

DOCTORAL JURY

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

ENGLISH SUMMARY

This dissertation explores how corporate communication and crisis communication in particular is influenced by the active role of multiple stakeholders in the communication process. In the current digital environment, social media are an indispensable tool for corporate communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Unlike traditional communication models that focus on one-way communication processes through mass media (e.g., public information model and press agency model, Grunig & Hunt, 1984), social media provide opportunities for bi-directional communication processes (e.g., two-way symmetrical model, Grunig & Hunt, 1984) between multiple senders and receivers (e.g., Lambret & Barki, 2017; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Zheng, Liu, & Davidson, 2018). Accordingly, organizations need to take into account that stakeholders are no longer passive recipients of organizational messages (e.g., Ji, Li, North, & Liu, 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017). Instead, they have to actively consider stakeholders' sense-making processes and engagement (Ji et al., 2017; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Waters & Williams, 2011; Watkins, 2017).

So far, there is a lack of empirical research that investigates the active sense-making processes of stakeholders and their engagement in the context of corporate and crisis communication. For example, previous research in crisis communication mainly focused on which crisis response strategies organizations could use in order to protect the organizational reputation or when organizations in crisis have to communicate (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). A dominant theory in the field, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) of Coombs (2007) argues that situational variables (i.e., attributions of crisis responsibility to the organization in crisis) could serve as an indicator to choose the appropriate crisis response strategy. The theory is based on the assumption that in order to optimally protect the organizational reputation, the crisis response strategy has to be selected that best fits the reputational threat caused by the crisis. While this theory is already aware of the receiver (i.e., attributions of responsibility by them), it does not explain how organizations have to adopt their strategy based on the sense-making processes of stakeholders. We argue, however, that it is important to actively consider the input of stakeholders and to examine how organizations best deal with their sense-making processes.

Research has to go beyond a sender approach (i.e., by focusing on who delivers the information) or interaction approach (i.e., by focusing on who receives the information) because in these approaches both the sender and receiver are put too much in singular. This, however, neglects the sociological reality in which corporate communication takes places nowadays (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). Therefore, inspired by the multi-vocal (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010;

Luoma-aho, Tirkkonen, & Vos, 2013; Vos, Schoemaker, & Luoma-aho, 2014; Zhao, 2017) and stakeholder engagement (e.g., Ji et al., 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018) approach, we argue that multiple stakeholders and their engagement and sense-making processes have to be taken into consideration when practicing corporate communication. Hence, the general aim of this dissertation is to investigate how the characteristics of the current digital environment (i.e., the interactive nature of social media and the active role of multiple stakeholders) influence corporate communication practices and crisis communication in particular.

Using a variety of research methods (i.e., experimental, survey and content analyses research), this dissertation will formulate answers to research questions established in three different contexts: corporate communication when business is as usual (i.e., study one), during corporate crises (i.e., studies two, three and four) and in the context of terrorism (i.e., studies five and six). Four central research questions will guide these studies: (1) *How is Facebook used as a corporate communication tool by reputed Belgian companies?* (i.e., study one), (2) *How should companies in crisis deal with the active sense-making processes of consumers in order to protect the organizational reputation?* (i.e., studies two, three and four), (3) *How did Belgian citizens respond to the terrorism threat in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris and how was this affected by the governmental communication?* (i.e., study five) and (4) *Which actors communicated on Twitter in response to the terrorist attacks on 22nd of March 2016 in Belgium and how?* (i.e., study six).

Chapter two provides the first study within this dissertation and is established in a context when business is as usual (i.e., no crisis). This study investigates which content is posted by companies on their Facebook pages (i.e., marketing communication and/or public relations related) and if the companies capitalize on the dialogic capabilities that Facebook offers compared to traditional media channels. Findings indicate that companies use Facebook more often to post public relations than marketing communication content. The former is also shared more often than the latter. However, the latter creates more engagement in terms of reactions of the company on comments of users. Furthermore, the semi two-way communication model is practiced most. This means that users are reacting on a company post but the company does not answer this reaction. Nonetheless, in one third of the cases companies are reacting on the reactions of users and results reveal that this is more often the case when it concerns public relations content than marketing communication content. To conclude, reputation score is not able to predict the communication strategy used on Facebook by the companies.

Hence, the first study examines the perspective of the sender (i.e., content posted by the companies) and the receiver (i.e., the comments of consumers on the posts and the reactions on it by the

companies). However, this study does not examine how organizations can adapt their strategy depending on the active sense-making processes of stakeholders in order to protect the organizational reputation. This topic is addressed in the next three chapters (i.e., chapters three, four and five) by means of experimental studies which are all established in the context of corporate crises. During crises, the organizational reputation is heavily threatened (Coombs, 2007; Jahng & Hong, 2017).

Chapter two demonstrates that there is a remarkable trend of engaging in dialogue with consumers on Facebook, however, there is still room for improvement. What possibly could convince communication managers to engage in dialogue is if they know how to engage in dialogue and what the effects are of engaging in dialogue on the organizational reputation. Therefore, in chapter three, we examine how companies in crisis should react to consumers' comments on an organizational crisis message post. In particular, we investigate whether a personalized organizational response to consumer comments on a corporate crisis message post affects the perceptions of the organizational reputation. Furthermore, we explore if the desirability of this response depends on the valence of the consumer comments (i.e., positive or negative). A 2 (tone of voice organizational response: personalized vs. corporate) x 2 (valence of consumer comment: positive vs. negative) between-subjects experimental design was established ($N = 264$).

Results of this experimental study show that a personalized organizational response to a consumer comment on an organizational crisis message post beneficially affects organizational reputation through higher perceptions of conversational human voice (CHV) and sequentially lower consumer skepticism. However, the effect of response personalization is not unanimously positive. When consumer comments are positive, a personalized organizational response damages organizational reputation due to increased consumer skepticism. The positive effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation through CHV disappears when responding to positive consumer comments. When consumer comments are negative, personalizing the organizational response is beneficial for organizational reputation due to increased perceptions of CHV. Hence, according to the results of this study, organizations can benefit from engaging in dialogue with consumers on social media. However, they have to adapt the appropriate response style, depending on the valence of the consumer comments.

The next chapter within this dissertation (i.e., chapter four) analyzes how companies in crisis best deal with another sense-making processes of consumers during a corporate crisis. Social media have created the expectations amongst stakeholders that when a crisis hits, they have to receive quick and frequent updates through social media (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016). However, if organizations have to communicate quickly, this communication is likely to include uncertainties,

especially in the initial stages of a crisis (Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016). Therefore, this chapter analyzes the impact of communicating uncertainties on consumers' perceptions of the organizational reputation. Furthermore, we examine under which circumstances (i.e., self-disclosure of the crisis vs. third-party disclosure) this process occurs and why (i.e., explanatory mechanism). A 2 (ambiguity markers: uncertain statements or hedges vs. certain statements or pledges) x 2 (source of information disclosure: self-disclosure vs. third party disclosure) between-subjects experiment is conducted ($N = 270$). Results demonstrate that overall communication of uncertainties is detrimental to organizational reputation because it lowers organizational trust. Nevertheless, communicating uncertainties can generate a positive impact on organizational reputation, but only when the affected organization self-discloses the crisis. In this context, the uncertain statements lower perceived organizational responsibility, which, in turn, improves organizational reputation. When a third party discloses the crisis, however, uncertain statements communicated by the organization in crisis lower organizational trust and, subsequently, organizational reputation. Hence, communicating uncertainties is not per se a problem, on the contrary, it could beneficially influence the organizational reputation but only on the important condition that the organization in crisis self-discloses the crisis.

Next, in the fifth chapter of this dissertation, we analyze a third sense-making process of consumers in the context of a corporate crisis: identification with the spokesperson based on a similar gender. Crisis communication research previously tended to focus on verbal aspects of the communication process (e.g., Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Recently, however, it was argued that it is also important to take into consideration nonverbal aspects in crisis communication (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Therefore, we analyze how gender similarity with the spokesperson influences the organizational reputation. In particular, we propose an interaction between a nonverbal (i.e., gender similarity) and a verbal aspect (i.e., the crisis response strategy). A 2 (gender match: similar vs. dissimilar) x 2 (crisis response strategy: rebuild vs. deny) between-subjects quasi-experimental design is conducted ($N = 199$).

Results of this study show that if consumers identify with the spokesperson based on a similar gender, this is beneficial for organizational reputation because it enhances consumers' empathy towards the spokesperson. However, this effect is only found when the spokesperson uses the appropriate crisis response strategy based on the guidelines of SCCT (Coombs, 2007). More specifically, when a spokesperson offers a rebuild strategy in the context of a preventable crisis, gender similarity results in more empathy towards the spokesperson and subsequently in an improved organizational reputation. However, the effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation through empathy towards the spokesperson is not found when a deny strategy is used by the spokesperson.

In the next two chapters of this dissertation (cf. chapters six and seven), two studies are conducted that investigate communication in an extreme turbulent context: the one of terrorism. Terrorism is considered as the most important threat for the internal security of the European Union according to European citizens (Eurobarometer, 2017). Belgium got closely confronted with terrorism several times. First with the terrorism threat because of the attacks in Paris that were coordinated within Belgium. Afterwards, on the 22nd of March 2016, two terrorist attacks took place in Brussels (Rose & Blenkinsop, 2015). In the last two studies we examine the communication processes in the context of terrorism in Belgium and how different actors make sense of this crisis by means of their behavior.

In chapter six, based on a national survey, we examine how Belgian citizens respond to the terrorism threat in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris and how this was affected by governmental communication. Results show that the terrorism threat makes Belgian citizens more alert in public places and they participate less in mass events. Moreover, one fifth stops traveling by public transport. In terms of information seeking behavior, results demonstrate that Belgian citizens search for information several times a day, mostly via traditional media such as television and radio. Furthermore, based on structural equation modelling, we demonstrate that information seeking behavior is determined by the cognitive assessment of the risk. This cognitive risk assessment is in turn positively influenced by risk involvement and perceived governmental expert efficacy. Mass media are able to negatively influence the information seeking behavior of citizens. If they are perceived as focusing too much on drama and sensationalism, then the perception of the risk decreases, and this in turn reduces information seeking behavior. Finally, results show that adequate governmental communication is able to increase trust and decrease the level of governmental responsibility, which is in turn beneficial for the governmental reputation.

Finally, in the last chapter of this dissertation (i.e., chapter seven), we examine by means of a quantitative content analysis how Twitter is used as a multi-vocal communication tool during and after the terrorist attacks in Brussels. Results show that Twitter is as an important communication tool especially for citizens during terrorist attacks. In particular, they use this platform to vent their negative feelings. Although governmental agencies form important communication hubs (i.e., the highest number of retweets), these actors do not tweet frequently during the attacks. Results also indicate that emotion-related content prevails on Twitter, especially when it comes to content expressed by citizens. The most frequently expressed emotion in the tweets is sympathy. Both governmental agencies and media mostly tweet neutral, non-emotional information following the attacks in Belgium. Hence, whilst traditional media seemed to be important in the context of terrorism to search for information (cf. chapter six), social media serve another purpose: being a channel to vent negative

feelings. Besides the adaptation of behavior such as being more alert in public places and information seeking, expressions of feelings form another way in which citizens make sense of terrorism.

In general, the current dissertation provides empirical evidence for the fact that it is indeed important to adopt a multi-vocal and stakeholder engagement approach in corporate communication. Stakeholders could actively make sense of a situation in a variety of ways (i.e., by commenting on a post, by identifying with the spokesperson, by seeking information, by sharing their feelings). Several chapters (i.e., chapters three, four and five) have indicated that organizations in crisis cannot longer be organization-centered when determining their strategy. On the contrary, they have to adapt their strategy to the active sense-making processes of consumers (i.e., commenting positively or negatively on posts, how they deal with uncertainties and identification with the spokesperson based on a similar gender) in order to obtain the optimal effect on the organizational reputation. Hence, when organizations want to manage their reputation, it is important to actively consider consumers' input. Furthermore, whilst the current digital environment is characterized by a loss of control for the organizations, organizations are able to manage the organizational reputation by dealing with consumers' sense-making processes in the appropriate way (i.e., responding in a personalized way to a negative consumer comment, using the appropriate response strategy according to SCCT, self-disclosing the crisis when communicating uncertainties) (cf. chapters three, four and five). Finally, this dissertation also clearly demonstrates that social media and traditional media do not have to be considered as each other's opponents. On the contrary, according to the results, both media outlets could be best used for their own purposes (i.e., information seeking via traditional media and sharing of feelings via social media) (cf. chapters six and seven).

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NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt hoe bedrijfscommunicatie en crisiscommunicatie in het bijzonder worden beïnvloed door de actieve rol van verscheidene stakeholders in het communicatieproces. In de huidige digitale omgeving vormen sociale media een onmisbare tool voor bedrijfscommunicatie (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). In tegenstelling tot traditionele communicatiemodellen die focussen op eenrichtingscommunicatieprocessen via massamedia (het *public information* model en het *press agency* model, Grunig & Hunt, 1984), bieden sociale media mogelijkheden voor tweerichtingscommunicatieprocessen (*two-way symmetrical* model, Grunig & Hunt, 1984) tussen verschillende zenders en ontvangers (Lambret & Barki, 2017; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Zheng, Liu, & Davidson, 2018). Bijgevolg dienen organisaties voortaan rekening te houden met stakeholders die niet langer passieve ontvangers zijn van de boodschappen van organisaties (Ji, Li, North, & Liu, 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017). In de plaats daarvan dienen organisaties aandacht te hebben voor het feit dat stakeholders actief betekenis kunnen geven of zich engageren met de informatie die ze ontvangen (Ji et al., 2017; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Waters & Williams, 2011; Watkins, 2017).

Tot dusver is er een gebrek aan empirisch onderzoek dat de actieve betekenisgevingsprocessen van stakeholders en hun engagement in de context van bedrijfs- en crisiscommunicatie onderzoekt. Bijvoorbeeld, voorgaand onderzoek in crisiscommunicatie focuste voornamelijk op welke crisisresponsstrategieën organisaties kunnen gebruiken om de reputatie te beschermen of wanneer organisaties in crisis dienen te communiceren (bijv. Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Een dominante theorie in dit domein, de *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT) van Coombs (2007), argumenteert dat situationele variabelen (de attributies van crisis verantwoordelijkheid aan de organisatie in crisis) kunnen fungeren als een indicator om de gepaste crisisresponsstrategie te kiezen. De theorie is gebaseerd op de assumptie dat om de reputatie optimaal te beschermen, de crisisresponsstrategie dient geselecteerd te worden die het best past bij bedreiging die de crisis vormt voor de reputatie. Hoewel deze theorie zich reeds bewust is van de ontvangers (attributies van verantwoordelijkheid door hen) legt het niet uit hoe organisaties hun strategie kunnen aanpassen aan de betekenisgevingsprocessen van stakeholders.

Onderzoek dient verder te gaan dan een zenderbenadering (door te focussen op wie de informatie aanlevert) of een interactiebenadering (door te focussen op wie de informatie ontvangt) omdat in deze benaderingen zowel de zender als de ontvanger te veel worden beschouwd als van elkaar losstaand. Dit negeert echter de sociologische realiteit waarin bedrijfscommunicatie de dag van vandaag

plaatsvindt (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). Daarom, geïnspireerd door de multi-vocale (bijv., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho, Tirkkonen, & Vos, 2013; Vos, Schoemaker, & Luoma-aho, 2014; Zhao, 2017) en stakeholder engagement (bijv. Ji et al., 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018) benadering, argumenteren we dat verschillende stakeholders en hun engagement en betekenisgevingsprocessen in rekening gebracht dienen te worden wanneer bedrijfscommunicatie wordt beoefend. Bijgevolg is het algemene doel van dit proefschrift om te onderzoeken hoe de eigenschappen van de huidige digitale omgeving (de alomtegenwoordigheid van sociale media en de active rol van verscheidene stakeholders) bedrijfscommunicatie en crisiscommunicatie in het bijzonder hebben beïnvloed.

Aan de hand van een verscheidenheid aan onderzoeksmethodes (i.e., experimenteel, survey en inhoudsanalyse-onderzoek) zal dit proefschrift antwoorden formuleren op onderzoeksvragen die zich situeren in drie verschillende contexten: bedrijfscommunicatie in normale omstandigheden (studie één), bedrijfscommunicatie gedurende bedrijfscrisissen (studies twee, drie en vier) en communicatie in de context van terrorisme (studies vijf en zes). In deze studies zullen vier onderzoeksvragen centraal staan: (1) *Hoe wordt Facebook gebruikt als bedrijfscommunicatie tool door gereputeerde Belgische bedrijven?* (studie één), (2) *Hoe dienen bedrijven in crisis om te gaan met de actieve betekenisgevingsprocessen van consumenten om de bedrijfsreputatie te beschermen?* (studies twee, drie en vier), (3) *Hoe reageerden Belgische burgers op de terreurdreiging in de nasleep van de terroristische aanslagen in Parijs en hoe werd dit beïnvloed door overheidscommunicatie?* (studie 5) en (4) *Welke actoren communiceerden op Twitter als reactie op de terroristische aanslagen op 22 maart 2016 in België en hoe?* (studie 6).

In het tweede hoofdstuk komt een studie aan bod die werd uitgevoerd in normale omstandigheden (wanneer er geen sprake is van een crisis). Deze studie onderzoekt welke inhoud wordt gepost door bedrijven op hun Facebook pagina's (marketingcommunicatie en/of public relations gerelateerd) en of de bedrijven de dialogische mogelijkheden die Facebook aanbiedt in vergelijking met traditionele mediakanalen benutten. De resultaten tonen aan dat bedrijven Facebook meer gebruiken om public relations gerelateerde inhoud te posten dan marketing gerelateerde inhoud. Het eerste wordt ook meer gedeeld dan het laatste. Echter, het laatste creëert meer engagement in termen van reacties van het bedrijf op reacties van gebruikers. Verder tonen de resultaten aan dat het *semi two-way* communicatiemodel het meest wordt toegepast. Dit betekent dat gebruikers reageren op een post van een bedrijf, maar het bedrijf reageert hier niet op. Desalniettemin, in één derde van de cases, reageren bedrijven wel op de reacties van gebruikers en resultaten tonen aan dat dit meer het geval is voor public relations gerelateerde inhoud dan voor marketingcommunicatie gerelateerde inhoud.

Tot slot blijkt de reputatiescore niet in staat te zijn om de communicatiestrategie die op Facebook wordt gebruikt te voorspellen.

Dus de eerste studie onderzoekt het perspectief van de zender (de inhoud gepost door bedrijven) en de ontvanger (de reacties van consumenten op de posts en de reacties hierop door de bedrijven). Deze studie houdt echter geen rekening met hoe bedrijven hun strategie kunnen aanpassen op basis van de actieve betekenisgevingsprocessen van stakeholders met het oog op het beschermen van hun reputatie. Dit topic wordt bestudeerd in de volgende drie hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift die allemaal werden uitgevoerd in de context van bedrijfscrisissen. Tijdens crisissen wordt de reputatie immers ernstig bedreigd (Coombs, 2007; Jahng & Hong, 2017).

Resultaten van de eerste studie tonen aan dat er een merkbare trend is om de dialoog aan te gaan met consumenten op Facebook. Toch is er nog heel wat ruimte voor verbetering. Wat communicatiemanagers mogelijks kan overtuigen om die dialoog aan te gaan met stakeholders is wanneer ze weten hoe ze dit moeten doen en wat de effecten zijn van het aangaan van de dialoog op de bedrijfsreputatie. Daarom onderzoeken we in de tweede studie hoe bedrijven in crisis dienen te reageren op de reacties van consumenten op een crisispost. In het bijzonder gaan we na of een gepersonaliseerde reactie van het bedrijf op reacties van consumenten een invloed heeft op percepties van de bedrijfsreputatie. Verder onderzoeken we ook of de wensbaarheid van deze gepersonaliseerde reactie afhangt van de valentie van de reactie van consumenten die positief of negatief kan zijn.

Resultaten van een experimentele studie tonen aan dat een gepersonaliseerde respons van het bedrijf op een reactie van consumenten op een crisis boodschap van het bedrijf positief de bedrijfsreputatie beïnvloedt via een hogere gepercipieerde '*conversational human voice*' (CHV) en sequentieel lager consumenten scepticisme. Het effect van een gepersonaliseerde respons is echter niet unaniem positief. Wanneer de reacties van consumenten positief zijn, beschadigt een gepersonaliseerde respons hierop de bedrijfsreputatie door een verhoogd consumenten scepticisme. Het positieve effect van een gepersonaliseerde respons op de bedrijfsreputatie via CHV verdwijnt ook wanneer er wordt gereageerd op een positieve reactie van een consument. Dus, volgens de resultaten van deze studie kunnen organisaties baat hebben bij het aangaan van de dialoog met consumenten via sociale media. Ze dienen echter de geschikte responsstijl te hanteren, afhankelijk van de valentie van de consumentenreacties.

Het volgende hoofdstuk in dit proefschrift (hoofdstuk vier) analyseert hoe bedrijven in crisis het best kunnen omgaan met een ander betekenisgevingproces van consumenten gedurende een bedrijfscrisis. Sociale media hebben de verwachtingen gecreëerd bij stakeholders dat ze snel en frequent updates

dienen te ontvangen via sociale media wanneer een crisis zich voordoet (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016). Echter, wanneer organisaties snel dienen te communiceren, is het waarschijnlijk dat deze communicatie onzekerheden bevat, vooral in de initiële fases van een crisis (Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016). Daarom onderzoekt dit hoofdstuk de impact van het communiceren van onzekerheden op de percepties van consumenten van de bedrijfsreputatie. Verder onderzoeken we onder welke omstandigheden (zelf naar buiten komen met de crisis vs. een derde partij die naar buiten komt met de crisis) dit proces zich voordoet en waarom (verklarend mechanisme). Resultaten tonen aan dat in het algemeen de communicatie van onzekerheden slecht is voor de bedrijfsreputatie aangezien het vertrouwen in het bedrijf verlaagt. Desalniettemin, het communiceren van onzekerheden kan ook een positieve impact genereren op de bedrijfsreputatie, maar enkel wanneer het betrokken bedrijf de crisis zelf bekend maakt. In deze context verlagen onzekere statements de gepercipieerde verantwoordelijkheid van het bedrijf, wat op zijn beurt de bedrijfsreputatie ten goede komt. Echter, wanneer een derde partij de crisis bekend maakt, verlagen onzekere statements gecommuniceerd door het bedrijf in crisis het vertrouwen in het bedrijf en op zijn beurt de bedrijfsreputatie. Dus, het communiceren van onzekerheden is niet per se een probleem. Integendeel, het kan de bedrijfsreputatie positief beïnvloeden maar enkel op de belangrijke voorwaarde dat het bedrijf in crisis de crisis zelf bekend maakt.

In het vijfde hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift analyseren we vervolgens een derde betekenisgevingsproces van consumenten in de context van een bedrijfscrisis: identificatie met de woordvoerder gebaseerd op een gelijk geslacht. Voordien focuste crisiscommunicatie-onderzoek vooral op de verbale aspecten van het communicatieproces (e.g., Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Recent werd er echter geargumenteed dat het ook belangrijk is om rekening te houden met non-verbale aspecten in crisiscommunicatie (bijv. Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Daarom gaan we na hoe gelijkheid in geslacht met de woordvoerder als een betekenisgevingproces van consumenten de bedrijfsreputatie beïnvloedt. In het bijzonder stellen we een interactie voor tussen dit non-verbale aspect (gelijkheid in geslacht) en het verbale aspect (de crisisresponsstrategie). Resultaten van deze studie tonen aan dat wanneer consumenten zich identificeren met de woordvoerder op basis van een gelijk geslacht dit voordelig is voor de bedrijfsreputatie omdat het de empathie van consumenten voor de woordvoerder verhoogt. Echter, dit effect wordt enkel gevonden wanneer de woordvoerder de geschikte crisisresponsstrategie gebruikt volgens de richtlijnen van SCCT (Coombs, 2007). In het bijzonder wanneer de woordvoerder een *rebuild* strategie gebruikt in de context van een voorkombare crisis, resulteert gelijkheid in geslacht in meer empathie ten opzichte van de woordvoerder en vervolgens in een betere bedrijfsreputatie. Het effect van gelijkheid in geslacht op de bedrijfsreputatie

via empathie voor de woordvoerder wordt echter niet gevonden wanneer een *deny* strategie wordt gebruikt door de woordvoerder.

In de volgende twee hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift (cf. hoofdstukken zes en zeven) worden twee studies uitgevoerd die communicatie in een extreem turbulente context onderzoeken, meer bepaald die van terrorisme. Terrorisme wordt volgens Europeanen beschouwd als de meest belangrijke bedreiging voor de interne veiligheid van de Europese Unie (Eurobarometer, 2017). België werd verschillende malen van dichtbij geconfronteerd met terrorisme. Eerst met de terreurdreiging door de aanslagen in Parijs die werden gecoördineerd vanuit België. Daarna, op 22 maart 2016, deden twee terroristische aanslagen zich voor in Brussel (Rose & Blenkinsop, 2015). In de laatste twee studies onderzoeken we de communicatieprocessen in de context van terrorisme in België en hoe verschillende actoren betekenis geven aan deze crisis door middel van hun gedrag.

In hoofdstuk zes onderzoeken we op basis van een nationale survey hoe Belgische burgers reageren op de terreurdreiging in de nasleep van de terroristische aanslagen in Parijs en hoe dit werd beïnvloed door overheidscommunicatie. Resultaten tonen aan dat de terreurdreiging Belgische burgers meer alert maakt in publieke plaatsen en minder doet participeren aan massa-evenementen. Verder stopt één vijfde met reizen via het openbaar vervoer. In termen van informatie zoekgedrag tonen de resultaten aan dat Belgische burgers meerdere keren per dag naar informatie zoeken, vooral via traditionele media zoals televisie en radio. Verder tonen we op basis van *structural equation modelling* aan dat informatiezoekgedrag bepaald wordt door de cognitieve beoordeling van het risico. Deze cognitieve beoordeling wordt op zijn beurt positief beïnvloed door betrokkenheid met het risico en de gepercipieerde expert *efficacy* van de overheid. De massamedia kunnen het informatiezoekgedrag van burgers echter negatief beïnvloeden. Wanneer zij beschouwd worden als te veel focussend op drama en sensatie dan verlaagt de cognitieve risicoperceptie en dit verlaagt op zijn beurt het informatiezoekgedrag. Verder tonen de resultaten aan dat adequate communicatie van de overheid in staat is om het vertrouwen in de overheid te vergroten en de verantwoordelijk van de overheid voor het risico te verlagen wat op zijn beurt voordelig is voor de reputatie van de overheid.

Tot slot, in het laatste hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift (hoofdstuk zeven), onderzoeken we aan de hand van een kwantitatieve inhoudsanalyse hoe Twitter wordt gebruikt als een multi-vocale communicatietool tijdens en na de terroristische aanslagen in Brussel. Resultaten tonen aan dat vooral voor burgers Twitter een belangrijke communicatietool is tijdens de aanslagen. Zij gebruiken dit platform voornamelijk om hun negatieve gevoelens te uiten. Ondanks het feit dat overheidsinstanties belangrijke communicatiehubs vormen (hun tweets hebben het hoogste aantal retweets), tweeten deze actoren niet frequent tijdens de aanslagen. De meest uitgedrukte emotie in de tweets is het

uitdrukken van sympathie (bijvoorbeeld voor de slachtoffers). Zowel overheidsinstanties als media tweeten vooral neutrale, niet-emotionele informatie over de aanslagen in België. Dus, terwijl traditionele media belangrijk lijken te zijn in de context van terrorisme om informatie te zoeken (cf. hoofdstuk 6), hebben sociale media een ander doel in deze context: een kanaal zijn om negatieve gevoelens te uiten. Naast de aanpassingen van gedrag, zoals meer alert zijn in publieke plaatsen en informatie zoeken, vormt het uiten van gevoelens een andere manier waarop burgers betekenis geven aan terrorisme.

In het algemeen verschaft dit proefschrift empirisch bewijs voor het feit dat het inderdaad belangrijk is om een multi-vocale benadering en stakeholder engagement benadering te hanteren in bedrijfscommunicatie. Stakeholders kunnen actief betekenis geven aan een situatie op verschillende manieren (door te reageren op een post, door zich te identificeren met de woordvoerder, door informatie te zoeken of gevoelens te uiten). Verschillende hoofdstukken (drie, vier en vijf) tonen aan dat bedrijven in crisis niet langer gericht kunnen zijn op zichzelf wanneer ze hun strategie bepalen. Integendeel, ze dienen hun strategie aan te passen aan de actieve betekenisgevingsprocessen van consumenten (die positief of negatief reageren op posts, die omgaan met onzekerheden die worden gecommuniceerd en zich identificeren met de woordvoerder op basis van een gelijk geslacht) om het best mogelijke effect te bereiken op de bedrijfsreputatie. Dus, wanneer bedrijven hun reputatie willen managen is het belangrijk om actief rekening te houden met de input van consumenten. Verder toont dit proefschrift aan dat hoewel de huidige digitale omgeving wordt gekenmerkt door een verlies van controle voor organisaties, ze toch in staat zijn om de situatie te managen door ermee om te gaan op de gepaste manier (bijv. door op een gepersonaliseerde manier te antwoorden op een negatieve reactie van een consument, door de gepaste crisisresponsstrategie te gebruiken volgens SCCT, door de crisis zelf bekend te maken wanneer ze onzekerheden communiceren) (cf. hoofdstukken drie, vier en vijf). Tot slot toont dit proefschrift ook duidelijk aan dat sociale en traditionele media niet dienen te worden beschouwd als elkaars tegengestelden. Integendeel, beide mediakanalen kunnen best worden gebruikt voor hun eigen doeleinden (informatiezoekgedrag via traditionele media en uiten van gevoelens via sociale media) (cf. hoofdstukken zes en zeven).

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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1 Corporate communication: a versatile research area

1.1 Defining corporate communication

Organizations could be considered as networks of people who are communicating with each other. The communication processes between these people could flow horizontally, vertically, internally, externally, formally, and informally, but they all have in common that they link stakeholders within an organization to each other. These communication processes are likely to influence stakeholders' perceptions of an organization and thereby could have an impact on the organizational reputation. Hence, communication is at the center of organizational performance. Moreover, the ability of organizations to achieve goals and acquire resources heavily depends on how organizations communicate with their stakeholders (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). In literature, the practice that is responsible for all communication processes within an organization is often called 'corporate communication'. Academic literature provides several definitions of corporate communication such as *"the set of activities involved in managing and orchestrating all internal and external communication aimed at creating favorable starting points with stakeholders on which the company depends."* (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 25). Another definition of corporate communication was suggested by Cornelissen (2017, p. 37) who defines corporate communication as *"a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent"*. Both definitions have in common that corporate communication is concerned with internal as well as external communication that aims to develop healthy relationships with stakeholders upon who the organization is dependent. A stakeholder is *"any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organizations' purposes and objectives"* (Freeman, 1984, p. 6).

In literature, corporate communication is often interchangeably labelled as public relations (e.g., Argenti, 1996; Grunig, 1992; McKie & Willis, 2012). Public relations involves a range of specialized disciplines such as corporate branding, internal communication, issue and crisis management, media relations, investor relations, financial communication, change communication and public affairs (Argenti, 1996). These specialized areas all have in common that they focus on how the organization

is represented as a whole to all its stakeholders, both internal and external (cf. definitions of corporate communication).

Another principal communication function within organizations is marketing communication (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Marketing communication could be defined as “*communication that supports sales of products, services and brand*” (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 17). The main target stakeholders of this communication function are consumers (McKie & Willis, 2012). In most organizations, marketing communication gets the highest budget (World Advertising Trends, NTC, 2003). It consists of sub functions such as product advertising, direct mail, personal selling and sponsorship activities (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

There is a long-debated discussion in literature about whether marketing communication and public relations have to be considered as two separate communication functions or as a whole (e.g., J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1998; Hallahan, 2007; Hutton, 2010; Kotler & Mindak, 1978; Lauzen, 1992; Moriarity, 1994; Supa, 2016). Researchers argue that both disciplines should complement each other. However, their responsibilities are often overlapping or conflicting (Ehling, White, & Grunig, 1992). For example, J.E. Grunig and L.A. Grunig (1998) argued that public relations should be a separate function from marketing communication. In particular, the authors argue that public relations is most excellent when it is strategic and when marketing does not dominate public relations. However, this proposition was challenged with the advent of integrated communication.

Starting in the late 1980's, a heated debate was forming about the concept of integrated communication and the relationship between marketing and public relations (Hallahan, 2007). For example, the relationship between marketing and public relations was the focus of a symposium at San Diego State University in 1989 (Broom, Lauzen, & Tucker, 1991). The participants of the symposium concluded that marketing and public relations had distinct missions, theories and philosophies. The participants argued that marketing is primarily occupied with maintaining a market for goods and services, whereas public relations aims to build and maintain hospitable social and political environments (Broom et al., 1991). Discussions about the relationship between both communication functions were clustered around what was called Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) (Estanyol, 2012). In this view, it is argued that there should be an integration of marketing and public relations activities in order to achieve the best possible impact of communication. This does not mean that both functions have to be merged or reduced to the same function. It rather means that both functions, each existing as such, have to be balanced and managed together within an overarching framework (Anantachart, 2006; Duncan, 2002; Smith 2002). Nonetheless, the IMC approach was also

criticized by several public relations scholars as a marketing encroachment on public relations (e.g., Dozier & Lauzen, 1991; Hutton, 2001; Smith, 2013).

We briefly discussed the above-mentioned issue in order to provide insights in how the communication functions of corporate communication, public relations and marketing communication are related to each other. However, in the remainder of this dissertation, we have chosen to focus on the concept of 'corporate communication'.¹ The use of the word 'corporate' in corporate communication should not be interpreted as referring to corporations. Rather, it should be understood in relation to the Latin word 'corpus' which means 'body' or in a more figurative sense 'relating to the whole' (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Hence, when we use the term of corporate communication in this dissertation, this refers to all types of communication that relate to different types of organizations as a whole. In particular, we will examine how the characteristics of the current digital environment (i.e., the interactive nature of social media and the active role of stakeholders) influence corporate communication practices and crisis communication in particular.

1.2 Communicating with stakeholders

The communication processes between organizations and their stakeholders are the central focus of this dissertation. Academic literature provides several theoretical insights about how organizations could communicate to or with stakeholders. Two major important streams in research are the four traditional models of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and the dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) which are discussed in the next paragraphs.

1.2.1 Four traditional models of public relations

Grunig and Hunt (1984) proposed a two-dimensional framework that resulted in four perspectives on communication. The first dimension, 'direction', refers to whether one-way or two-way communication is practiced. One-way communication is the spreading of information by a sender in the form of a monologue. For two-way communication, however, there is an exchange of information between sender and receiver which results in a dialogue. The other dimension, 'purpose', refers to whether the communication is asymmetrical or symmetrical in nature. Asymmetrical communication is not balanced, leaves the organization unchanged and tries to change stakeholders' opinions and beliefs. Symmetrical communication, on the contrary, is balanced and nurtures a mutual beneficial relationship between the organization and stakeholders (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002).

¹ Only in the second chapter we subdivided corporate communication in marketing communication and public relations to investigate to what extent Belgian companies use Facebook as a tool for these communication practices.

Based on these two dimensions, four models of public relations were identified. The press agency model represents one-way asymmetrical communication. This is the least desirable form of communication because it involves a one-way flow of information that aims to persuade stakeholders by making use of less truthful statements (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The second model, the public information model, also involves one-way communication, but unlike the press agency model, the organization is communicating the truth. However, feedback of stakeholders is also lacking. The third model, the two-way asymmetrical model takes into consideration stakeholders' feedback, but the organization only engages in dialogue for their own benefits. The primary goal of dialogue in this model is to learn to know stakeholders better in order to understand how they could be influenced (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006). Finally, the two-way symmetrical model is typified as the most ideal type of communication. In this model, both the sender and the receiver are open and truthful about each other's point of view and exchange information in order to obtain a common understanding of the situation. By applying this model, the organization aims to build mutual beneficial long-term relationships with stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Notwithstanding, the ideal model of two-way symmetrical communication has been criticized by several researchers (e.g., Laskin, 2009; Stauber & Rampton, 1995) who argue that this model is rather an utopia than a reachable truth. However, these critiques have been raised before the breakthrough of the internet. The internet provides the ideal platform to establish two-way symmetrical communication (Samsup & Yungwook, 2003). According to Wright (2005), the introduction of the internet in corporate communication has created a paradigmatic shift by enabling two-way communication between organizations and stakeholders as well as relationship building with stakeholders. This resulted in a focus on relationship management within corporate communication (e.g., Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

1.2.2 The dialogic theory of public relations

Exactly 20 years ago, Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed a framework to build relationships with stakeholders using the internet (i.e., websites). This framework has guided lots of other studies on online relationship building (Watkins, 2017). According to the framework, two-way symmetrical communication provides an outlet for both organizations and stakeholders to reach mutual benefits (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The internet (i.e., websites and social media) provides a tool for interactivity between both parties and dialogue is the result of that interaction, which helps to build relationships with stakeholders (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008). Even more important: the technology enables organizations to do that in a transparent and ethical way (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009; Watkins, 2017).

In this framework, five principles are proposed for achieving dialogue and relationship building: (1) ease of interface, (2) dialogic loop, (3) usefulness of information, (4) generation of return visits and (5) conservation of visitors (Kent & Taylor, 1998) (cf. chapter two p. 107 for a detailed discussion of the principles). In 2002, the authors proposed the dialogic theory of public relations that also contributes a central role to dialogue in the development and maintenance of relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This theory is characterized by five assets, (1) the recognition of a relationship between the organization and stakeholders (i.e., mutuality), (2) the temporality or spontaneity of interactions with stakeholders (i.e., propinquity), (3) the supportiveness and confirmation of stakeholders' goals and interests (i.e., empathy), (4) the willingness to interact with stakeholders on their own terms (i.e., risk), and finally (5) the extent to which the organization itself is dedicated to engaging in dialogue with stakeholders (i.e., commitment). Important in this process is that organizations and stakeholders do not necessarily have to agree, however, they have to share the same intention: obtaining mutual satisfying positions (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

As the internet has evolved over the years (cf. the rise of social media), scholars started to apply dialogic communication theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and the dialogic principles (Kent & Taylor, 1998) to various organizational and social media settings (Watkins, 2017). The adoption of the above-mentioned principles was not only tested on websites (e.g., Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Park & Reber, 2008) as originally intended by Kent and Taylor (1998), but also on social media such as Facebook (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009) and Twitter (e.g., Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Similar in all these studies was the conclusion that the two-way dialogic capabilities of these platforms were not optimally used. Accordingly, instead of using social media as two-way communication tools that distinguish them from traditional media, social media are used by organizations more for purposes of spreading one-way messages.

For example, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) investigated how environmental advocacy groups use Facebook to engage in dialogue with stakeholders. The authors found that the organizations think that the mere creation of an interactive space through a profile on Facebook is sufficient for facilitating dialogue. However, in order to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders, it requires an application of the dialogic strategies as suggested by Kent and Taylor (1998). Furthermore, another study investigated how Fortune 500 companies use Twitter to facilitate dialogic communication with stakeholders (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The authors found that companies with a dialogic orientation to Twitter use conservation of return visitors as one of the key dialogic principles. This means that they provide stakeholders with an ideal platform where dialogic communication could potentially develop. However, in general, the authors conclude that, just like on Facebook (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009), the dialogic capabilities of Twitter are not fully exploited (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

Other studies that investigated if organizations capitalize on the dialogic potential of social media have also repeatedly shown that social media are primarily used as one-way communication channels to push information to stakeholders instead of interacting with them. For example, Waters and Jamal (2011) conclude that despite the potential for dialogue and stakeholder engagement on Twitter, nonprofit organizations predominantly use this social medium to convey one-way messages to their followers. Regarding the four models of public relations, the public information model was mostly practiced by the organizations. However, the most ideal model according to Grunig and Hunt (1984), the two-way symmetrical model, was least applied by the nonprofit organizations (Waters & Jamal, 2011). Another study has shown that companies do not take full advantage of the dialogic capabilities of social networking sites. For example, much of the communication on Facebook could be classified as one-way communication (Men & Tsai, 2012).

Following the above-mentioned studies, we could conclude that most studies tend to reveal that organizations are not utilizing the dialogic potential of social media. However, an exception is the American Red Cross. Findings of a study (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011) show that the Red Cross uses social media as tools to build relationships with volunteers, communities and the media. Hence, the American Red Cross demonstrates the success of using social media dialogically by applying Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles, for example, by actively providing responses to posts (Briones et al., 2011). Consequently, although some organizations capitalize on the dialogic potential of social media (Briones et al., 2011), most studies still discover an unexploited potential (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Men & Tsai, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Watkins, 2017).

1.3 Defining social media and Web 2.0

As mentioned in the previous section, social media have been repeatedly praised for their capacity to enable two-way symmetrical communication between organizations and stakeholders (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Whilst there is no doubt in literature about the important role of social media in enabling this process, there is often confusion about what term is the most appropriate: 'social media' or 'Web 2.0'. Both terms are often used interchangeably.

The term social media became well-known, especially after the rise of Facebook in 2004. Besides Facebook, other media are also included in the umbrella concept of social media such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc. These media have in common that they involve online or digital technologies through which people create, share and exchange information and ideas (Allagui & Breslow, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Valentini, Romenti, & Kruckeberg, 2018; Wright & Hinson, 2013).

In 2004, the O'Reilly Media Group introduced the concept of Web 2.0, which refers to a newer and better version of the World Wide Web. Interactivity, an active user role and co-creation are crucial characteristics of this new web generation (O'Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 could be defined as *"a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion"* (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). In the current dissertation, we use the term social media because in essence Web 2.0 provides the platform that enables the evolution of social media and their use within corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2017). Social media are accordingly defined as *"a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that follow the creation and exchange of user-generated content"* (UGC) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

In the 21st century, social media have entered the media landscape (Cheng & Cameron, 2018). These new communication channels provide both challenges and opportunities for organizations to communicate and engage with stakeholders. On the one hand, it is challenging for corporate communication, because social media blur the line between who provides content and consumes it. Thus, it makes news gathering and dissemination fragmented, both for organizations as well as stakeholders. Moreover, there is a loss of control because organizations are no longer able to fully control which corporate messages are sent out about them (Effing & Spil, 2016; Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). For example, consumers are able to voice both positive and negative things about an organization on social media. This in turn influences how the organization is perceived or in other words, this might influence perceptions of the organizational reputation (Ji, Li, North, & Liu, 2017). Consequently, social media empower stakeholders because they have the possibility to select, create and share any information whenever they want to whoever they want (e.g., Colley & Collier, 2009; Heinonen, 2011; Sinclair & Vogus, 2011).

Notwithstanding, social media also bring opportunities to organizations for corporate communication practices. Social media offer tools that enable a quick and broad distribution of information (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2011; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). Furthermore, they provide a cost-efficient tool because organizational responses to stakeholders could also be seen by others who might have the same comments (Bygstad & Presthus, 2012). In addition, the possibility that social media offer to engage in conversations with stakeholders provides a useful barometer to know what stakeholders consider as important (e.g., Ki & Nekmat, 2014; Rim & Song, 2016; Roshan, Warren & Carr, 2016). Hence, taken together, we could argue that these media facilitate an active and engaging relationship with stakeholders by enabling organizations to listen to their feedback and respond in a direct manner (Floreddu, Cabiddu, & Evaristo, 2014).

1.4 From stakeholder management to stakeholder engagement

Social media provide ideal tools to bring the two-way symmetrical communication model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and the dialogic principles (Kent & Taylor, 1998) in practice. Nevertheless, as thoroughly discussed above, organizations often fail to do so (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Park & Reber, 2008; Ryablko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Therefore, several authors argue that for future research it is important to broaden their theoretical perspectives when examining communication strategies on social media. In particular, it is important to take into consideration stakeholder engagement (Ji et al., 2017; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Waters & Williams, 2011; Watkins, 2017).

Kang (2014, p. 402) defines stakeholder engagement as “*a psychologically motivated affective state that brings extra-role behaviors and is characterized by affective commitment, positive affectivity and empowerment that stakeholders experience in interactions with organizations over time*”. Hence, this definition stresses the active role that stakeholders might play. Engagement as a concept is also closely related to relationship building and dialogue (Watkins, 2017). Taylor and Kent (2014) made a thorough review of literature on engagement in public relations. These authors conceptualized engagement as both an approach and orientation to ethical communication that is able to create mutual understanding between organizations and their stakeholders. In particular, engagement could be situated within the ‘propinquity’ dimension of dialogue (cf. 1.2.2) that refers to the openness to interact with stakeholders in a timely and relevant manner (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Hence, engagement could be considered as a part of dialogue through which organizations and stakeholders are able to make decisions that create social capital (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Engagement represents a process that actively involves stakeholders in organizational activities (Devin & Lane, 2014; Sloan, 2009). Therefore, engagement could be considered as the opposite of the asymmetrical models of public relations (Dhanesh, 2017; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Recently, scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of engaging in a direct way with stakeholders and this for several reasons such as to strengthen the goodwill towards the organization and the organizational reputation (e.g., Ji et al., 2017), to create understanding around specific issues and to build more long-term long-lasting relationships (e.g., Johnston, 2014). The focus in this approach has changed from ‘management’ to ‘collaboration’ and from ‘exchange’ to ‘engagement’. The goal of stakeholder engagement is to develop mutually supportive and long-lasting relationships with stakeholders (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Hence, engagement with stakeholders is an essential component of relationship building (Devin & Lane, 2014; Johnston, 2014).

Stakeholder engagement is of crucial importance for organizations that need to operate in an environment where social media enable interactions with multiple stakeholders (Johnston, 2014).

Hence, social media provide both organizations and stakeholders with new engagement tools (Ji et al., 2017). Examples of stakeholder engagement in the context of social media are commenting on social media posts, sharing information, criticizing or recommending organizations, etc. (Kang, 2014; Jiang et al., 2016; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Men & Tsai, 2014). In this view, it is important that stakeholders are considered as active actors, rather than passive audiences (Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016).

Various studies point out that stakeholder engagement forms an antecedent of stakeholders' positive evaluations of the relationship with the organization. For example, a study found that the engagement of stakeholders (i.e., their perceptions, cognitions and communicative actions) will determine the content and tonality of what people remember about an organization or what they will talk about (Kim, Huang-Baesecke, Yang, & Grunig, 2013). Furthermore, Yang (2007) has also found that stakeholder engagement (i.e., their active communication behavior) together with an organization's effective relationship management are both associated with positive perceptions of the organizational reputation. In addition, stakeholders that engage on social media with organizations also seem to be more committed, trusting and satisfied with the organization (Men & Tsai, 2014).

So far, however, research tended to focus on the organizational perspective (i.e., what could organizations do to build or maintain relationships with stakeholders) such as the extent to what organizations (for-profit and nonprofit) apply the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) or the dialogic principles of Kent and Taylor (1998) (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). However, the perspective of the stakeholders remains an under-researched topic (Ji et al., 2017; Watkins, 2017). As a consequence, "*the real potential of social media may be underestimated*" (Ji et al., 2017, p. 203). This is a missed opportunity, however, because the wide adoption of social media offers enormous opportunities to observe stakeholders' online engagement (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Unlike traditional media, social media are user-centered tools that allow stakeholders to play the role of gatekeepers (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011).

Only recently, research started to pay attention to the stakeholder perspective of stakeholder engagement instead of solely focusing on the organizational perspective. For example, one study (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014) has shown that two-way symmetrical communication is likely to induce high levels of stakeholder engagement, compared to asymmetrical strategies. In particular, findings demonstrated that stakeholders are more likely to comment on messages of organizations based on a two-way symmetrical model than messages based on a two-way asymmetrical model (i.e., two-way communication but only for the benefit of the organization itself) or public information model (i.e., one-way communication) (Cho et al., 2014). However, in this study stakeholder engagement is still

primarily considered as a response to what the organization is doing (i.e., what model of public relations do they apply).

The study of Ji et al. (2017) provides one of the earliest attempts to actually empirically investigate the stakeholder perspective of stakeholder engagement. In this study data were collected from stakeholders' engagement with Fortune 500 companies on Facebook from 2009 to 2013. Results of the study show that among different online engagement activities of stakeholders (i.e., liking, sharing and commenting in a positive or negative way on Facebook posts), only positive and negative comments were significant indicators of the organizational reputation whereas positive comments had a positive impact on it and negative comments a negative influence. In particular, the impact of negative comments on the organizational reputation was slightly higher than the positive impact of positive comments. Importantly, this effect could be considered as long-lasting because the effects are based on a longitudinal observation in a natural environment. Hence, by focusing on the stakeholder perspective, this study provides a very interesting direction for future research that will be taken into consideration in the current dissertation.

1.5 Webcare as a tool to address stakeholder engagement

Besides gaining insights in how stakeholder engagement affects perceptions of the organization (e.g., Ji et al., 2017), it is also important to know how organizations should best deal with this engagement behavior. By engaging in dialogue with stakeholders (i.e., especially with the ones that are negative), organizations could prevent issues from escalating into crises. This is referred to in literature as webcare. Inspired by other researchers (i.e., Harrison-Walker, 2001; Hong & Lee, 2005), van Noort and Willemsen (2012, p. 133) define webcare as *“the act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) consumers by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (i.e., questions, concerns, and complaints)”*. The reason why organizations are likely to invest time and efforts in webcare, is that by means of webcare, organizations clearly demonstrate that they take concerns of stakeholders seriously which might prevent the negative comments from escalating into a crisis (van Noort, Willemsen, Kerkhof, & Verhoeven, 2014).

Figure 1 shows an example of webcare on Facebook established by the Dutch airline company KLM. In this post, the KLM webcare team is answering to the complaint of a customer.



Figure 1: Example of webcare by KLM. (Facebook, 2018)

As illustrated in this figure, webcare is mostly used to address negative comments because this negative feedback might possibly influence multiple audiences. In particular, by addressing complaints in an appropriate way, the organization might actually benefit from webcare. For example, Lee and Song (2010) found that when observers are exposed to accommodative responses (i.e., putting complainers' concerns first, Coombs, 1999; Marcus & Goodman, 1991) from the company to their negative feedback, they are more likely to positively evaluate the company (Lee & Song, 2010). Furthermore, another study has found that both on consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms, a company was evaluated more positively when it offered a reactive webcare response to negative feedback of consumers. By responding to this negative feedback upon the request of the complainer (i.e., reactive), the company was likely to evoke sympathy and hence a more favorable brand evaluation (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Additionally, research has shown that consumers' loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and purchase intentions could be increased by webcare addressing negative consumer comments (Hong & Lee 2005; Lee & Song 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010).

As illustrated above, webcare is mainly considered as a tool to address negative stakeholder engagement. Webcare as a tool to reinforce positive consumer engagement has not much been studied yet. One of the few studies that investigated this topic is the one of Schamari and Schaefer (2015). These authors found that organizations could also benefit from webcare that addresses positive consumer feedback. In particular, the authors found that a personalized response directed at a positive consumer comment is able to increase consumer engagement intentions (i.e., posting about the brand on social media) through enhanced conversational human voice, but only on consumer-generated platforms. Hence, this study provides some preliminary evidence for the fact that it is important to not only consider webcare as a response to negative consumer feedback (e.g., Lee &

Song, 2010; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012) but also to positive consumer feedback because this might generate positive consumer evaluations or behavior as well.

2 Corporate communication in turbulent times

2.1 Defining crisis communication

While webcare could possibly avoid an issue to escalate into a crisis, sooner or later, it is inevitable that an organization will be confronted with a crisis throughout its life cycle (e.g., Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs, 2010; Fearn-Banks, 2010). For example, in 2018, H&M was heavily criticized for an advertisement that featured a black child model wearing a hoodie that says “*coolest monkey in the jungle*” (cf. Figure 2). H&M became at the center of a public backlash. The advertisement was shared thousands of times on social media and got a lot of comments of critics saying that H&M should be ashamed, such as the example in Figure 3. Also, several protests were organized, such as by the Members of the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa. The protestors ruined shops and H&M was forced to temporarily close the shops in order to guarantee the employees’ safety (Flanagan & Tahir, 2018).



Figure 2: Contested H&M advertisement. (West, 2018)



Figure 3: Negative tweet about H&M advertisement. (Twitter, 2018)

Crises like the one from H&M are likely to threaten the organization-stakeholder relationship. Therefore, both organizations and academic literature are concerned with how organizations could best handle such crisis situations (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Kim, 2016; Lambret & Barki, 2017; Vos, 2017). The academic discipline that is especially concerned with this topic is crisis communication research. Several authors argue that crisis communication could be considered as a sub-discipline of corporate communications (Argenti, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). However, during the last two decades, it could be argued that crisis communication research has evolved into an independent academic discipline within the broader research area of corporate communication and public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

Coombs (2015, p. 3) defines a crisis as *"the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes"*. Hence, Coombs (2015) stresses that a crisis is largely perceptual. If stakeholders think there is a crisis, the organization is actually in a crisis unless it is able to convince stakeholders that it is not. Other key characteristics of crises are that they are unpredictable: nobody knows *when* exactly *what* is going to happen. Another important feature of crises is that they threaten stakeholders' expectations. Hence, stakeholders are a crucial point of focus when a crisis hits.

A potential negative outcome of crises is that they might result in reputational damage and thus threaten the organizational reputation (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Jahng & Hong, 2017). This is why an important goal of crisis communication is reputation management (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Sturges, 1994). Effective crisis communication may minimize crisis damage that is likely to negatively affect the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2010). The organizational reputation is created based on the information that stakeholders receive about the organization (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004). Fombrun (1996, p. 72) defines organizational reputation as *"a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals"*.

Today there is a widespread belief that the survival of organizations largely depends on perceptions of the organizational reputation (Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2004; Wang, Yu, & Chiang, 2016). A good organizational reputation is of great strategical value for the organization that possesses it (Ji et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016). Having a good reputation offers a wide range of benefits such as acceptance from stakeholder groups, generating higher profits and having a competitive advantage because it is hard to obtain. Therefore, CEO's and senior executives of organizations consider the protection of the organizational reputation as a priority (Dowling, 2002). As organizational reputations deal with perceptions of stakeholders who evaluate multiple characteristics of the involved organization, stakeholders have to be a focal point of attention when examining the organizational reputation.

2.2 Crisis communication theory in evolution

2.2.1 From passive to active stakeholders

Nowadays, the organization in crisis does not longer own the exclusivity of communication when a crisis hits. Traditional media are characterized by their passive recipients of messages (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Social media, on the contrary, provide an interactive platform that allows active participation (Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng, Liu, & Davidson, 2018). Therefore, a paradigm change has entered in which the focus is no longer on organization-centered thinking and unilateral relationship management, but on stakeholder-centered thinking and bi-lateral stakeholder engagement (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010).

This change is largely initiated by social media. Since their introduction, social media are not only changing the practice of corporate communication (cf. 1.3), but also the landscape of crisis communication in particular. On social media, crisis communicators are able to quickly share initial information, updates, explanations and decisions (Smith, 2010; Sutton, Palen, & Shlovksi, 2008). Furthermore, these media enable organizations to have a closer connection with stakeholders that are affected by the crisis because through social media they could provide social support (Marken, 2007). Nevertheless, the characteristics of social media also pose some challenges to the practice of crisis communication (Freberg, Palenchar, & Veil, 2013). Social media have created a shift from a command-and-control model, with messages sent out by the top of the organization, to a more interactive and free-flowing model (Jiang et al., 2016). For example, when the automobile brand Volkswagen got involved in the Dieselgate in September 2015 (i.e., the brand installed fraudulent software in their cars that manipulated emission rates), the amount of fans of the Volkswagen's Facebook page raised spectacularly compared to the week before when the news was not revealed yet, as shown in Figure

4. This demonstrates that people are actually checking what is happening on social media when an organization gets involved in a crisis.

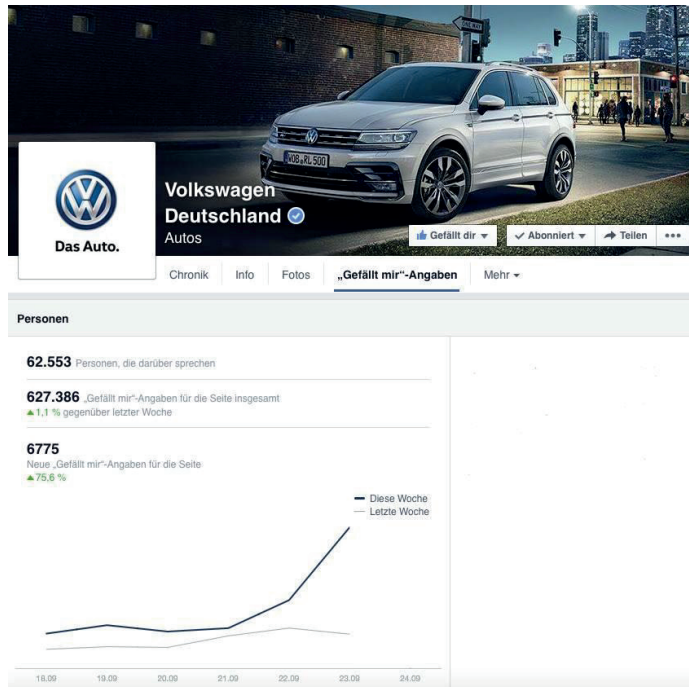


Figure 4: Amount of likes Facebook pages Volkswagen Deutschland. (Facebook, 2015a)

Furthermore, thousands of people were also tweeting about the event as shown in Figure 5 (Zhang, Vos, Jari, Wang, & Kotkov, 2016). After the news became known to the public, the number of tweets per day remained relatively high for more than one month. This is an indication for the severity of the crisis for Volkswagen and indicates that people could be talking about a crisis for a long time (Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016).

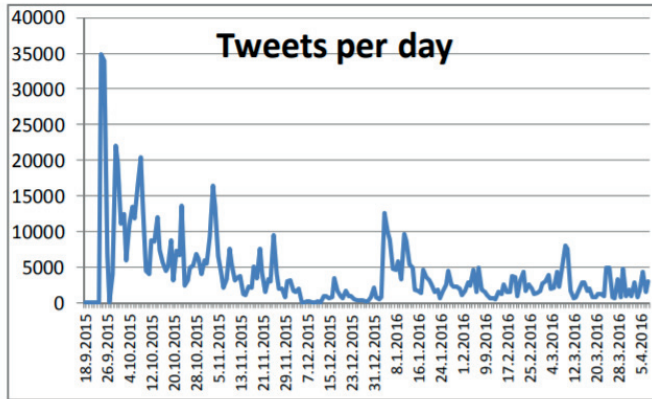


Figure 5: Tweets per day during Volkswagen crisis. (Zhang et al., 2016)

Consequently, in the current social media environment, stakeholders are no longer what they used to be (Johnston, 2014). Previously, all communication occurred through traditional media that are characterized by one-way communication in which organizations speak to their stakeholders. This is also referred to as a broadcasting model because an organization attempts to persuade stakeholders who are in this context the receivers of the message. This communication process is determined by the sender (i.e., the organization in crisis). This is unlike social media, that are characterized by a ‘crowd-casting’ instead of a ‘broadcasting’ model because they enable stakeholders to self-organize as a ‘crowd’ that is in charge to produce and spread information about an organization (Cornelissen, 2017). In this context, stakeholders are no longer passive receivers of information, but could also become active senders (Ji et al., 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017). Therefore, crisis communication in the current digital environment could not be reduced to the communication of one organization trying to maintain or defend the organizational reputation.

Stakeholders of the past are transformed in individualistic and claim-oriented persons that easily spread their negative and positive thoughts and feelings online as a way to give sense to the crisis (Ji et al., 2017). They have access to a variety of communication channels, both online and offline. Especially the internet and social media empower them (Lambret & Barki, 2017). They could express their grief to whoever they want, whenever they want. Both spatial-temporal borders as well as gatekeepers such as journalists have disappeared (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Hence, organizations in crisis also have to take into account a new communication power balance (Lambret & Barki).

Several authors examined how stakeholders have the power to challenge organizations in crisis in a variety of ways that are visible for others (e.g., Brummette & Sisco, 2015; Ott & Theunissen, 2014). For example, Brummette and Sisco (2015) demonstrated that stakeholders use Twitter to express their

emotions as well as their perceptions of the organization involved in the crisis. This information could be viewed by multiple followers of the tweeters and is likely to set the tone for the crisis. This is especially the case when there is a lack of information about the crisis originating from the organization in crisis and when the crisis is still characterized by high levels of uncertainty (Brummette & Sisco, 2015). Furthermore, another study has shown that stakeholders should be addressed appropriately in order to avoid a crisis escalation. In particular, authenticity of voice and transparency were crucial factors for success, whereas engaging indiscriminately with emotional stakeholders was likely to escalate the crisis (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Hence, stakeholders have the power to influence crisis perceptions and they have to be addressed appropriately in order to avoid further damage.

In addition, consumers' comments on social media might also influence perceptions of the organizational reputation (Conway, Ward, Lewis, & Bernhardt, 2007). Since messages on social media are public in nature, these can easily damage or enhance the organizational reputation (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013). Hence, messages on social media created by stakeholders have the capacity to either benefit or harm the organization in crisis because of their potential to affect the evaluation of the organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). However, it is important to remark that stakeholders do not only use social media in times of crises to vent their negative thoughts and feelings. Feelings of support could also be expressed when an organization that consumers love is involved in a crisis. Luoma-aho (2010) made a distinction between positive and negative feedback of stakeholders: faith-holders and hate-holders. On the one hand, hate-holders are *"formed when the distrust and negative emotion that stakeholders feel towards an organization are strong enough to hinder it"*. On the other hand, faith-holders are *"formed when the trust and positive emotion they feel towards the organization is strong enough to be a beneficial resource"* (Luoma-aho, 2010, p. 5). For example, during the Dieselgate scandal in which Volkswagen got involved, people showed their continued support on Facebook to the brand in good and in bad days as shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6: Faith-holder Volkswagen. (Facebook, 2015b)

Taken together, based on the above-mentioned findings we could conclude that stakeholders can play an active role in the crisis communication process (Coombs & Holladay, 2014) and are likely to affect perceptions of the organization in crisis both in a positive or negative way.

2.2.2 Sense-making by stakeholders

The active role that stakeholders might play during a crisis was already introduced by Weick in 1988 who published a paper entitled 'Enacted sense-making in crisis situations'. Sense-making could be defined as a process of social construction that occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals' ongoing activities (i.e., life as usual is disrupted by a crisis), and involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalize what people are doing (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Weick (1988) argues that crises initiate a strong intention among people for sense-making. The conditions of a crisis (i.e., a high uncertainty event) initiate a high information need and therefore a cognitive gap occurs (Heverin & Zach, 2010). In this context, people might feel a high need to make sense of this situation (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002; Stieglitz, Bunker, Mirbabaie & Ehnis, 2017). By 'enactment' people undertake actions to make sense of a crisis situation (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). These actions enable people to reduce the complexity of crises (Weick, 1988). Crises provide ideal occasions for sense-making because they interrupt individuals' routines and people are compelled to wonder what is going on (Maitlis & Sonensheim, 2010). This sense-making process could be influenced by different factors. For example, Mills and O'Connell (2013) found that when the media propagate a certain construction of a crisis, this significantly influences people's sense-making process.

Often, sense-making is an individual process, however, during extreme and uncertain events such as crises, individuals are likely make sense of such situations by communicating with others (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Stieglitz et al., 2017). Especially social media are designed with the purpose of enabling interactions between people, they can freely mingle, interact, and collaborate (e.g., Ehnis & Bunker, 2012; Stieglitz et al., 2017). Key actions of individuals' sense-making behaviors are talking, interacting and engaging in dialogue with others (Muhren, Van Den Eede, & Van de Walle, 2008). For example, Stieglitz et al. (2017) compared the sense-making behavior of stakeholders regarding three different cases: the Sidney Lindt Café Siege (2014) (i.e., a gunman entered a café and killed three people including himself), the Germanwings plane crash (2015) (i.e., a crash caused by a co-pilot that committed suicide) and the terrorist attacks in Brussels (2016) (i.e., three bombings caused by terrorists: two in Brussels Airport and one in metro station Maalbeek). The authors found that stakeholders mostly tweet negatively about the German Wings crash, whilst about the SydneySiege case more neutral and positive tweets were posted. Even stakeholders that are not directly affected by the crisis use platforms such as Twitter for sense-making processes such as sharing external

information (i.e., sharing hyperlinks) and expressing their emotions about the event. With regard to the amount of tweets, results demonstrated that the Brussels attacks initiated the highest amount of Twitter communication, compared to the two other cases (Stieglitz et al., 2017).

Furthermore, another action that individuals could establish in order to bridge the cognitive gap is information seeking behavior (Garnett & Kouzmin, 1999). For example, one study investigated how stakeholders seek information on social and traditional media and what factors affect their media use during crises (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Findings showed that stakeholders tend to rely on traditional media (i.e., especially broadcast media and newspapers) to find information about the crisis. Social media, on the contrary, were used to share or obtain insider information and to connect with family and friends (Austin et al., 2012).

2.3 Towards a multi-vocal approach

If research wants to take into account the complexity and dynamics of organizational crises as described above, scholars have to take the 'third step' within communication research (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). In the last 60 years, communication research has evolved from a transmission paradigm with a focus on the sender, the distribution of information and the intended effect (i.e., first step) into an interaction paradigm that emphasizes the receiver, the interpretation of messages and the creating of meaning (i.e., second step) (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). A similar evolution took place in crisis communication research. Here, a shift took place from a rhetorical or text-oriented approach into a strategic or context-oriented approach. Benoit (1995) is an influential presenter of the former. His image repair theory explains how and why individuals and organizations defend their reputation by making use of a set of image repair strategies when they are accused or suspected of wrongdoing. A very influential representative of the second research tradition is Coombs (2007) and his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). This theory explains how situational variables (i.e., attributions of crisis responsibility to the organization in crisis) could serve as an indicator to choose the appropriate crisis response strategy. The theory is based on the assumption that in order to optimally protect the organizational reputation, the crisis response strategy has to be selected that best fits the reputational threat caused by the crisis. The theory consists of three components: (1) a list of crisis response strategies, (2) a framework that helps to categorize crisis situations and (3) a matching procedure between the type of crisis and the crisis response strategy. This theory already reflects a shift in crisis communication theory from a sender approach (i.e., image repair theory: the verbal defense strategies selected by the organization in crisis) to an approach that is more aware of the receiver (i.e., SCCT: attributions of responsibility made by the stakeholders) (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Both image repair theory and SCCT mention stakeholders, but stakeholders are not the focal point of these

theories. Instead, they are rather treated as negative entities who have to be handled in order to minimize harm to the organization rather than valuable allies to work together with in order to deal with crises (Xu & Li, 2013).

Consequently, it has been argued that previous crisis communication research tended to focus on crisis communication produced by the organization in crisis itself. However, "*crisis communication produced by the other voices who are involved in the crises, directly or indirectly, as senders or as receivers, is seldom taken into account*" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 140). Accordingly, it is important for crisis communication research to adopt a multi-vocal approach in which different senders and receivers of crisis information are taken into consideration (e.g., Ji et al., 2017). For example, the study of Zhang and colleagues (2016) examined how multiple actors communicate on Twitter about the Volkswagen Dieselgate scandal, each representing their own interests and views pertaining this crisis.

Different authors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Ji et al., 2017; Kim, 2016; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Zhang et al., 2016) argue that in order to consider all the voices of the current environment in which crisis communication takes place, a shift away from both the transmission and interaction paradigm has to take place. A shortcoming of these paradigms is that both the sender and the receiver are often put too much in singular. This, however, neglects the sociological reality of a crisis context in which there are multiple senders, receivers, communication and sense-making processes (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). In this view, stakeholders are partners in the sense-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Hence, despite the major importance of both paradigms (i.e., text and context-oriented approach) in crisis communication research, recently some critics have been raised about them, especially within the current digital environment. Organizations in crisis have to be aware of the fact that multiple stakeholders are able to communicate about the crisis through different social media platforms and all these actions might influence perceptions of the organizational reputation (Cheng & Cameron, 2018). Therefore, with the omnipresence of social media, traditional ways of thinking about stakeholders became outdated since communication with and among stakeholders is more and more taking place outside the control of the organization (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho, Tirkkonen, & Vos, 2013). On social media, various stakeholders are likely to interact with each other, all having different interests and different point of views (Vos, Schoemacker, & Luoma-aho, 2014). In this context, the role of corporate communication practitioners is more than ever linked to organizational survival (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), for example by protecting the organizational reputation. This organizational survival is no longer only dependent on communicating with the right stakeholders, but especially in finding the right issue arenas in which organizations have to participate. The results of

what is happening in these issue arenas is then reflected in the organizational reputation (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Issue arenas are “*places of interaction where an issue is discussed by stakeholders and organizations, both online and within traditional media*” (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010, p. 315). This definition recognizes that besides the recognition of different stakeholders, different places of interaction have to be recognized as well. It is in particular important to pay attention to the specific characteristics of each arena (Vos et al., 2014). For example, Twitter is primarily used to spread short information updates because of its limited amount of characters (Sharma, 2012). Facebook posts, however, do not have a character limitation, so they these could include some background information.

Besides the issue arena’s theory (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Vos et al., 2013; Vos et al., 2014), the theory of the rhetorical arena was developed to extend and complicate the traditional receiver orientation of crisis communication. The basic assumption of this theory is that when a crisis hits, an arena opens up in which multiple actors and voices (i.e., internal and external), meet, compete, collaborate and negotiate with each other (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Zhao, 2017). Frandsen and Johansen (2017), however, were not the first authors that used the metaphors of arena and voice. The authors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017) argue that they are inspired by German public relations researchers’ redefinition of the public sphere as a ‘forum for communication’ in which there exist several arenas where actors communicate with each other (e.g., Renn, 1992). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) and Vos et al. (2014) also used the metaphor of arenas by introducing issue arenas.

Just like the issue arena theory (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Vos et al., 2014), the rhetorical arena theory adopts a multi-vocal approach to crisis communication. It argues that multiple voices have to be heard in a crisis context: not only one sender and one receiver but many senders and receivers start communicating with each other when a crisis hits. In this context, Frandsen and Johansen (2017, p. 148) define crisis communication as “*a complex and dynamic configuration of communicative processes which develop before, during and after an event or a situation that is interpreted as a crisis by an organization and/or by other voices in the arena*”. Hence, in this definition the complexity of crisis communication nowadays is stressed and the fact that multiple actors at the same time make sense of the crisis. In this arena, traditional crisis publics (i.e., receivers) can become crisis communicators (i.e., senders). Therefore, the voices that are heard during and after a crisis are not restricted to those from the ones who represent the organization in crisis. The rhetorical arena represents an area where several crisis actors talk about the crisis and respond to the crisis. Therefore, this concept applies a multi-vocal approach to crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010).

Figure 7 represents a visual representation of the rhetorical arena: when a crisis occurs, the arena opens in which multiple voices communicate (cf. circles in Figure 7). Each time when a communication process could be considered as an intervention or a contribution to a crisis, it becomes part of the arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

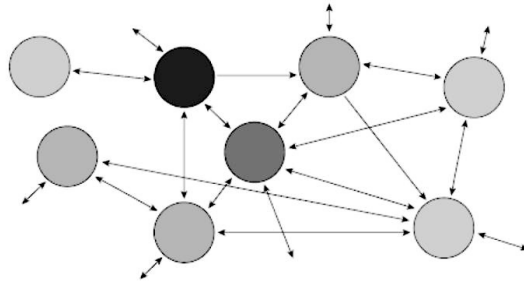


Figure 7: Visualization of the rhetorical arena. (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017)

3 Research aims and research questions

Corporate and crisis communication theory have both evolved in such a way that they attribute a more active role to stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement and their sense-making processes are crucial features of communication practices nowadays (e.g., Ji et al., 2017). Despite this evolution, however, current research is still focusing too often on the perspective of the organization, for example by investigating how organizations use social media (e.g., Allagui & Breslow, 2016; Colley & Collier, 2009; Effing & Spil, 2016; Valentini et al., 2018; Wright & Hinson, 2013), if they capitalize on the dialogic potential (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Briones et al., 2011; Men & Tsai, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011) and which response strategies could be used by organizations to protect the organizational reputation (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Claeys et al., 2010). However, as suggested by the stakeholder engagement (e.g., Ji et al., 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018) and multi-vocal approach (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho et al., 2013; Vos et al., 2014; Zhao, 2017), it is important that research starts to take into consideration the input of a variety of stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Therefore, the general research aim of this dissertation is to investigate how the characteristics of the current digital environment (i.e., the interactive nature of social media and the active role of multiple stakeholders) affect corporate communication practices and crisis communication in particular.

Within the context of this dissertation, six different empirical studies have been carried out to explore this topic by means of a variety of quantitative methods such as content analyses, experimental designs and a survey. In these studies, we examined several voices of stakeholders within the issue or

rhetorical arenas and this in different organizational contexts (i.e., business as usual, corporate crises and terrorism). We first conducted a basic examination of how organizations communicate with stakeholders on Facebook during normal operations, when business is as usual. Then, in the following three studies, we examined how sense-making processes of consumers influence perceptions of the organizational reputation during turbulent times and more specifically in times of corporate crises. In these studies, we focus on the interactions of commercial companies with the stakeholder group of consumers since they are the most important stakeholders in terms of organizational crisis communication that aims to protect the organizational reputation (Lin, Chen, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). Finally, the last two studies were carried out in the context of extreme turbulent times. In particular, we investigated the sense-making processes of both organizations and different stakeholders during the terrorism threat in Belgium and the terroristic attacks in Brussels on 22nd of March 2016. In the context of terrorism, the government and citizens are the most important stakeholders because the former has to ensure citizens' security and communicate to them in an appropriate manner.

The first focus of this dissertation is how Facebook is used as a corporate communication tool by companies when business is as usual (i.e., no crisis). Social media introduced a revolution in corporate communication because, unlike traditional media, these media enable organizations to interact with stakeholders in a dialogic manner (Saxton & Waters, 2014; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009) and develop relationships with them (Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). However, in order to really capitalize on the relationship building and dialogic potential of social media, interactions among organizations and social media users by means of two-way symmetrical communication is necessary (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Following the example of previous studies (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009), as a baseline starting point of this dissertation, we investigated how companies use Facebook as a corporate communication tool and as a tool to engage in dialogue with stakeholders and built relationships with them (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002). The following research question is formulated:

RQ₁: *How is Facebook used as a corporate communication tool by reputed companies?*

By answering this research question, we gain insights in how companies use Facebook to communicate with stakeholders when business is as usual. However, especially when organizations get confronted with a crisis, corporate communication practices are under pressure, for instance because crises threaten the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2015). Crisis communication in particular has the goal to prohibit or minimize reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, a second aim of this dissertation is to investigate how the organizational reputation could be protected by specifically considering the active role that stakeholders might play in this process. Traditionally, crisis communication research tends to focus on the perspective of the organization in crisis, for example by

investigating which crisis response strategies organizations best use in order to protect the organizational reputation (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010). However, several authors (e.g., Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018) argue that it is important to adopt a stakeholder engagement approach in crisis communication that actively considers the sense-making processes of stakeholders (Weick, 1988) and how these influence perceptions of the organization in crisis such as the organizational reputation. Therefore, we formulate the following second research question:

RQ₂: *How should companies in crisis deal with the active sense-making processes of consumers in order to protect the organizational reputation?*

The second research question leads us to three sub-questions that each focus on distinct sense-making processes of stakeholders and their impact on the organizational reputation. In a first sub-question we investigate how organizations can take into account the position of the consumer when engaging in dialogue. According to the dialogic theory of public relations it is important to engage in dialogue with stakeholders on social media (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Whilst the focus of the first study is to investigate *if* companies engage in dialogue, this second study wants to provide an answer to the question *how* they have to engage in dialogue in order to protect the organizational reputation. Previous research has shown that it is important to engage in dialogue in a human and conversational manner, referred to in literature as ‘conversational human voice’ (CHV) (Kelleher, 2009). This is a natural, informal communication style that perfectly fits the context of social media (e.g., Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Research is necessary, however, to investigate which dialogic response styles engender a human voice (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). We propose personalization as a response style that is likely to engender this human voice. By personalizing a response, organizations can give the impression that there are ‘real people’ behind the scenes who want to listen to the needs of consumers (i.e., feature of human communication) (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Moreover, based on the stakeholder engagement approach (e.g., Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng, Liu, & Davidson, 2018), we argue that the most suitable response style to engage in dialogue with consumers will depend on the input and viewpoint from those consumers. As argued by Ji et al. (2017), it is important to incorporate stakeholders’ behavior when examining organizational communication on social media.

Therefore, the second study takes the point of view of consumers by investigating how their engagement on social media (i.e., posting comments on a corporate crisis message post) should be appropriately addressed by organizations in crisis. Consumers’ comments in reaction to a company crisis message post could be positive or negative (Doh & Hwang, 2009). We argue that the valence of the consumers’ comments to which the organization in crisis is responding forms a boundary condition of the desirability of a personalized response. In this study we consider commenting on a corporate

crisis message post as a way for consumers to give sense to the crisis. At the same time, we examine how the organization in crisis best deals with this sense-making process. We formulate the following research question:

RQ_{2.1}: *How do both negative and positive online consumer comments on a corporate crisis message affect consumers' perceptions of the organizational reputation, and how should the organization in crisis respond to each of them?*

Social media do not only allow stakeholders to share their viewpoints regarding companies in crisis, they also create expectations amongst those stakeholders. The rise of social media has resulted in the expectations amongst stakeholders that organizations in crisis have to communicate quickly and frequently (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016). Hence, on social media, companies are forced to communicate about a crisis more quickly than ever before because otherwise, other parties such as for example the news media will happily publish the information (Johnson, 2009). Nonetheless, communicating quickly also entails the risk of communicating information that is not yet confirmed (e.g., Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016). We argue that the use of uncertain statements or hedges (Banks & De Pelsmacker, 2014) may be a feasible and necessary strategy for crisis communicators when they must communicate quickly on social media in the initial stages of crises. Surprisingly, so far, crisis communication did not explore the impact of communicating uncertainties on perceptions of the organization in crisis such as the organizational reputation (Liu et al., 2016). Therefore, in the third study of this dissertation, we examine the impact of communicating uncertainties on perceptions of organizational reputation and also unravel the underlying explanatory mechanism. Additionally, we suggest a boundary condition of the desirability of communicating uncertainties: self-disclosure of the crisis by the organization in crisis. This is called 'stealing thunder' in literature and signifies that the organization in crisis itself breaks the news about the crisis before other parties are able to do so (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldson, 2005). We expect communicating of uncertainties only to be tolerated by consumers in the case of stealing thunder because when self-disclosing the crisis, research has repeatedly shown that in this context, organizations get more credits from stakeholders (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Pandelaere, 2016; Wigley, 2011). Therefore, in research question 2.2, we will examine how consumers make sense of uncertainties communicated by the organization in crisis. In particular, we will examine how the communication of uncertainties by the organization in crisis affects the organizational reputation and how self-disclosure (vs. third-party disclosure) of the crisis influences this process:

RQ_{2.2}: *What is the impact of communicating uncertainties on consumers' perceptions of the organizational reputation, under which circumstances and why?*

As a third element within the broader second research question, we examine another sense-making process of consumers: identification with the spokesperson based on gender similarity. The degree to which consumers can identify with an organizational spokesperson based on nonverbal cues is relevant to consider because stakeholders' perceptions of an organization in crisis is determined by more than the content of the message alone (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Previous research in crisis communication has mainly stressed the importance of verbal cues in the crisis communication message (i.e., the content and the framing) (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). However, nonverbal aspects could also have an important influence on people's perceptions (Sporer & Schwandt, 2006). Especially in crisis situations that are characterized by high levels of uncertainties, people tend to be very sensitive for this kind of information (Coleman & Wu, 2006). Therefore, it is important for crisis communication research to not only consider verbal but nonverbal cues as well (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). While crisis communication research recently started to investigate the impact of nonverbal cues (e.g., ethnic similarity, baby faces, facial expressions and body movements) (Arpan, 2002; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; De Waele, Claeys, & Cauberghe, 2017; Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008), the impact of one obvious and easily accessible visible cue (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990) has been neglected: gender similarity between the sender (i.e., the spokesperson) and the receiver of the crisis message. Therefore, in the fourth study of this dissertation, the impact of gender similarity between the crisis spokesperson and stakeholders will be analyzed.

However, the impact of a nonverbal cue like gender similarity should not be considered independently of the content of the crisis message. It is important to examine not only if this nonverbal cue affects consumers' perceptions, but also whether or not this depends on the crisis response strategy offered in the organizational crisis message (e.g., apology). According to the empathy model of forgiveness, individual similarities such as gender similarity are likely to create empathy towards the spokesperson. However, another important antecedent of empathy according to this model is the presence of apologies (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998; Riek & Mania, 2012). Thus, we expect that the impact of gender similarity together with the offering of apologies in the crisis response strategy will enhance the degree of empathy that stakeholders experience towards the organizational spokesperson (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Consequently, similar to the previous studies, in this study as well, we combine sense-making processes of consumers (e.g., identification with the spokesperson based on similar gender) and aspects under control of the organization in crisis (e.g., choosing the appropriate crisis response strategy) to gain insights in how the organizational reputation is influenced. As a final element within the overall second research question, we formulate the following third sub-question:

RQ_{2.3}: *What is the impact of gender similarity between the crisis spokesperson and consumers on consumers' perceptions of the organizational reputation, under which circumstances and why?*

Whilst the second goal of this dissertation focuses on the context of corporate crises, through the third goal of this dissertation, we want to gain insights into corporate communication in extreme turbulent times: in the context of terrorism to be exact. It is important to investigate terrorism as a case because Europeans consider terrorism as the most important challenge for the internal security of the European Union (Eurobarometer, 2017). Furthermore, terrorism forms a very particular type of crisis because of several reasons: it creates a fear of repetition (Gibbs van Brunshot & Sherley, 2005; Vos, 2017), it makes people vulnerable, has a major psychological impact (Goldstein, 2005) and it threatens core values of society (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). We examine the representation of multiple voices and sense-making processes of stakeholders in a terrorism context through two final research questions. One focuses on the terrorism threat in Belgium after the attacks in Paris and another one focuses on the reactions of different stakeholders to the terrorist attacks in Belgium in March 2016.

The fifth study of this dissertation is conducted in the context of the terrorism threat in Belgium. After the terrorist attacks in France on the 13th of November 2015, the only terrorist who was still alive and involved in these attacks fled to Belgium. The Belgian government feared an imminent Paris-style attack and therefore the terrorism threat level was raised to the highest level possible (Rose & Blenkinsop, 2015). In this study, we aim to explore the resilience of Belgian citizens during the terrorism threat in Belgium in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris. Furthermore, we also explore how the government, who is also a primary stakeholder during the threat, is able to protect its reputation by means of communication. Hence, we adopt a multi-vocal approach by examining both how citizens and the government make sense of the terrorism threat by means of their behavior. The overall third research question is therefore:

RQ₃: *How did Belgian citizens respond to the terrorism threat in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris and how was this affected by the governmental communication?*

In light of this third research question, we first focus on the behavior of citizens. Two types of behavior are analyzed in this context: behavioral changes (e.g., avoiding public transport, not participating in mass events) and information seeking behavior. Both strategies could be used by citizens to give sense to this crisis (Garnett & Kouzmin, 1999; Kievik & Gutteling, 2011; Lee, Gibson, Markon, & Lemyre, 2009; Palenchar & Heath, 2002) because by changing their behavior and seeking information about the threat, citizens are able to get some kind of control over the situation (Kievik & Gutteling, 2011; Nellis, 2009). This leads us to the first sub-question:

RQ_{3.1}: *How do Belgian citizens deal with the terrorism threat in terms of their behavior?*

Furthermore, we also investigate the behavior of another important stakeholder of the terrorism threat: the government. The government had the delicate task to provide Belgian citizens with sufficient information about the threat whilst at the same time being cautious in order to not hinder the police services' investigation. In this regard, we will also analyze the communication of the Belgian government about the terrorism threat and how this influences the governmental reputation. In particular, we examine the following research question:

RQ_{3.2}: *Can governmental communication beneficially influence the governmental reputation? What is the underlying explanatory mechanism?*

For the final research question, which was investigated in the sixth study of this dissertation, we provide a case study of the multi-vocal approach to crisis communication. In particular, we examine the different voices that communicate on Twitter in response to the terrorist attacks in Belgium on the 22nd of March 2016. Despite the omnipresence of terrorism in current society, so far, there is no research that provides in-depth insights about who uses social media in this context and for what purposes. Previous case-studies in crisis communication research largely focused on other types of crises such as natural disasters, for example on hurricanes (e.g., Hughes, Denis, Palen, & Anderson, 2014; Lachlan, Spence, Lin, & Greco, 2014) and earthquakes (e.g., Mendoza, Poblete, & Castillo, 2010; Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Qu, Huang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011; Wilensky, 2014). As mentioned above, however, terrorism as a crisis has some unique characteristics that distinguishes it from other crisis types (Goldstein, 2005; Gibbs van Brunshot & Sherley, 2005; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Vos, 2017). Therefore, it is important to explore corporate communication in the context of terrorism.

Hence, while the first research question allows us to examine how organizations use social media as a corporate communication tool when business is as usual, this final research question provides us insights about how Twitter was used as a crisis communication tool during and after the terrorist attacks in Belgium. We formulate the following research question:

RQ₄: *Which actors communicated on Twitter in response to the terrorist attacks on 22nd of March 2016 in Belgium and how?*

In sum, by answering each of these four research questions, the current dissertation wants to provide a thorough understanding of corporate communication in which different stakeholders are involved in a variety of contexts. We do so by shedding a light on corporate communication when business as usual, during turbulent times such as corporate crises and during extreme turbulent times like terrorism. Common thread in all these studies is the attention that is paid to how social media and/or the active role of different stakeholders (i.e., stakeholder engagement and sense-making) have influenced the practice of corporate communication.

4 Dissertation outline

This dissertation serves the purpose of exploring how the current digital environment has changed corporate communication and crisis communication in particular. This environment is characterized by the interactive nature of social media and the active role of stakeholders. These characteristics force corporate communication practitioners to not only look at what the organization has to say but also to consider the input of different stakeholders who might play an active role in the communication process. This dissertation adopts a stakeholder engagement (e.g., Ji et al., 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018) and multi-vocal approach (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho et al., 2013; Vos et al., 2014; Zhao, 2017) that pays attention to different voices and their sense-making processes that have to be taken into consideration when practicing corporate communication.

The dissertation encompasses six empirical chapters. These chapters aim to formulate answers to the four research questions which have been described earlier. Chapter two (i.e., study one) describes the first empirical study which explores how Facebook is used as a corporate communication tool by companies by means of a quantitative content analysis. Chapters three (i.e., study two), four (i.e., study three) and five (i.e., study four) start from the perspective of the consumer by investigating how and when their active sense-making processes influence perceptions of the organizational reputation and how organizations could optimally deal with these processes in times of crisis. Chapters six (i.e., study five) and seven (i.e., study six) contain studies that are conducted in the context of terrorism. Again, in both chapters, different stakeholders and their sense-making processes are taken into consideration. In particular we examine what factors drive the information seeking behavior of citizens during the terrorism threat and how governmental communication is able to influence the governmental reputation. Finally, chapter seven explores how Twitter is used as a communication tool by different stakeholders during and after the terrorist attacks in Brussels on the 22nd of March 2016.

Chapter two, *Facebook as a corporate communication tool for companies? A content analysis of the communication strategies of reputable Belgian companies on the social network site*, explores how twelve reputed companies use Facebook as a corporate communication tool by means of a quantitative content analysis (cf. RQ₁). The companies are selected based on a poll organized by Akkanto and the Reputation Institute in which 12 000 people have to rate the reputation of 35 companies in different sectors. In the content analysis, several aspects of the content of the Facebook posts of the companies and the comments on these posts were coded (i.e., whether the communication is marketing communication and/or public relations related, the application of the four

traditional models of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and the dialogic principles of Kent and Taylor (1998).

Findings indicate that companies use Facebook more often to post public relations than marketing communication content. The former is also more often shared than the latter. In one third of the case, the two-way symmetrical model of communication was practiced and results reveal that this is more often the case when it concerns public relations content than marketing communication content. Furthermore, about one fourth of the company posts does not generate any written reactions from users and can be classified as one-way communication. In addition, Belgian companies seem to invest in relationship building through Facebook because most of the companies apply the dialogic principles as suggested by Kent and Taylor (1998). However, there is still room for improvement. Finally, reputation score is not able to predict the communication strategy used on Facebook.

Chapter three, *How to deal with online consumer comments during a crisis? The impact of personalized organizational responses on organizational reputation*, investigates how organizations in crisis should deal with online consumer comments to organizational crisis message posts on Facebook. An experimental design is used to examine if a personalized organizational response to consumer comments in reaction to a corporate crisis message on Facebook is advisable to protect the organizational reputation, and whether or not the desirability of it depends on the valence of these comments (cf. RQ_{2.1}). Results show that a personalized organizational response to a consumer comment on an organizational crisis message post beneficially affects organizational reputation through higher perceptions of conversational human voice (CHV) and sequentially lower consumer skepticism. Hence, when an organization in crisis responds in a personalized conversational style to online consumer comments, these consumers will find that the organization responded with a CHV and as such will feel less skepticism. For this reason, a personalized response will generally lead to a better organizational reputation than a response in a distant, corporate style.

However, the effect of response personalization is not unanimously positive. When consumer comments are positive, a personalized organizational response damages organizational reputation due to increased consumer skepticism. The positive effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation through CHV disappeared when responding to positive consumer comments. However, when consumer reactions are negative, personalizing the organizational response is beneficial for organizational reputation due to increased perceptions of CHV.

Chapter four, *Probably, definitely, maybe: The use of ambiguity markers in crisis communication and the moderating role of source of information disclosure*, investigates how consumers deal with uncertain information communicated by the organization in crisis by means of an experimental design.

In particular, we examine the impact of communicating uncertainties vs. certainties (i.e., ambiguity markers) on perceptions of the organizational reputation. Additionally, we also reveal a boundary condition of this effect: whether the organization in crisis self-discloses the crisis or not (cf. RQ_{2.2}). Results demonstrate that overall communication of uncertainties is detrimental to organizational reputation because it lowers organizational trust. Nevertheless, communicating uncertainties can generate a positive impact on organizational reputation, but only when the affected organization self-discloses the crisis. In this context, the uncertain statements lower perceived organizational responsibility, which in turn improves organizational reputation. When a third party discloses the crisis, however, uncertain statements lower organizational trust and, subsequently, organizational reputation.

Chapter five, *Who says what during crises? A study about the interplay between gender similarity with the spokesperson and crisis response strategy*, pays attention to another sense-making process of consumers: identification with the crisis spokesperson based on a similar gender. Besides this nonverbal cue, we also investigate the moderating role of a verbal cue: the crisis response strategy (cf. RQ_{2.3}). Results of an experimental design show that if consumers identify with the spokesperson based on a similar gender, this is beneficial for organizational reputation because it enhances stakeholders' empathy towards the spokesperson. However, this effect is only found when the spokesperson uses an appropriate crisis response strategy based on the guidelines of situational crisis communication theory. More specifically, when a spokesperson uses a rebuild strategy in the context of a preventable crisis in which apologies are offered, gender similarity results in more empathy towards the spokesperson and, subsequently, in improved organizational reputation. However, the effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation through empathy towards the spokesperson was not found when a deny strategy was used.

Chapter six, *Terrorism threat in Belgium: The resilience of Belgian citizens and the protection of governmental reputation by means of communication*, explores how Belgian citizens are dealing with the terrorism threat in Belgium in terms of behavioral actions (cf. RQ_{3.1}). Second, this study also investigates if the Belgian government is able to protect its reputation by means of efficient communication (cf. RQ_{3.2}). Results of a national survey show that the terrorism threat makes citizens more alert in public places and participate less in mass events. Moreover, one fifth stopped traveling by public transport. In terms of information seeking behavior, it was found that Belgian citizens search for information several times a day, mostly via traditional media such as television and radio. Furthermore, based on structural equation modelling, we reveal that information seeking behavior is determined by the cognitive assessment of the risk. This cognitive risk assessment is in turn positively influenced by risk involvement and perceived governmental expert efficacy. However, if the mass

media are considered as focusing too much on drama and sensationalism, then the risk perception decreases, and this in turn reduces information seeking behavior. With regard to the impact of governmental communication, results show that adequate governmental communication is able to increase trust and decrease the level of governmental responsibility, which is in turn beneficial for governmental reputation.

Finally, chapter seven, *Using Twitter for communication after terrorist attacks: Insights from a quantitative content analysis of tweets about the attacks in Brussels, Belgium*, provides a case-study that examines by whom and how Twitter is used as a crisis communication channel after the terrorist attacks in Brussels on the 22nd of March 2016, by means of a quantitative content analysis (cf. RQ₄). Results reveal that Twitter is an important communication tool, especially for citizens during terrorist attacks. They use this platform particularly to vent their negative feelings. Although governmental agencies form important communication hubs (i.e., the highest number of retweets), these actors tweeted not frequently during the attacks. Results also indicate that emotion-related content prevails on Twitter, especially when it comes to the content expressed by citizens. The most frequently-expressed emotion in the tweets was sympathy. Both governmental agencies and media mostly tweet neutral, non-emotional information about the attacks in Belgium.

All six chapters have been written as stand-alone articles. As all papers focus on the investigation of corporate communication in the current environment, the literature mentioned in the introduction and corresponding chapters may somewhat overlap.

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CHAPTER II
FACEBOOK AS CORPORATE
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CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE
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CHAPTER II

FACEBOOK AS CORPORATE COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR COMPANIES? A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF REPUTED BELGIAN COMPANIES ON THE SOCIAL NETWORKSITE¹

ABSTRACT

This study used a quantitative content analysis to investigate how twelve reputable Belgian companies use Facebook as a corporate communication tool. Facebook posts of these companies within the timeframe from the 1st of February 2013 until the 31st of March 2013 were analyzed. In total 509 posts were coded as well as 2895 comments to these posts and 332 comments of companies to comments of users. Findings indicated that companies used Facebook more often to post public relations than marketing communication content. The former was also more often shared than the latter. In one third of the cases, the two-way symmetrical model of communication was practiced and results revealed that this is more often the case when it concerned public relations content than marketing communication content. Furthermore, about one fourth of the company posts did not generate any written reactions from users and can be classified as one-way communication. In addition, Belgian companies seemed to invest in relationship building through Facebook because most of the companies applied the dialogic principles as suggested by Kent and Taylor (1998). However, there is still room for improvement. Finally, reputation score was not able to predict the communication strategy used on Facebook.

KEYWORDS

Facebook; corporate communication; marketing communication; public relations; content analysis

¹ The chapter is included in Dutch in this dissertation because the original publication is also in Dutch. It has been published as "Facebook as a corporate communication tool for companies? A content analysis of the communication strategies of reputable Belgian companies on the social network site. *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap*, 43(1), 39-63." This paper has also been presented at the International Conference on Research in Advertising (ICORIA) in Amsterdam (27-28th June 2014). The paper also received the "Beste artikel 2015" award on the Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap conference in Amsterdam (4-5th February 2016).

1 Inleiding

Sociale media zoals Facebook hebben een (r)evolutie teweeggebracht in de manier waarop bedrijven met hun publiek kunnen communiceren. Deze media stellen hen namelijk in staat om de corporate communicatie met hun publiek op een meer dialogische manier te organiseren. Er kan in interactie getreden worden met het publiek, wat niet mogelijk is via traditionele media (Saxton & Waters, 2014; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). De sociale netwerksite Facebook is een van de bekendste en populairste sociale media. Wereldwijd gebruiken meer dan twee miljard mensen deze sociale netwerksite dagelijks (The Verge, 2018). Ook in België en Nederland is Facebook het meest gebruikte sociale medium met ruim 5 miljoen Belgische en 8,4 miljoen Nederlandse accounts (Oosterveer, 2013; Social-bakers, 2013). Bedrijven, die nochtans vaak laatkomers zijn wat betreft de adoptie van nieuwe communicatietechnologieën (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008), blijken zich bewust van dit enorme bereik en schakelen de sociale netwerksite in toenemende mate in als corporate communicatietool (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Van Belleghem, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2012).

Bestaande studies naar het gebruik van sociale media in corporate communicatie focussen voornamelijk op de adoptie van sociale media door communicatiemanagers en de gevolgen voor hun functioneren als communicatiemanager. Diga en Kelleher (2009) bijvoorbeeld onderzochten de impact van sociale netwerksites op de rol van communicatiemanagers. Zij stelden vast dat managers die frequent gebruik maken van sociale media hun macht, prestige en expertise positiever inschatten. Dit omdat sociale media gebruikt kunnen worden om informatie te verzamelen die relevant is voor het bedrijf en de stakeholders, waardoor communicatiemanagers hun expertise kunnen vergroten. Daarnaast ervaren ze een groter prestige doordat ze invloedrijke 'vrienden' en 'volgers' hebben via sociale media waardoor ze hun sociaal kapitaal kunnen vergroten. Onderzoek naar hoe organisaties omgaan met sociale media zoals Facebook in het kader van hun corporate communicatie blijft echter beperkt (Cho, Schweickart & Haase, 2014; Saxton & Waters, 2014).

Corporate communicatie bestaat enerzijds uit marketingcommunicatie, zijnde de communicatie ter ondersteuning van de verkoop, en anderzijds uit public relations, zijnde de communicatie ter ondersteuning van de reputatie van het bedrijf. Het is niet duidelijk in welke mate organisaties Facebook gebruiken voor deze typen van corporate communicatie (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Wel zijn er een beperkt aantal studies (gebaseerd op inhoudsanalyses) die onderzochten of organisaties het dialogische potentieel van sociale media ten volle benutten. Deze studies geven aan dat dit vaak niet het geval is: sociale media worden tot op heden in de eerste plaats gebruikt om informatie te verspreiden en niet om de dialoog aan te gaan met de stakeholders (bijv. Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton,

2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Dus uit bestaande studies blijkt dat bedrijven de interactiviteit van sociale media niet altijd optimaal benutten. Daarom is het interessant om hun communicatie te benaderen vanuit de vier traditionele modellen van public relations van Grunig en Hunt (1984) omdat deze zowel eenrichtingscommunicatie (geen dialoog) als tweerichtingscommunicatie (dialoog) bevatten. Bovendien ligt de focus van voorgaand onderzoek op de microblogsites Twitter en bijgevolg is er nog weinig bekend over het gebruik van Facebook door organisaties. In de huidige studie zullen we daarom op deze bestaande studies verder bouwen door na te gaan hoe de communicatie van (Belgische) bedrijven via Facebook verloopt.

Facebook onderscheidt zich van Twitter op een aantal vlakken. In tegenstelling tot het beperkt aantal tekens (140)² die kunnen worden gebruikt in een tweet, kan een Facebookbericht een onbeperkt aantal tekens bevatten. Ook kunnen bezoekers een Facebookbericht 'liken', wat niet mogelijk is bij een tweet³ (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Het uitlokken van dergelijke betrokkenheid (waaronder bijv. 'likes') willen bedrijven bereiken wanneer ze communiceren via Facebook. Ze willen immers dat hun berichten door zo veel mogelijk mensen worden opgepikt (Cho et al., 2014). Academisch onderzoek besteedde echter tot op heden weinig aandacht aan dit topic. Uitzonderingen zijn de recente studies van Cho et al. (2014) en Saxton en Waters (2014) waarin de onderzoekers nagaan in welke mate de communicatie van non profitorganisaties via Facebook betrokkenheid creëert bij het publiek. In deze studies worden drie tools bestudeert die Facebook verbindt aan elk bericht, met name: de mogelijkheid om het bericht te 'liken', te delen onder geconnecteerde vrienden en erop te reageren. In deze studie willen we nagaan hoeveel betrokkenheid de communicatie van commerciële bedrijven (in tegenstelling tot non profitorganisaties) via Facebook genereert en of er een verschil is in betrokkenheid bij het publiek tussen marketingcommunicatie- en public-relationsberichten alsook tussen de vier modellen van public relations.

Deze betrokkenheid is ook cruciaal om relaties op te bouwen met het publiek (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Kent en Taylor (1998) introduceerden vijf dialogische principes die kunnen gehanteerd worden bij online relatiemanagement. Facebook is een handige tool om deze principes toe te passen omdat bedrijven op deze netwerksite geregeld berichten kunnen plaatsen waardoor ze zeer snel met een groot aantal mensen in interactie kunnen treden tegen relatief lage kosten (Tong & Walther, 2011). Door in dialoog te gaan via onder meer het beantwoorden van vragen gesteld door bezoekers, toont het bedrijf een grotere werktransparantie en meer betrokkenheid met het publiek (Lahav, 2014). Dit

² Recentelijk werd het aantal tekens op Twitter uitgebreid naar 280 (Newton, 2017).

³ Sinds eind 2015 is het echter wel mogelijk om een tweet te 'liken' door op een hartje te klikken (Bright, 2015).

zorgt er op zijn beurt voor dat de inkomsten van organisaties kunnen verhogen, kosten kunnen worden gereduceerd en er meer efficiënt kan worden gewerkt (Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

De algemene doelstelling van de huidige studie is om na te gaan hoe (Belgische) bedrijven Facebook gebruiken als corporate-communicatietool. Deze algemene doelstelling wordt onderverdeeld in vijf subdoelstellingen. Allereerst gaan we na welke inhoud de bedrijven op Facebook plaatsen (marketingcommunicatie- en/of publicrelations gerelateerde berichten). Vervolgens gaan we na hoe de communicatie met het publiek verloopt aan de hand van de vier traditionele modellen van public relations van Grunig en Hunt (1984). Op die manier wordt zowel eenrichtings- als tweerichtingscommunicatie opgenomen in de studie.

Echter, het kenmerk dat sociale media onderscheidt van traditionele media is het dialogische potentieel waardoor relaties kunnen worden opgebouwd met het publiek. Bijgevolg onderzoeken we als derde aspect in welke mate het relatiemanagementpotentieel dat Facebook biedt, wordt benut aan de hand van de dialogische principes van Kent en Taylor (1998). Tot slot gaan we ook na hoeveel betrokkenheid er wordt uitgelokt door de inhoud alsook of de reputatie van de bedrijven een goede voorspeller is van de manier waarop ze via Facebook communiceren. Volgens Gray en Balmer (1998) vormt corporate communicatie immers de cruciale link tussen de bedrijfsidentiteit en de reputatie van het bedrijf.

2 Theoretisch kader

2.1 Corporate communicatie in een sociale media omgeving

2.1.1 Marketingcommunicatie versus public relations

Sociale media hebben de verwachtingen van het publiek gewijzigd met betrekking tot de communicatie van bedrijven. Het publiek verwacht niet langer om louter ‘aangesproken’ te worden via traditionele massamedia en opvallende publiciteits-stunts. Via sociale media verwachten ze persoonlijke en interactieve communicatie (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Deze shift in het verwachtingspatroon van het publiek heeft ervoor gezorgd dat corporate communicatie belangrijker is dan ooit in de huidige sociale mediaomgeving (Breakenridge, 2008). Corporate communicatie is de verzameling van alle boodschappen van een organisatie afkomstig van zowel officiële als informele bronnen, die verspreid worden via verscheidene media, waaronder ook Facebook. De bedoeling van deze boodschappen is om de identiteit van het bedrijf over te brengen en op die manier een sterke reputatie uit te bouwen bij diverse stakeholders. Corporate communicatie kan worden onderverdeeld in marketingcommunicatie en public relations (van Riel, 1995). Marketingcommunicatie verwijst naar

alle soorten verkoopondersteunende communicatie zoals promoties, reclame, sponsoring en wedstrijden. Public relations staat voor reputatie-ondersteunende activiteiten zoals klantenservice, issuemanagement en goede doelen steunen (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Tot op heden is onderzoek dat nagaat in welke mate organisaties Facebook inschakelen voor marketingcommunicatie of public relations vrijwel onbestaand (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

Corporate communicatie (marketingcommunicatie en public relations) vormt dus de link tussen de bedrijfsidentiteit en de reputatie van het bedrijf. Via corporate communicatie wordt namelijk een consistent en distinctief beeld geschapen van een bedrijf (de bedrijfsidentiteit), hetgeen idealiter leidt tot een gunstig imago en uiteindelijk tot een goede reputatie bij de stakeholders. Een goede reputatie heeft tal van voordelen voor een bedrijf: klanten zijn trouwer, investeerders kunnen makkelijker worden aangetrokken, werknemers werken met meer toewijding et cetera. (Cornelissen, 2014). Bijgevolg is het interessant om na te gaan of er een verband bestaat tussen de reputatie van het bedrijf en het toegepaste communicatietype. Deze inzichten kunnen bedrijven helpen hun corporate communicatie beter af te stemmen op de noden van het publiek.

Via sociale media kan, in tegenstelling tot traditionele media, op een eenvoudige manier worden nagegaan hoe het publiek reageert op de corporate communicatie van organisaties (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Facebook biedt het publiek namelijk aan de hand van drie tools (een bericht 'liken', een bericht 'delen' onder je vrienden en kennissen en 'een reactie geven') de mogelijkheid om de betrokkenheid aan te gaan met een Facebookbericht geplaatst door een bedrijf. 'Liken' is een eenvoudige tool om aan te geven dat men een bepaald Facebookbericht leuk vindt zonder een verbale expressie te gebruiken. 'Delen' gaat een stap verder. Hierbij wordt het publiek een vrijwillige verspreider van de boodschap naar hun eigen sociale netwerk. Tot slot kan het publiek ook direct interageren met een Facebookbericht door een reactie te plaatsen. In vergelijking met de twee eerste tools vereist dit laatste de hoogste graad van interactie en betrokkenheid, aangezien dit een grotere inspanning vergt van het publiek (Cho et al., 2014).

Deze reacties kunnen bovendien verder opgedeeld worden volgens hun valentie, met name positieve, negatieve en neutrale reacties (De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012). Onderzoek toont aan dat wanneer consumenten online positieve ervaringen delen, dit empathie en positieve gevoelens kan opwekken ten opzichte van het bedrijf en zijn producten/diensten bij de mensen die dit lezen (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Bovendien kunnen deze positieve reacties een toegevoegde waarde bieden aan het oorspronkelijke Facebookbericht (Bronner & De Hoog, 2010), wat de aantrekkelijkheid van het bericht en de organisatie verhoogt. Bezoekers kunnen echter ook negatief reageren op een Facebookbericht

dat geplaatst werd door een organisatie waardoor de aantrekkelijkheid van een Facebookbericht kan verminderen (De Vries et al., 2012).

Hoewel deze drie tools gerelateerd zijn aan elkaar, vertegenwoordigen ze toch elk een andere dimensie van de reactie van het publiek. Het aantal 'likes' weerspiegelt het algemene positieve gevoel bij het publiek met betrekking tot het bericht en is tegelijk een ruwe indicator van hoeveel mensen het bericht gelezen hebben. Het aantal keer dat het bericht wordt gedeeld, weerspiegelt hoe belangrijk het publiek het bericht vindt. Door het bericht te delen, verspreiden ze het immers naar hun eigen netwerk. En tot slot weerspiegelt het aantal reacties op een bericht hoeveel effectieve interacties het bericht opwekt bij het publiek (Saxton & Waters, 2014).

In deze studie willen we nagaan hoeveel betrokkenheid de communicatie van commerciële bedrijven via Facebook oplevert en of er een verschil is in betrokkenheid tussen marketingcommunicatie- en public-relationsberichten.

Op basis hiervan werd de eerste onderzoeksvraag (en bijhorende deelvragen) geformuleerd:

Onderzoeksvraag 1:

1.1: *In welke mate schakelen (Belgische) bedrijven Facebook in voor marketingcommunicatie en/of public relations?*

1.2: *Hoeveel betrokkenheid creëren marketingcommunicatie- versus public-relationsgerelateerde berichten op basis van aantal 'likes', het aantal keer dat het bericht is gedeeld en de reacties (positief, negatief en neutraal) op het bericht?*

1.3: *Bestaat er een verband tussen de reputatie van een bedrijf en het type communicatie dat er wordt gebruikt?*

2.1.2 Communicatieprocessen op Facebook

In de jaren tachtig en begin jaren negentig van de twintigste eeuw werd de corporate communicatie van bedrijven gedomineerd door eenrichtingscommunicatie via traditionele media. In de huidige sociale mediaomgeving kan echter zeer eenvoudig tweerichtingscommunicatie worden beoefend door in dialoog te treden met het publiek (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Grunig en Hunt (1984) beschreven met hun traditionele modellen van public relations vier mogelijke manieren waarop de communicatie tussen een bedrijf en zijn publiek kan verlopen. Het *press agency*- en het *public information*-model representeren beiden eenrichtingscommunicatie. Dit impliceert dat het bedrijf een bericht plaatst op zijn Facebookpagina, maar verder niet reageert op reacties van bezoekers. Ze verschillen echter van

elkaar in het opzicht dat bij het *press agency*-model gebruik wordt gemaakt van persuasieve informatie, terwijl dit bij het *public information*-model objectieve, waarheidsgetrouwe informatie is.

Echter, doordat het publiek de mogelijkheid heeft om via Facebook te reageren op berichten die bedrijven plaatsen, leent dit medium zich ertoe om tweerichtingscommunicatie te beoefenen. Dit houdt in dat bedrijven verder gaan interageren met de bezoekers die een reactie geplaatst hebben naar aanleiding van het bericht van het bedrijf. Dit kan op twee manieren. Ofwel kan het bedrijf hierop reageren gericht op eigen voordelen, dan is er sprake van het *two-way asymmetrical*-model. Het bedrijf kan echter ook reageren gericht op wederzijdse voordelen. In dit geval is het *two-way symmetrical*-model van toepassing, wat het ideaal is in public relations volgens de symmetrie/excellence-theorie (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). Deze theorie stelt met name dat bedrijven via de toepassing van het *two-way symmetrical* model wederzijds voordelige relaties kunnen opbouwen met het publiek, waarbij beide partijen samenwerken op een gebalanceerde manier om wederzijdse voordelen te bekomen (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Een andere mogelijkheid is dat het publiek reageert op een bericht van het bedrijf, maar het bedrijf gaat niet verder in op deze reacties. In dit geval is er als het ware sprake van een '*semi*' *two-way*-model. Deze categorie is niet opgenomen in de vier traditionele modellen van Grunig en Hunt (1984), maar is toch ook een vorm van tweerichtingscommunicatie gezien de ontvanger van het bericht ook kan reageren door een reactie naar de zender van het oorspronkelijke bericht te sturen. Er is hier echter louter sprake van tweerichtingscommunicatie vanuit het oogpunt van de gebruiker die reageert op een bericht van een bedrijf. Via sociale media kan er eenvoudig gereageerd worden op boodschappen van bedrijven, traditionele media staan dergelijke reacties in mindere mate toe.

Waters en Jamal (2011) analyseerden de Twitterupdates van een aantal non profitorganisaties op basis van de vier traditionele modellen van public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Zij vestigden de aandacht op het feit dat de huidige ontwikkelde relatiemanagementstrategieën (zoals bijv. de *relationship cultivation strategies* van Hon & Grunig, 1999) ervan uitgaan dat symmetrische tweerichtingscommunicatie plaatsvindt. Dit klopt echter in vele gevallen niet, aangezien nog steeds veel informatie asymmetrisch wordt verspreid. Bijgevolg baseerden ze zich op de vier modellen van public relations die zowel eenrichtingscommunicatie (*public information*-model, *press agency*-model) als tweerichtingscommunicatie (*two-way (a)symmetrical*-model) bevatten. Uit hun onderzoek bleek dat organisaties ook op sociale media meer geneigd zijn om te communiceren via eenrichtingsmodellen. Twitter wordt door de organisaties vooral gebruikt om informatie te delen, maar slechts zelden om relaties op te bouwen met de stakeholders of om de dialoog aan te gaan (Waters & Jamal, 2011).

Verder onderzochten Cho et al. (2014) net als Saxton en Waters (2014) hoeveel betrokkenheid de communicatie van non profitorganisaties via Facebook creëert aan de hand van de drie tools die Facebook aanbiedt ('liken', 'delen' en 'reageren'). Meer bepaald ging de eerste studie na hoeveel betrokkenheid wordt uitgelokt door de vier traditionele modellen van public relations van Grunig en Hunt (1984). Zij kwamen tot de vaststelling dat bezoekers meer geneigd zijn om te reageren op *two-way symmetrical*-berichten dan op *two-way asymmetrical* berichten of *public information*-berichten. Wat betreft de 'likes' en het aantal keer dat het bericht wordt gedeeld, werden er geen verschillen gevonden tussen de verschillende modellen (Cho et al., 2014). De tweede studie onderzocht hoeveel betrokkenheid er bij het publiek wordt opgewekt door informationele, promotionele en community-building boodschappen. Zij kwamen tot de vaststelling dat community-building en bepaalde informationele boodschappen het meeste betrokkenheid creëren op basis van het aantal 'likes' en reacties. Daarnaast bleken eenrichtingsboodschappen meer gedeeld te worden dan tweerichtingsboodschappen (Saxton & Waters, 2014).

In de huidige studie willen we nagaan in welke mate deze communicatiemodellen voorkomen op de Facebookpagina's van de Belgische bedrijven. Daarnaast onderzoeken we of er een verschil is qua modellen tussen marketingcommunicatie- en public relations-berichten en of de reputatie van het bedrijf een goede voorspeller is van de public-relationsmodellen die aan bod komen.

Dit leidt tot de volgende onderzoeksvraag en deelvragen:

Onderzoeksvraag 2:

2.1: *Welke communicatiemodellen zijn van toepassing op de Facebook-pagina's van de (Belgische) bedrijven?*

2.2: *Bestaat er een verschil tussen marketingcommunicatie- en public relations-berichten wat betreft de public-relationsmodellen die hierin aan bod komen?*

2.3: *Wat is de invloed van de reputatie van het bedrijf op de public-relationsmodellen die aan bod komen in de communicatie van het bedrijf?*

2.1.3 Relatiemanagement via Facebook

De mogelijkheid tot tweerichtingscommunicatie is een van de belangrijkste kenmerken die sociale media onderscheiden van traditionele media (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Hon en Grunig (1999) stellen dat tweerichtingscommunicatie cruciaal is om relaties op te bouwen met het publiek. Meer bepaald moeten bedrijven streven naar het vormen van *communal relationships* met hun publiek. Hierbij werken beide partijen samen ten behoeve van elkaar door gebruik te maken van symmetrische tweerichtingscommunicatie. Facebook wordt beschouwd als een ideale tool om aan online

relatiemanagement te doen omdat de sociale netwerksite niet enkel interactief is, maar ook inherent sociaal en communicatief (Avery et al., 2010). Bovendien geeft deze sociale netwerksite bedrijven een persoonlijke, menselijke toets doordat mensen 'vrienden' kunnen worden met het bedrijf en een bedrijf 'leuk' kunnen vinden ('liken'). Dit faciliteert relatiemanagement op een meer persoonlijk niveau (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Kent en Taylor (1998) introduceerden vijf dialogische principes die de basis vormen om relaties op te bouwen via het internet. In de eerste plaats onderscheiden ze het *usefulness of information*-principe. Dit is het verschaffen van nuttige, relevante informatie en vormt de eerste stap in het ontwikkelen van een relatie met het publiek. Net zoals het verzamelen van rudimentaire interpersoonlijke informatie de eerste stap is in het ontwikkelen van een persoonlijke relatie (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997), geldt dit eveneens voor relaties tussen bedrijven en het publiek. Het tweede principe, *conservation of return visits*, houdt in dat bedrijven moeten proberen het publiek zo lang mogelijk op hun pagina te houden (Kent & Taylor, 1998). In de derde plaats wordt het *generation of return visits*-principe onderscheiden, volgens hetwelke bedrijven willen dat hun pagina wordt bezocht op een regelmatige basis. Dit principe is noodzakelijk om een relatie te kunnen laten ontstaan. Relatiemanagement vereist tijd, vertrouwen en een waaier aan andere strategieën die alleen kunnen worden toegepast tijdens herhaalde interacties (Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). Het vierde en voornaamste kenmerk van dialogische communicatie op sociale netwerksites is de incorporatie van interactiviteit of de *dialogic loop*. Deze kunnen organisaties in de praktijk brengen door bijvoorbeeld vragen te beantwoorden van bezoekers of te reageren op hun reacties (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Belangrijk om op te merken hierbij is echter dat bedrijven dit niet volledig zelf in de hand hebben. Vooral eer zij de keuze kunnen maken om al dan niet te reageren op een reactie van een bezoeker, moet de bezoeker wel eerst een reactie geven op het bericht. Tot slot betreft het vijfde principe, *ease of interface*, de gebruiksvriendelijkheid van het platform. Dit principe wordt niet verder opgenomen in deze studie aangezien alle Facebookpagina's min of meer een gelijkaardige interface hebben die niet kan worden gewijzigd door de bedrijven zelf.

Recentelijk zijn er een aantal studies die op basis van de dialogische principes (Kent & Taylor, 1998) nagaan hoe organisaties sociale media gebruiken als relatiemanagementtool. Waters, Burnett, Lamm en Lucas (2009) stelden vast dat non profitorganisaties wel actief zijn op de sociale netwerksite Facebook, maar het potentieel om mensen interactief te betrekken bij de activiteiten van de organisatie, niet optimaal wordt benut. Rybalko en Seltzer (2010) kwamen in een gelijkaardig onderzoek qua opzet, maar gevoerd bij commerciële bedrijven, eveneens tot de conclusie dat het relatiemanagementpotentieel niet optimaal wordt benut. Zij onderzochten in welke mate Fortune 500-bedrijven in dialoog gaan met hun stakeholders via Twitter. Ook een recenter onderzoek van Lovejoy et al. (2012) constateerde een onderbenutting van het dialogische en

relatiemanagementpotentieel dat Twitter biedt. Minder dan 20% van de tweets vertoonde een conversatie.

Uit deze studies blijkt dat tot op heden organisaties sociale media minder frequent gebruiken om dialoog te creëren, maar eerder om informatie te delen. Ondanks de herhaaldelijke academische aanbevelingen om interactieve principes te incorporeren in hun sociale media-accounts (Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Morsing & Schultz, 2006) hebben bedrijven de aard van hun communicatie dus niet drastisch gewijzigd. Coombs (2007) concludeerde dat bedrijven niet geneigd zijn om interactiviteit te creëren, tenzij hun reputatie op het spel staat omwille van een crisis die het bedrijf treft. In de andere gevallen verkiezen de bedrijven om eenrichtingscommunicatie toe te passen (Cooper & Owen, 2007; Glenny, 2008). De symmetrie/excellence-theorie van public relations benadrukt nochtans dat communicatie managers moeten focussen op engagement en symmetrische tweerichtingsconversaties om het potentieel van langetermijnrelaties met stakeholders te maximaliseren (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). Dit leidt ons tot de derde onderzoeksvraag:

Onderzoeksvraag 3:

3.1: *In welke mate zijn de dialogische principes van Kent en Taylor (1998) geïntegreerd in de Facebookcommunicatie van (Belgische) bedrijven?*

3 Methode

Om na te gaan hoe bedrijven communiceren met het publiek via de sociale netwerksite Facebook werd een kwantitatieve inhoudsanalyse van de Facebookpagina's van twaalf gereputeerde Belgische bedrijven uitgevoerd in de periode van 1 februari tot en met 31 maart 2013. Een kwantitatieve inhoudsanalyse is een onderzoekstechniek die een systematische, objectieve en kwantitatieve beschrijving verschaft van manifeste inhoud (Neuendorf, 2002). De algemene informatie op de Facebookpagina van elk bedrijf en de berichten die deze bedrijven op hun prikbord plaatsten in deze periode ($N = 509$) werden geanalyseerd, inclusief de reacties op deze berichten door bezoekers ($N = 2895$) en de reacties van de bedrijven op de reacties van de bezoekers ($N = 332$). Hierbij dient echter te worden opgemerkt dat met het oog op de haalbaarheid van de analyses enkel de eerste vijftig reacties op elk bericht werden opgenomen in de inhoudsanalyse, in navolging van Gardner (2012).

Om een antwoord te kunnen formuleren op de onderzoeksvragen werden de volgende aspecten gecodeerd: 1) algemene informatie met betrekking tot de Facebookpagina, 2) de inhoud van de berichten door bedrijven (marketingcommunicatie en/of public relations), 3) de mate van betrokkenheid uitgelokt door deze berichten (op basis van het aantal 'likes', aantal keer dat het bericht

is gedeeld en het aantal positieve, negatieve en neutrale reacties door bezoekers en reacties door het bedrijf op reacties van bezoekers), 4) de communicatieprocessen gemeten aan de hand van de vier modellen van public relations van Grunig en Hunt (1984) aangevuld met het 'semi' two-way-model en 5) het relatiemanagementpotentieel gemeten aan de hand van vier dialogische principes van Kent en Taylor (1998). Om na te gaan welk type corporate communicatie (marketingcommunicatie en/of public relations) in het bericht aan bod komt, werd enkel het bericht zelf inhoudelijk geanalyseerd exclusief de reacties van bezoekers of het bedrijf.

3.1 Steekproef van bedrijven

De bedrijven werden geselecteerd aan de hand van een peiling die sinds 2012 jaarlijks wordt uitgevoerd door communicatiebureau Akkanto in samenwerking met het internationale Reputation Institute. Hierbij wordt er bij 12 000 mensen gepeild naar de reputatie van 35 toonaangevende bedrijven die hun producten of diensten direct aan de consument verkopen. Deze bedrijven zijn hoofdzakelijk in Belgische handen of hebben allemaal een Belgische voorgeschiedenis. Daarnaast is elk van de bedrijven gerangschikt in de BEL20-index en zijn alle participerende bedrijven gekend bij minstens 40% van het brede publiek (Akkanto & Reputation Institute, 2014). Op basis van de resultaten worden de bedrijven gerangschikt volgens reputatie. Voor dit onderzoek werden uit deze lijst van 35 bedrijven uiteindelijk twaalf bedrijven geselecteerd (cf. Tabel 1: Steekproef bedrijven.) waarvan de Facebookpagina voldeed aan de volgende voorwaarden (cf. Edman, 2010; Wester & Van Selm, 2006): 1) minstens vijfhonderd mensen moesten de pagina geliket hebben, 2) de pagina moest Nederlandstalig zijn zodat er op een goede manier betekenis kan worden gegeven aan de inhoud, en 3) de pagina moest een zekere mate van activiteit vertonen (in de week voorafgaand aan de geanalyseerde periode moest minstens één bericht door het bedrijf op de pagina zijn geplaatst). Twaalf bedrijven voldeden niet aan deze criteria. Wat betreft de resterende 23 bedrijven hebben we ervoor geopteerd om een verscheidenheid van sectoren op te nemen in de steekproef om zo de externe validiteit van het onderzoek te verhogen. In Tabel 1 wordt een overzicht gegeven van de geselecteerde bedrijven. De reputatiescores van de geselecteerde bedrijven varieerden tussen 50.90 en de 79.60 op de reputatiecoëfficiënt (gehanteerd door het *Reputation Institute*). De gemiddelde reputatiescore van de geselecteerde bedrijven was 58.6 ($SD = 8.27$).

Bedrijf	Sector	Reputatiescore	Ranking in top 34 Akkanto
A	Retail	79.60	1
B	Retail	73.20	4
C	Consumentengoederen	71.60	5
D	Kansspelen	71.60	14
E	Autonome publieke instelling	59.10	17
F	Retail	57.90	18
G	Bank & Verzekering	56.80	19
H	Telecommunicatie	56	21
I	Bank & Verzekering	53.30	25
J	Energie	52.10	27
K	Telecommunicatie	51.80	28
L	Bank & Verzekering	50.90	29

Tabel 1: Steekproef bedrijven.

3.2 Meetinstrument

Op basis van de onderzoeksdoelstellingen werd een registratieformulier en bijhorend codeboek met de operationalisering van de variabelen uitgewerkt (cf. appendix). Elke variabele in dit codeboek werd geoperationaliseerd aan de hand van bestaande vergelijkbare studies die de communicatie van organisaties via sociale media analyseren (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Garder, 2012; Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Eerst werden twee algemene variabelen met betrekking tot de Facebookpagina's van de bedrijven gecodeerd, zijnde de naam van het bedrijf en het aantal fans van de Facebookpagina. Vervolgens werd de inhoud van de berichten die bedrijven plaatsten op hun prikbord gecodeerd als marketingcommunicatie en/of public relations. Deze codering gebeurde op basis van bestaande classificaties (Berry, 1995; Gordon, 2011; Gardner, 2012). Een bericht werd gecodeerd als marketingcommunicatie wanneer het een van volgende categorieën betrof: reclame voor producten en diensten, marktonderzoek, sponsoring, exclusieve Facebookwedstrijd/-aanbieding, wedstrijden, korting/solden en reclame voor het bedrijf. Wanneer een bericht betrekking had op de volgende categorieën: stakeholder engagement, publiciteit voor evenementen, reputatiemanagement, klantenservice, mediarelaties, steun aan goede doelen of issuemanagement, werd het als een public relationsbericht gecodeerd. Een belangrijke opmerking is dat sommige berichten betrekking konden

hebben op beide typen communicatie en dus zowel een marketingcommunicatie- als een public relationsgerelateerde activiteit konden bevatten. In dit geval werden deze berichten gecategoriseerd als marketingcommunicatie- én als public relationsbericht. Daarnaast was het ook mogelijk dat een bericht onder geen van deze categorieën viel. In dat geval werd het geclassificeerd als 'andere'.

Vervolgens werd geregistreerd hoeveel betrokkenheid elk bericht heeft uitgelokt. Dit werd gemeten aan de hand van het aantal 'likes', het aantal keer dat het bericht werd gedeeld, het aantal en de valentie (positief, negatief en neutraal) van de reacties door bezoekers en de reacties door het bedrijf zelf op de reacties van bezoekers. De berichten die zowel marketingcommunicatie- als public relations inhoud bevatten alsook de berichten die geen van beide typen communicatie bevatten, werden uitgesloten van de analyses waarin we nagingen hoeveel betrokkenheid werd uitgelokt door de berichten. Bijgevolg vergeleken we enkel de berichten die ofwel marketingcommunicatie- ofwel public relations inhoud bevatten wat betreft de betrokkenheid die ze uitlokken.

Daarna werden de berichten (inclusief eventuele reacties door bezoekers en/of het bedrijf zelf) gecategoriseerd in een van de modellen van public relations: het *press agency*-model, het *public information*-model, het '*semi*' *two-way*-model, het *two-way asymmetrical*-model of het *two-way symmetrical*-model. Wanneer er geen reacties waren op een bericht (noch van bezoekers, noch van het bedrijf zelf) werd het bericht gecodeerd als eenrichtingscommunicatie. Vervolgens werd er binnen de berichten die behoren tot eenrichtingscommunicatie nagegaan of de inhoud van het bericht feitelijk/objectief was of eerder persuasief. In het eerste geval werd het bericht geclassificeerd onder het *public information*-model. In het tweede geval, indien het bericht persuasief van aard was, werd het gecodeerd als *press agency*-model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Indien er wel gereageerd werd op een bericht waren er drie opties. Ofwel reageerden enkel bezoekers op het bericht en dan was er sprake van een '*semi*' *two-way*-model. In dit geval was er sprake van tweerichtingscommunicatie gezien de ontvanger van het bericht (de bezoeker) kon reageren op het bericht van de zender (het bedrijf).

Tweerichtingscommunicatie kon echter nog verder gaan. Het bedrijf kon ook reageren op een reactie van een bezoeker. In dit geval kon het bericht geclassificeerd worden als *two-way asymmetrical* of *two-way symmetrical*. Indien de reactie van het bedrijf op de reactie van de bezoeker eerder persuasief was, werd het geclassificeerd als het *two-way asymmetrical*-model. Een voorbeeld hiervan is het bedrijf dat reageert op een reactie van een bezoeker met de plaats waar een bepaald product kan worden aangeschaft. Wanneer de reactie eerder informatief bedoeld was, werd het geclassificeerd als het *two-way symmetrical*-model. Dit is het geval wanneer een bedrijf, bijvoorbeeld, reageert op de

reactie van een bezoeker over een probleem met zijn gsm-abonnement waarbij het bedrijf een mogelijke oplossing aanreikt of vraagt hen te contacteren voor meer informatie (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Tot slot werden de dialogische principes van Kent en Taylor (1998) gecodeerd om de benutting van het relatiemanagementpotentieel via Facebook na te gaan.

Het *usefulness of information*-principe werd gemeten aan de hand van drie variabelen. De eerste twee variabelen hadden betrekking op de inhoud van een bericht. Allereerst gingen we na of het bericht al dan niet de volgende 'links' bevat: link naar eigen website, een andere website, een Facebookapplicatie, een andere sociale mediasite van het bedrijf, een nieuwssite, een andere Facebookpagina, een Facebookevenement of naar een sociale mediasite van een ander bedrijf. Vervolgens gingen we na of 'multimedia' (d.i., foto's, video's en polls) aan- of afwezig waren in het bericht. De derde variabele tot slot had betrekking op de informatie die te vinden was op de 'info tab' van de Facebookpagina (d.i., contactinformatie, voorgeschiedenis, missie, doel pagina en beschrijving van het bedrijf). Deze operationalisering is gebaseerd op een gelijkaardige studie van Rybalko en Seltzer (2010) naar de communicatie via Twitter van commerciële bedrijven.

Het *generation of return visits*-principe werd in navolging van Gardner (2012) gemeten aan de hand van het aantal berichten dat het bedrijf plaatste tijdens de onderzoeksperiode. Immers, door regelmatig berichten te plaatsen op Facebook kan het bedrijf ervoor zorgen dat het vaker voorkomt in het nieuwsoverzicht waardoor de kans groter is dat bezoekers (weer) op de Facebookpagina van het bedrijf belanden.

Het *conservation of return visits*-principe werd geoperationaliseerd op basis van het aantal applicaties die de bedrijven hadden aangemaakt op hun Facebookpagina. Deze applicaties zoals bijvoorbeeld een spel, een Pinterest-applicatie of een question&answer-applicatie, zorgen ervoor dat bezoekers langer op de Facebookpagina blijven (Gardner, 2012).

Tot slot werd de *dialogic loop* gemeten aan de hand van het aantal reacties van bedrijven op reacties van bezoekers (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Vanaf het moment dat het bedrijf één reactie gaf op de reactie van een bezoeker, was dit principe van toepassing en werd er per bericht gecodeerd hoeveel keer het bedrijf reageerde op een reactie van een bezoeker.

De betrouwbaarheid van de codering werd gegarandeerd door een deel van de berichten ($N = 60$), alsook de reacties op deze berichten door bezoekers en het bedrijf, te hercoderen twee weken na de initiële codering. Vervolgens werd de intra-codeurbetrouwbaarheid berekend tussen de twee coderingen (Krippendorff, 2004). De intracodeurbetrouwbaarheidsanalyse gaf een voldoende hoge betrouwbaarheid van de inhoudsanalyse aan. Alle Kappa-waarden (> 0.75) voor de nominale

variabelen en intra-class-correlatiecoëfficiënten (tussen 0.83 en 1) voor de metrische variabelen waren goed tot zeer goed.

4 Resultaten

4.1 Activiteit op de Facebook pagina's

De Facebookpagina's telden gemiddeld 7499.67 fans ($SD = 9754.67$) met een grote variatie gaande van 1053 tot 18.722 fans per bedrijf. In totaal plaatsten de twaalf bedrijven tijdens de acht weken durende onderzoeksperiode samen 509 berichten op hun Facebookpagina. Het aantal berichten dat de bedrijven per week posten varieerde tussen de 1.38 en 10.25 per bedrijf. Voor alle bedrijven samen kwam dit neer op een gemiddelde van 5.31 berichten per week ($SD = 2.60$). In totaal werd op de 509 berichten 2895 keer gereageerd door bezoekers. Het aantal reacties per bericht varieerde tussen 0 en 1408. Gemiddeld werd er 22.38 keer gereageerd op een bericht ($SD = 90.31$). Meer specifiek reageerden ze gemiddeld 4.01 keer positief ($SD = 8.33$), 3.03 keer negatief ($SD = 6.59$) en 2.63 keer neutraal ($SD = 5.16$). Bedrijven reageerden in totaal 332 keer op reacties van bezoekers. Het aantal reacties op een reactie van een bezoeker per bericht varieerde tussen 0 en 20. Dit kwam neer op een gemiddelde van 0.65 ($SD = 1.50$) reacties van het bedrijf op een reactie van een bezoeker. Meer specifiek werd er gemiddeld 0.17 keer positief ($SD = .52$) gereageerd door het bedrijf op reactie van een bezoeker, 0.03 keer negatief ($SD = 0.31$) en 0.46 keer neutraal ($SD = 1.33$).

4.2 Onderzoeksvraag 1: Type corporate communicatie in berichten

Uit de analyses bleek dat iets meer dan de helft van de berichten betrekking had op een public-relationsactiviteit ($n = 274, 53.8\%$), een kwart op een marketingcommunicatieactiviteit ($n = 131, 25.7\%$) en 15.9% ($n = 81$) was zowel public-relations- als marketingcommunicatiegerelateerd. Tot slot was 4.5% ($n = 23$) van de berichten niet gerelateerd aan marketingcommunicatie en/of public relations en kon bijgevolg niet ondergebracht worden in een van deze categorieën.

Wanneer we meer in detail keken naar de marketingcommunicatiegerelateerde berichten waren de verschillende categorieën als volgt vertegenwoordigd: reclame voor producten en diensten ($n = 55, 42.0\%$), marktonderzoek ($n = 35, 26.9\%$), sponsoring ($n = 12, 9.0\%$), exclusieve Facebookwedstrijden/-aanbiedingen ($n = 10, 7.5\%$), korting/solden ($n = 9, 7.1\%$), reclame voor het bedrijf ($n = 6, 4.2\%$) en wedstrijden ($n = 4, 3.3\%$).

Wanneer we hetzelfde deden voor de public-relationsgerelateerde berichten konden we vaststellen dat de verschillende categorieën in de volgende mate aan bod kwamen: stakeholderengagement ($n =$

173, 63.1%), publiciteit voor evenementen ($n = 37$, 13.5%), reputatiemanagement ($n = 28$, 10.4%), klantenservice ($n = 24$, 8.7%), mediarelaties ($n = 6$, 2.3%), steun goede doelen ($n = 4$, 1.4%) en issuemanagement ($n = 2$, 0.6%).

4.2.1 Betrokkenheid gegenereerd door de berichten

Om na te gaan of de verschillende typen berichten (marketingcommunicatie en public relations) statistisch van elkaar verschilden wat betreft de betrokkenheid die ze creëerden, werden independent samples t-tests uitgevoerd.

Betrokkenheid	Gemiddelde score marketingcommunicatie	Gemiddelde score public relations	t-waarde	p-waarde
'Likes'	63.36 ($SD = 155.12$)	76.47 ($SD = 179.94$)	-0.55	0.58
Aantal keer post gedeeld	5.54 ($SD = 13.60$)	13.48 ($SD = 49.23$)	-2.48	0.01
Reacties bezoekers	16.47 ($SD = 43.61$)	29.92 ($SD = 118.26$)	-1.66	0.10
Positief	4.75 ($SD = 9.54$)	3.80 ($SD = 7.80$)	1.07	0.29
Negatief	3.47 ($SD = 6.37$)	3.18 ($SD = 7.23$)	0.39	0.70
Neutraal	2.33 ($SD = 4.13$)	2.88 ($SD = 5.91$)	-1.08	0.28
Reacties bedrijf	0.98 ($SD = 2.28$)	0.42 ($SD = 0.92$)	2.69	0.01
Positief	0.16 ($SD = 0.55$)	0.11 ($SD = 0.34$)	0.90	0.37
Negatief	0.06 ($SD = 0.54$)	0.00 ($SD = 0.06$)	1.22	0.23
Neutraal	0.78 ($SD = 2.14$)	0.31 ($SD = 0.83$)	2.44	0.02

Tabel 2: Vergelijking marketingcommunicatie en public relationsberichten wat betreft betrokkenheid.

Uit Tabel 2 kunnen we afleiden dat public-relationsberichten meer werden gedeeld dan marketingcommunicatieberichten, $t(348) = -2.48$, $p = 0.01$, $r = 0.13$. Wat betreft de reacties van het bedrijf op reacties van bezoekers gold het omgekeerde. In dit geval reageerde het bedrijf vaker op een reactie van een bezoeker bij marketingcommunicatieberichten dan bij public-relationsberichten, $t(151) = 2.69$, $p = .01$, $r = 0.21$. Meer specifiek konden we vaststellen dat het bedrijf vaker neutraal reageerde op een reactie van een bezoeker bij een marketingcommunicatiebericht dan bij een public-relations-bericht, $t(149) = 2.44$, $p = 0.02$, $r = 0.20$. Verder konden we zien dat marketingcommunicatieberichten en public-relationsberichten niet van elkaar verschilden in de betrokkenheid die ze uitlokten

op basis van het aantal keer dat het bericht werd geliket, het aantal reacties van bezoekers (positief, negatief en neutraal) en het aantal positieve en negatieve reacties van het bedrijf op een reactie van een bezoeker. Deze resultaten bleven hetzelfde indien er gecontroleerd werd voor het aantal fans van de Facebookpagina.

4.2.2 Impact reputatiescore

Vervolgens gingen we na in welke mate de reputatiescore het aantal berichten dat het bedrijf op zijn Facebookpagina plaatste kon voorspellen. Uit de lineaire regressie konden we afleiden dat de reputatie geen goede voorspeller is van het aantal berichten, $R^2 = 0.17$, $\beta = -0.41$, $F(1, 10) = 1.10$, $p = 0.19$. Verder toonde een binaire logistische regressieanalyse aan dat de reputatiescore van het bedrijf ook niet het type corporate communicatie (marketingcommunicatie of public relations) op de Facebook-pagina significant kon voorspellen, $\beta = -0.01$, $t(403) = 0.97$, $p = 0.34$, $r = 0.05$.

4.3 Onderzoeksvraag 2: Communicatieprocessen op Facebook

4.3.1 Modellen van public relations

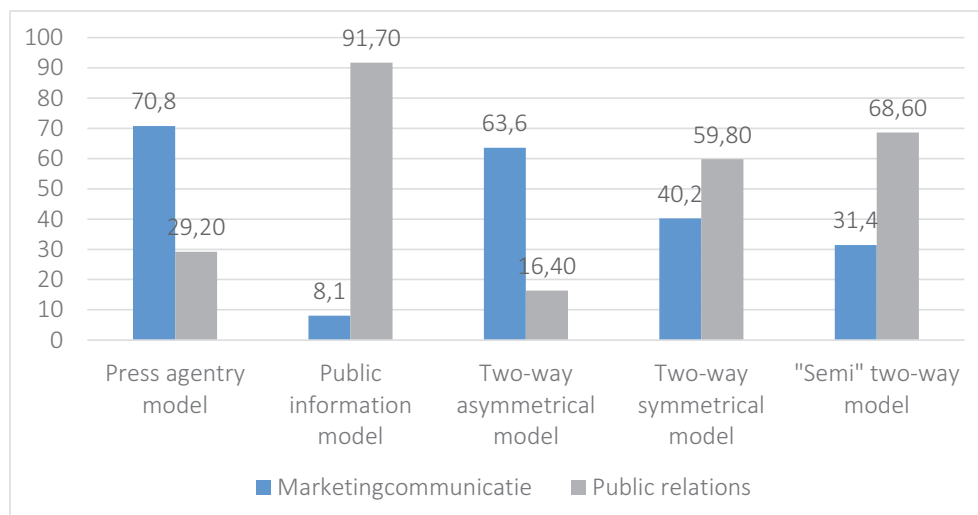
Allereerst maakten we de indeling tussen eenrichtingscommunicatie, tweerichtings-communicatie en 'semi'-tweerichtingscommunicatie. Uit de data bleek dat er het meest sprake was van 'semi'-tweerichtingscommunicatie ($n = 203$, 39.9%), waarbij bezoekers dus reageerden op een bericht geplaatst door het bedrijf, maar het bedrijf vervolgens niet verder reageerde op deze reacties van bezoekers.

Ongeveer een derde van de berichten kon geclassificeerd worden als tweerichtings-communicatie ($n = 164$, 33.4%), waarbij het bedrijf actief inging op de reacties van de bezoekers en 26.7% van de berichten als eenrichtingscommunicatie ($n = 142$).

Bij de eenrichtingscommunicatie konden we vaststellen dat 20% ($n = 102$) van de berichten het *public information*-model en 6.7% ($n = 34$) het *press agency*-model weerspiegelden. Bij de tweerichtingscommunicatieberichten konden we vaststellen dat het *two-way symmetrical*-model voorkwam in 30.6% van de berichten ($n = 156$), terwijl slechts een kleine minderheid van de berichten tot het *two-way asymmetrical*-model ($n = 14$, 2.8%) behoorden.

Tabel 3 geeft een overzicht van de mate van betrokkenheid gegenereerd door de verschillende public-relationsmodellen. Aan de hand van een ANOVA-test konden we vaststellen dat er een verschil is tussen de public-relationsmodellen wat betreft het aantal 'likes', $F(4, 502) = 5.65$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$. Een Tukey post-hoc-analyse toonde aan dat berichten die werden geclassificeerd als het 'semi' two-way-communicatie of als *two-way symmetrical*-communicatie significant vaker werden geliket dan

berichten die werden geclassificeerd als *public information*. Wat betreft het aantal keer dat een bericht werd gedeeld, toonde een Tukey post-hoc-analyse aan dat ook hier berichten geclassificeerd als 'semi' two-way communicatie meer worden gedeeld dan *public information*-berichten, $F(4, 504) = 3.26, p = 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$. Verder toonden de resultaten aan dat berichten geclassificeerd als 'semi' two-way communicatie significant meer reacties kregen van bezoekers dan berichten geclassificeerd als *public information*, $F(4, 504) = 4.31, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$. Ook in dit geval bleven de resultaten hetzelfde wanneer er werd gecontroleerd voor het aantal fans van de Facebookpagina.



Figuur 1: Vergelijking marketingcommunicatie- versus public relationsberichten wat betreft public relationsmodellen (in %).

Betrokkenheid	Gemiddelde score <i>Press agency model</i>	Gemiddelde score <i>Public information model</i>	Gemiddelde score <i>'Semi' two-way model</i>	Gemiddelde score <i>Two-way asymmetrical model</i>	Gemiddelde score <i>Two-way symmetrical model</i>	F-waarde	p-waarde
'Likes'	17.09 (SD = 13.53)	17.71 (SD = 18.43) ^a	87.36 (SD = 198.80) ^b	27.79 (SD = 343)	99.59 (SD = 184.18) ^b	5.65	0.00
Aantal keer gedeeld	1.06 (SD = 1.54)	1.86 (SD = 4.87) ^a	16.16 (SD = 56.67) ^b	2.29 (SD = 5.14)	10.44 (SD = 17.05)	3.26	0.01
Aantal comments bezoekers	0 (SD = 0)	0 (SD = 0) ^a	40.25 (SD = 136.16) ^b	11.70 (SD = 3.13)	40.89 (SD = 3.27)	4.31	0.00

Tabel 3: Vergelijking public relationsmodellen wat betreft betrokkenheid.

^{a,b} = modellen die significant van elkaar verschillen

4.3.2 Samenhang tussen type corporate communicatie en de public relationsmodellen

Een Chi²-analyse toonde aan dat er een significant verband bestaat tussen het type corporate communicatie (marketingcommunicatie of public relations) en het public relationsmodel dat erin aan bod kwam, $\chi^2(4, N = 405) = 46.65, p < 0.001$ (cf. Figuur 1). Een percentage-toets toonde vervolgens dat het *press agency*-model ($z = 7.9, p < 0.001, r = 0.39$) en het *two-way asymmetrical*-model ($z = 5.1, p < 0.001, r = 0.25$) vaker voorkwamen wanneer het marketingcommunicatieberichten betrof dan public relationsberichten. Wat betreft de public relationsberichten merkten we het omgekeerde. Het *public information*-model ($z = 16.4, p < 0.001, r = 0.81$), *'semi' two-way*-model ($z = 7.1, p < 0.001, r = 0.35$) en het *two-way symmetrical*-model ($z = 3.7, p < 0.001, r = 0.18$) kwamen significant vaker voor in public relationsberichten dan in marketingcommunicatieberichten.

4.3.3 Impact reputatiescore

Om na te gaan of het voorkomen van de public relationsmodellen kan voorspeld worden aan de hand van de reputatiescore van het bedrijf werd een multinomiale logistische regressie uitgevoerd met de public-relationsmodellen als afhankelijke variabele en de reputatiescore als onafhankelijke variabele (cf. Tabel 4). Het *'semi' two-way*-model werd gebruikt als baseline-groep. De resultaten wezen uit dat de reputatiescore geen goede predictor bleek te zijn voor de public relationsmodellen, $\chi^2(4) = 7.70, p = 0.10$. De reputatiescore bleek enkel een significant onderscheid te kunnen maken tussen het *'semi' two-way*-model en het *press agency*-model. Meer specifiek toonden de resultaten aan dat hoe hoger de reputatiescore was, hoe groter de kans was dat de communicatie volgens het *press agency*-model in plaats van volgens het *'semi' two-way*-model zou verlopen (odds = 1.05, $p = .03$).

Press agency- model vs. 'semi' two-way-model	B (SE)	95% BI voor odd ratio		
		Ondergrens	Odds ratio	Bovengrens
Intercept	-4.46 (1.26)***			
Reputatiescore	0.05 (0.02)*	1.01	1.05	1.09

Tabel 4: Multinomiale logistische regressie: voorspellen public relationsmodellen a.d.h.v. reputatiescore.

Opmerking: $R^2 = .02$ (Cox & Snell), $.02$ (Nagelkerke). Model $\chi^2(4) = 7.70, p = .10$

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

4.4 Onderzoeksvraag 3: Relatiemanagement via Facebook

4.4.1 Integratie van de dialogische principes

Wat betreft het *usefulness of information*-principe konden we met betrekking tot de inhoud van de berichten vaststellen dat meer dan de helft van de berichten ($n = 285$, 56%) ofwel een link ofwel multimedia bevatten. 37.3% ($n = 190$) van de berichten bevatten beiden en slechts 6.7% ($n = 34$) van de berichten bevatten noch een link noch multimedia. Wat betreft de links die aanwezig waren in de berichten die op het prikbord werden geplaatst, werd er het meest doorverwezen naar de eigen website ($n = 172$, 33.8%). De andere links betroffen links naar een andere website ($n = 49$, 9.6%), een Facebookapplicatie ($n = 21$, 4.2%), een andere sociale mediasite van het eigen bedrijf ($n = 19$, 3.8%), een nieuwssite ($n = 6$, 1.2%), een andere Facebookpagina ($n = 4$, 0.8%), een Facebookevenement ($n = 3$, 0.6%) en een sociale mediasite van een ander bedrijf ($n = 1$, 0.2 %). Wat betreft de multimedia in berichten werd er in 66% ($n = 336$) een foto/afbeelding getoond. De berichten bevatten slechts in mindere mate een video ($n = 32$, 6.3%) of een poll ($n = 26$, 5.1%). Wanneer we keken naar de informatie die het bedrijf over zichzelf (doel pagina, contactinformatie, missie, beschrijving bedrijf en geschiedenis) vermeldde op zijn Facebookpagina konden we vaststellen dat elk bedrijf een minimum van informatie aanbood. De helft van de bedrijven ($n = 6$) vermeldde 3 van de 5 zaken, een kwart van hen vermeldde 4 zaken ($n = 3$) zaken en nog een kwart ($n = 3$) vermeldde ze allemaal.

Wat betreft de toepassing van het *generation of return visits*-principe bleek uit de data dat er een grote verscheidenheid was in de mate van activiteit van de bedrijven op Facebook. Het aantal berichten dat de bedrijven op Facebook plaatsten, varieerde tussen de 11 en 82. Sommige bedrijven waren dus zeer actief op Facebook en plaatsten dagelijks een bericht, anderen slechts wekelijks.

Het *conservation of return visits*-principe werd door alle bedrijven toegepast. Elk bedrijf had op zijn minst 5 applicaties op zijn Facebookpagina. De Facebookpagina met de meeste applicaties telde er 13.

Wat betreft de *dialogic loop* (waarbij we enkel de berichten selecteerden waarbij er sprake was van een reactie van een bezoeker) was er bijna sprake van een fiftyfifty-verdeling. De bedrijven reageerden namelijk in 44.7% van de gevallen op reacties van bezoekers.

5 Conclusie en discussie

Deze studie onderzocht aan de hand van een kwantitatieve inhoudsanalyse de communicatie van twaalf gereputeerde Belgische bedrijven via Facebook. Uit de studie kunnen we afleiden dat de bedrijven Facebook meer gebruikten als public relationstool dan als marketingcommunicatietool. Wat

betreft de betrokkenheid die wordt uitgelokt door deze inhoud bleek dat public relationsberichten meer worden gedeeld dan marketingcommunicatieberichten. Bezoekers zijn dus meer geneigd om reputatiegerelateerde (public relations) berichten van bedrijven te delen met hun persoonlijke netwerk dan eerder persuasieve, commerciële (marketingcommunicatie) berichten. Wanneer we echter naar een andere indicator van betrokkenheid kijken, met name de reacties van het bedrijf op reacties van bezoekers, kunnen we het omgekeerde vaststellen. In dit geval creëerden marketingcommunicatieberichten meer betrokkenheid dan public relationsberichten. Een mogelijke verklaring hiervoor zou kunnen zijn dat bedrijven de meer commerciële, persuasieve inhoud van de marketingcommunicatieberichten willen compenseren door te reageren op de reacties van bezoekers. Er blijkt geen verschil te bestaan tussen het algemene positieve gevoel (op basis van het aantal 'likes') dat marketingcommunicatie- versus public-relationsberichten opwekken. Wel vinden de bezoekers public relationsberichten interessanter dan marketingcommunicatieberichten om te delen met hun eigen familie of vrienden. Tot slot creëren marketingcommunicatieberichten meer effectieve interacties dan public relationsberichten op basis van de (neutrale) reacties van het bedrijf op de reacties van de bezoekers (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Het verschil in betrokkenheid die wordt uitgelokt door marketingcommunicatie- versus publicrelationsberichten kan mogelijks ook verklaard worden doordat bepaalde berichten door Facebook vaker in het nieuwsoverzicht van mensen worden geplaatst, waardoor deze berichten ook onder andere meer 'likes' kunnen genereren.

Wat betreft het voorkomen van de public relationsmodellen in de communicatie konden we een opvallende trend vaststellen in vergelijking met voorgaande studies. Door de operationalisering van tweerichtingscommunicatie uit te breiden met het *'semi' two-way*-model, konden we vaststellen dat 'semi'-tweerichtingscommunicatie het meest aan bod kwam op Facebook. Dit betekent dus dat bezoekers reageren op berichten geplaatst door het bedrijf, zonder dat het bedrijf hier verder op ingaat. Wat betreft de overige vier traditionele modellen van public relations bleek het *two-way symmetrical*-model het meest aan bod te komen in de communicatie. Dit resultaat verschilt van voorgaande studies die voornamelijk tot de conclusie kwamen dat eenrichtingscommunicatie domineert via sociale media (bijv. Bortree & Seltzer, 2009, Lovejoy et al., 2012, Men & Tsai, 2012). Bijgevolg kan het interessant zijn om in toekomstig onderzoek de vier traditionele modellen van public relations uit te breiden met het *'semi' two-way*-model, waardoor de operationalisering van tweerichtingscommunicatie wordt uitgebreid en een meer gedifferentieerd en accurater beeld kan geschept worden van communicatie via sociale media.

Deze resultaten illustreren het feit dat corporate communicatie in een sociale mediaomgeving duidelijk gecompliceerder is dan het louter 'pushen' van symmetrische tweerichtingscommunicatie. Gezien het feit dat veel studies tot de vaststelling komen dat dialoog en interactiviteit slechts gematigd

worden toegepast door communicatiemanagers (bijv. Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009) is het toch enigszins verrassend dat het *two-way symmetrical*-model het meest toegepaste public-relationsmodel is (van de vier traditionele modellen van public relations). Blijkbaar zijn communicatiemanagers zich ervan bewust dat een gevarieerde corporatecommunicatiebenadering het best de belangen van het bedrijf en de verwachtingen van het publiek dient. Dit sluit aan bij de reflectieve communicatiemanagementvisie die stelt dat de vier traditionele modellen van public relations gecombineerd dienen te worden met de inzichten van de organisatie en het management. Dit leidt tot vier verschillende theoretische benaderingen van communicatiemanagement die alle belangrijke benaderingen in public relations tot op heden omvatten. Deze benaderingen zijn het informatieve model, het persuasieve model, het relationele model en het discursieve model. In tegenstelling tot de symmetrie/excellence-theorie die het *two-way symmetrical*-model vooropstelt als het ideaal in public relations, stelt deze benadering dat afhankelijk van de context een bepaald model kan worden verkozen boven een ander. De modellen zijn dus niet exclusief, maar complementair. Reflectief communicatiemanagement ziet communicatiemanagement als het maximaliseren en optimaliseren van het proces van betekenisgeving aan de hand van informatiele, persuasieve, discursieve en relationele interventies om managementproblemen op te lossen via de coproductie van publieke legitimatie (Van Ruler, Betteke & Vercic, 2003).

Uit de resultaten bleek ook dat bezoekers deze trend richting tweerichtingscommunicatie schijnen te waarderen aangezien berichten waarin het '*semi*' *two-way*-model (en/of het *two-way symmetrical*-model) aan bod kwamen, significant meer werden geliket en gedeeld dan eenrichtingscommunicatieberichten (*public information* model). Ook Cho et al. (2014) kwamen tot de conclusie dat tweerichtingscommunicatieberichten meer betrokkenheid uitlokken dan eenrichtingscommunicatieberichten, wat in principe ook zo zou moeten zijn aangezien eenrichtingscommunicatie niet tot doel heeft interactie uit te lokken. Deze studie toont dus aan dat ('semi')-tweerichtingscommunicatie het meest nuttig is voor organisaties om betrokkenheid te creëren bij de Facebookbezoekers. Dit is wat organisaties immers willen bereiken, want op die manier ontstaat er een persoonlijke connectie met de bezoekers en positievere attitudes ten opzichte van het bedrijf. Bovendien zet dit bezoekers aan tot het verspreiden van positieve mond-tot-mondreclame (Yang & Kang, 2009). Deze studie bevestigt dus het belang van symmetrische tweerichtingscommunicatie in het opbouwen van relaties tussen organisaties en het publiek (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Wanneer we de public-relationsmodellen linkten aan de corporate communicatie-inhoud van de berichten, konden we zien dat in marketingcommunicatieberichten meer gebruik werd gemaakt van persuasieve inhoud (*press agency*-model) en dat het bedrijf meer in dialoog ging gericht op eigen

voordelen (*two-way asymmetrical-model*) in vergelijking met public-relationsberichten. Voor de public-relationsberichten gold het omgekeerde: deze berichten bevatten meer objectieve informatie (*public information-model*) en als het bedrijf in dialoog ging, deed het dit meer gericht op wederzijdse voordelen (*two-way symmetrical-model*) in vergelijking met in marketingcommunicatieberichten.

Wat betreft de dialogische principes kunnen we stellen dat er een duidelijke trend is richting de integratie van deze principes en bijgevolg richting relatiemanagement via Facebook. Enkel het *generation of return visits*-principe werd door sommige bedrijven nog niet voldoende toegepast doordat ze slechts af en toe in plaats van geregeld een bericht plaatsten op Facebook. Ook de *dialogic loop* kan nog verder worden geoptimaliseerd. Nu reageerden de bedrijven in ongeveer de helft van de gevallen op de reacties van bezoekers. Dit zou nog meer kunnen worden opgedreven zodat bezoekers meer en meer het gevoel krijgen dat bedrijven naar hen luisteren en lezen wat zij zeggen (en er vervolgens op reageren), hetgeen de reputatie van het bedrijf alleen maar ten goede kan komen. Deze reputatie blijkt echter wel geen goede voorspeller te zijn van hoe bedrijven communiceren via Facebook.

Deze studie toont net als de recente studies van Cho et al. (2014) en die van Saxton en Waters (2014) aan dat onderzoek niet langer alleen moet focussen op het perspectief van de organisatie wanneer corporate communicatie via sociale media wordt bestudeerd. Door het perspectief van het publiek mee te bestuderen (aan de hand van het aantal keer dat berichten worden geliket, gedeeld, etc.), kunnen nieuwe inzichten verkregen worden over de communicatie via sociale media. De integratie van het *'semi' two-way-model* dat tweerichtingscommunicatie bekijkt vanuit het perspectief van de bezoeker is hier een mooie illustratie van.

6 Beperkingen en aanbevelingen voor verder onderzoek

Dit onderzoek heeft een aantal beperkingen die aanleiding bieden voor verder onderzoek. De eerste heeft betrekking op de onderzoeksmethode. Deze studie maakte gebruik van een kwantitatieve inhoudsanalyse. Op basis hiervan kunnen we een accurate beschrijving geven van hoe Facebook momenteel wordt gebruikt door de bedrijven, maar de methode stelt ons niet in staat om de achterliggende motivaties van communicatiemanagers te begrijpen (Waters & Williams, 2011). Bijgevolg kan het interessant zijn om deze resultaten aan te vullen met kwalitatief onderzoek zoals bijvoorbeeld diepte-interviews met de communicatiemanagers van de desbetreffende bedrijven. Op die manier kunnen de resultaten meer in perspectief worden geplaatst en achterliggende motieven worden blootgelegd. Ook dient er opgemerkt te worden dat enkel de berichten van bedrijven zijn geanalyseerd. Om een vollediger beeld te krijgen van de communicatie van Belgische bedrijven via

Facebook zou toekomstig onderzoek ook de berichten door bezoekers op het prikbord van de bedrijven kunnen analyseren. Tot slot dient opgemerkt te worden dat deze studie zich focuste op de communicatie van commerciële Belgische bedrijven. Het zou interessant kunnen zijn om ook de communicatie van non profitorganisaties en gouvernementele organisaties te bestuderen, om op die manier een breder begrip te ontwikkelen van hoe het publiek mogelijk anders reageert op de communicatie van verschillende soorten organisaties via sociale media. Interessant voor de discipline van corporate communicatie zou zijn dat toekomstig onderzoek verder bouwt op deze lijn door na te gaan welke inhoud het meeste betrokkenheid creëert bij het publiek aan de hand van verschillende sociale mediakanalen. Zo kan het publiek bijvoorbeeld ook interageren op de communicatie van organisaties via Twitter door tweets te retweeten en erop te reageren. Via YouTube kunnen organisaties dan weer zien hoeveel hun video bekeken werd, hoeveel mensen de video geliket, gedeeld en erop gereageerd hebben. Deze indicatoren geven onderzoekers een unieke mogelijkheid om de effectiviteit van hun online corporate communicatie te meten in een natuurlijke setting (Saxton & Waters, 2014). Door per sociaal mediakanaal na te gaan welke inhoud het meeste betrokkenheid creëert bij het publiek, kunnen communicatiemanagers hun corporate communicatiestrategieën op sociale media optimaliseren en beter afstemmen op de noden en behoeften van het publiek.

7 Referenties

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8 Appendix

8.1 Coding guide used for content analysis⁴

Dit codeboek werd opgesteld op basis van een verkennende studie van de Facebook pagina's van Belgische bedrijven en gelijkaardige studies van Gardner (2012), Kent en Taylor (1998) en Bortree en Seltzer (2009).

Algemeen

De posts die door de bedrijven zelf geplaatst zijn op hun prikbord inclusief de comments op deze posts (zowel door het bedrijf als bezoekers) gedurende de periode van 1 februari tot en met 31 maart 2013 werden geanalyseerd. Onderstaand codeboek geeft per variabele op het registratieformulier duidelijk aan hoe deze werd geoperationaliseerd. Van belang is dat elke operationalisering eerst volledig zeer aandachtig wordt gelezen, alvorens tot de coderingen over te gaan.

Facebook posts (post inclusief *comments*)

Elke post door het bedrijf inclusief alle *comments* gedurende de periode van 1 februari tot en met 31 maart 2013 op het prikbord van de Facebook pagina worden geanalyseerd.

Variabele	Omschrijving
Aantal posts bedrijf gedurende de periode van 1 februari t.e.m. 31 maart 2013)	Noteer hier het aantal posts dat het bedrijf heeft geplaatst op zijn prikbord gedurende de periode van 1 februari tot en met 31 maart 2013 . Wanneer er een melding op het prikbord staat dat het bedrijf zijn hoofdingsafbeelding of profielfoto heeft gewijzigd, dient dit ook gecodeerd te worden als een post. Post geplaatst door buitenstaanders op het prikbord van het bedrijf dienen NIET te worden gecodeerd.

Per post:

Van belang is om vooraleer je met het coderen begint de post eerst eens zeer goed te bekijken en eventuele links of foto's die de posts bevat te openen. Op die manier krijg je een goed beeld van de post. Links kunnen immers ook nuttige informatie bevatten. Bijvoorbeeld een link die doorverwijst naar een website van een goed doel waarvan het bedrijf een sponsor is. Het zou kunnen dat uit de post zelf niet af te leiden valt dat het bedrijf dit evenement sponsort, maar uit de website wel. Daarom is het belangrijk om ook goed de inhoud van de link te bekijken die in de post wordt vermeld.

⁴ The coding guide is in Dutch because the original publication is also in Dutch.

Datum Noteer de datum waarop de post werd geplaatst door het bedrijf op het prikbord door de dag, de maand en het jaar voluit te schrijven (bijvoorbeeld 4 april 2013). Wanneer Facebook geen specifieke datum aangeeft (bv. “zaterdag” of “gisteren”), bereken je zelf op welke dag de post is geplaatst.

Tijdstip post Noteer het tijdstip waarop de post werd geplaatst als volgt: bijvoorbeeld 8u31 of 19u43. Wanneer Facebook geen exact tijdstip aangeeft (bijvoorbeeld “4 uur geleden”), bereken je zelf op welk tijdstip de post effectief is geplaatst. Indien er enkel een dag wordt vermeld (bijvoorbeeld ‘vrijdag’) ga je met je muis op de dag staan (zonder te klikken) en dan verschijnt rechts het exacte tijdstip.

Aantal likes Noteer het aantal likes dat de post telt.
Een “like” op Facebook verschijnt wanneer iemand op de “vind ik leuk”-knop klikt onder een post om hun steun, interesse of instemming met een post duidelijk te maken. Onderstaand bericht van Telenet werd door 280 personen geliket.



Het aantal likes van een post kan afgeleid worden uit het “duim omhoog-symbool”, gevolgd door het getal van het aantal mensen dat hierop klikten. Soms vermeldt Facebook: “een gebruikersnaam en x aantal andere mensen liketen je post”. Het is belangrijk om het totale aantal likes hierbij in rekening te brengen.

Marketing activiteit Het doel van deze variabele is om te identificeren welke marketingactiviteiten een bedrijf toepast op zijn Facebook pagina. Duid het vakje aan dat het meest past bij de post. In sommige gevallen kunnen dit meerdere activiteiten tegelijk zijn. Indien er geen sprake is van een marketingactiviteit dient het eerst vakje te worden aangekruist.

Geen marketing activiteit

- Exclusieve Facebook wedstrijd/ aanbieding** heeft betrekking op een soort van wedstrijd, georganiseerd door het bedrijf zelf, waaraan enkel kan deelgenomen worden via Facebook. Vaak kunnen dit soort activiteiten herkend worden aan het feit dat de fan doorgaans de pagina moet liken of delen, moet reageren op een post, of wordt gevraagd om een @vermelding van hun pagina te gebruiken in een post naar vrienden. Soms heeft het bedrijf ook een applicatie op Facebook aangemaakt voor de wedstrijd. Zowel een post met de aankondiging van de wedstrijd en de uitleg hierover als de bekendmaking van de resultaten van de wedstrijd vallen onder deze categorie.
- Wedstrijd** heeft betrekking op een post die een bepaalde wedstrijd georganiseerd door het bedrijf promoot door middel van een link of instructies wat er moet gedaan worden. De aanbieding heeft niet exclusief betrekking op Facebook activiteiten (zoals bijvoorbeeld het liken van de pagina van het bedrijf) en kan bijvoorbeeld doorverwijzen met een link naar de website van het bedrijf waar aan de wedstrijd kan deelgenomen worden. Zowel een post met de aankondiging van de wedstrijd en de uitleg hierover als de bekendmaking van de resultaten van de wedstrijd vallen onder deze categorie.
- Korting/solden** heeft betrekking op het adverteren van speciale aanbiedingen voor bepaalde producten of diensten van het bedrijf. Ze verwijzen direct naar een bepaald product of dienst en willen de bezoekers wijzen op een speciale actie gerelateerd aan de directe verkoop van een product of dienst. Ook posts van warenhuizen in verband met bonuspunten die kunnen worden verdiend, vallen onder deze categorie of acties zoals bijvoorbeeld 5 + 1 gratis. Wanneer in het algemeen “niet te missen promo’s” wordt vermeldt, maar geen specifieke voorbeelden hiervan worden gegeven, valt deze post onder de categorie reclame over een product of dienst (cf. infra).
- Reclame over een product of dienst** adverteert een specifiek product of dienst van het bedrijf als een merk zonder te verwijzen naar prijspromoties of speciale aanbiedingen. Bijvoorbeeld de reclame van Coca-Cola. Deze reclames hebben het nooit over een korting of speciale actie, ze adverteren enkel het product om het publiek eraan te herinneren dat het beschikbaar is en zo

aan te zetten tot de aankoop ervan. Een voorbeeld: een post van Delhaize waarin ze hun traiteurdienst promoten.



- **Bedrijfsreclame** is vergelijkbaar met reclame voor een product of dienst, behalve dat in dit geval de focus op het bedrijf als merk ligt. Een voorbeeld hiervan is de volgende post van Delhaize in verband met de paas aankopen: *“Voor het lekkerste paasfeest moet je bij Delhaize zijn.*



- **Marktonderzoek** posts zijn posts waarbij het bedrijf zijn Facebook bezoekers vragen stelt (die op zijn minst onrechtstreeks verbonden zijn met de activiteiten/producten of diensten van het bedrijf), links naar surveys geeft of andere methodes gebruikt om op een informele manier aan marktonderzoek te doen. Het kan hierbij gaan om massa-interactie (“Wat is je favoriete smaak?”) of het kan persoonlijk zijn (“Hallo Linda, waar heb je informatie gevonden over deze pagina?”). Wanneer het bedrijf een vraag stelt dat los staat van het bedrijf zoals bijvoorbeeld “Hoe vier jij Pasen”, dient dit te

worden gecodeerd als een *stakeholder engagement* post (cf. infra).

- **Sponsoring** heeft betrekking op een (commercieel) partnership dat het bedrijf aangaat met een ander bedrijf, merk, organisatie of evenement. Een loutere vermelding van een andere merknaam of bedrijf doordat de naam deel uitmaakt van een evenement zoals bijvoorbeeld de “Redbull Sound Clash” is niet voldoende om onder deze categorie te vallen. Partners dienen expliciet vermeld te worden of getoond (bijvoorbeeld via een foto). Een voorbeeld van een sponsoring post door KBC:



Ook wanneer een bedrijf een foto post van bijvoorbeeld een evenement met een duidelijk zichtbaar logo van het bedrijf op de foto (bedrijf heeft dus het evenement gesponsord), dient dit vakje te worden aangekruist. Een voorbeeld van dergelijke post door ING België:



Public relations activiteit Deze variabele dient tot de identificatie van mogelijke toegepaste **public relations** activiteiten door het bedrijf in een post. Kruis het vakje aan van welke PR activiteit er het meest past of passen bij de post. In sommige gevallen kunnen dit meerdere activiteiten tegelijk zijn. Indien er geen PR activiteit wordt toegepast, dient het eerste vakje te worden aangeduid.

- Geen PR activiteit**
- Klantenservice** posts helpen mensen die vragen hebben in verband met een product of dienst dat het bedrijf aanbiedt. Daarnaast kan het ook gaan om een productsuggestie, gebruikers doorverwijzen naar meer informatie, of een service update aanbieden. Meldingen in verband met pannes, verminderde dienstverlening door het weer enz. vallen ook onder deze categorie. Ook een melding in verband met sluiting van het bedrijf bijvoorbeeld naar aanleiding van een feestdag, vallen hier onder.
- Posts die **stakeholder engagement** beogen willen Facebook bezoekers direct engageren. Dit kan gaan om posts waarbij het bedrijf een compliment geeft,

(commerciële) partners bedankt, nuttige informatie verschaft voor bezoekers van de pagina zoals bijvoorbeeld receptsuggesties of bezoekers van de pagina aanzet tot (inter)actie. Ook vacatures bij het bedrijf kunnen vermeld worden in dit soort post. *Stakeholder engagement* posts zijn positief en dragen bij tot een positief imago van het bedrijf. Wanneer het bedrijf iedereen bijvoorbeeld “Vrolijk Pasen” wenst, kan dit beschouwd worden als een dergelijke post. Het geven van tips aan bezoekers van de pagina in verband met bedrijfsgerelateerde activiteiten, producten of diensten kan ook hieronder vallen. Bijvoorbeeld KBC geeft een tip aan beginnende ondernemers in een post en verwijst hen door naar de website van Unizo met meer informatie. Wanneer het bedrijf een vraag stelt aan zijn bezoekers zoals bijvoorbeeld “Hoe vier jij Pasen?” kan dit ook gecodeerd worden als een *stakeholder engagement* post. Ook een post met informatie over degustaties door Delhaize valt onder deze categorie aangezien zij op die manier hun bezoekers willen engageren en aanzetten tot actie (wijn degusteren).

- Media relaties** posts verwijzen naar posts die een link bevatten naar eender welk media materiaal in verband met het bedrijf, zijn producten/diensten of de sector. Dit kan gaan om een media release van de website of een verhaal op een nieuwssite over het bedrijf of bijvoorbeeld de YouTube pagina van het bedrijf.
- Issue management** posts zijn posts die problemen of issues veroorzaakt door (producten of diensten van) het bedrijf managen. Bijvoorbeeld een post van McDonalds in verband met de kritiek dat een nieuwe hamburger te vet zou zijn, zou kunnen zijn dat ze zeggen dat de hamburger uit de handel is genomen. Het kan ook gaan om een verontschuldiging zoals bijvoorbeeld Telenet deed na de

grote panne op 3 februari zoals het voorbeeld hieronder.



Sorry! Duco Sickinghe en alle Telenet medewerkers verontschuldigen zich voor de panne van deze ochtend.

Sorry! Vlaanderen zonder internet op zondag 3 februari 2013 »
Telenet blog
bit.ly

Vele Telenet-kanten hadden zondagochtend 3 februari geen internet, vaste telefoon en een probleem met interactieve digitale televisie. Dit veroorzaakte grote hinder en hiervoor willen we ons uitdrukkelijk

- Reputation building** posts zijn bedoeld om de reputatie van het bedrijf te verbeteren door informatie te posten die het bedrijf in een goed daglicht stelt. Dit kan gaan om bijvoorbeeld de aankondiging door Accent Jobs dat ze voor het 11 jaar op rij tot Beste Werkgever zijn verkozen. Daarnaast kunnen *corporate social responsibility* (aandacht voor mensen, de planeet en winst, bijvoorbeeld gelijke kansen voor mannen en vrouwen; milieuzuiverende maatregelen enz.) activiteiten in de schijnwerper worden geplaatst, positieve survey resultaten worden gedeeld of statistieken over het bedrijf, zijn producten en diensten. Foto's van activiteiten een bedrijf waarin de werknemers bijvoorbeeld in actie te zien zijn kunnen ook worden beschouwd als een reputatie opbouwende post. Ook interviews met werknemers over het bedrijf die worden gepost vallen onder deze categorie.
- Posts met **publiciteit over evenementen** promoten bepaalde evenementen of speciale dagen (zoals bijvoorbeeld Earth Hour van WWF) waarbij het bedrijf rechtstreeks of onrechtstreeks betrokken is. Een voorbeeld van een evenement waarbij KBC onrechtstreeks betrokken is, is de liveshow van 'Kom op tegen kanker'. Zij postten op hun Facebook pagina dat 500 KBC vrijwilligers hieraan hun medewerking verleenden. Een ander voorbeeld van een evenement- publiciteit post is KBC die in een post meldt dat "De Dag van de zorg" gezellig druk was.
- Goede doelen** posts promoten of vermelden een goed doel, een nonprofit organisatie of een evenement met de duidelijke intentie om een goed doel te helpen. Goede doelen posts worden niet enkel vermeld om het bedrijf te

helpen. Bijvoorbeeld een bedrijf dat post “*We hebben net € 10 000 gedoneerd aan het Rode Kruis*” komt niet het goede doel van het Rode Kruis ten goede, maar wel het bedrijf zelf. Om een goede doel post te zijn, zou er moeten staan: “*Het Rode Kruis heeft dringend geld nodig voor zijn nieuwe projecten. Steun hen door te doneren ...*”. Onderstaand voorbeeld zou een twijfelgeval kunnen zijn. Het is zeer belangrijk om na te gaan wat de primaire boodschap is van de post. Er wordt wel een goed doel (microfinanciering van het Zuiden) vermeld, maar in de eerste plaats gaat de post over een evenement georganiseerd door BRS. Deze post is dus GEEN goede doelen post, maar een post met publiciteit over een evenement.

KBC Bank & Verzekering heeft een link via BRS gedeeld.
6 maart

Lekker lenteweertje vandaag! BRS stuurt de temperatuur alvast nog wat meer de hoogte in met Zuidgebred. Geniet van een fijne avond met zangeres Lies Lefever en een gezellige receptie, en leer ook nog een beetje bij over microfinanciering van het Zuiden. Inschrijven kan tot 8 maart 2013 via www.brs.coop.



Lies Lefever zingt voor brs over Drie Mandjes in Planckendael

Artiest Lies Lefever componeerde speciaal voor BRS een lied over het boekje 'Drie mandjes uit Rwanda'. Het verhaal is geschreven door Koen Peeters

Vind ik leuk · Reageren · Delen 11

Feitelijke informatie

Een post is niet altijd marketing of public relations gerelateerd. Een bedrijf kan ook gewoon **feitelijke informatie** posten zoals bijvoorbeeld een wegbeschrijving naar hun winkels, een vermelding van vernieuwde openingsuren, enz. Indien de post reeds gecodeerd werd als een marketing of public relations activiteit, dient hier dus sowieso ‘neen’ te worden aangeduid.

Indien er feitelijke info wordt vermeld, dient ‘ja’ te worden aangeduid.

Reacties op posts

Om het geheel analyseerbaar te houden wordt het aantal *comments* die we opnemen in de analyse beperkt **tot en met de 50^e reactie**.

Aantal reacties door bezoekers

Noteer **hoeveel keer er wordt gereageerd** op de post **door bezoekers**. Indien dezelfde persoon meerdere keren reageert, dient elke reactie apart te worden meegeteld. Indien er meer dan 50 *comments* zijn dienen enkel bij deze categorie het volledige

aantal *comments* te worden genoteerd. De volgende variabelen hebben enkel betrekking op de eerste 50 *comments* op de post.

Aantal positieve reacties bezoekers Noteer hier het **aantal reacties door bezoekers die positief zijn**. Het kan hierbij gaan om een compliment, een instemmende reactie (bijvoorbeeld: akkoord, vind ik ook, goed gedaan, ik denk er hetzelfde over), een positief antwoord op een vraag die door het bedrijf wordt gesteld in een post, een positief emoticon (☺), positieve uitdrukkingen (bijvoorbeeld: cool!!!) of positieve onomatopoeën zoals whoooo.

Aantal negatieve reacties bezoekers Noteer het **aantal reacties door bezoekers die negatief** van aard zijn. Het kan hierbij gaan om kritiek die er wordt geuit, klachten, beledigingen, negatieve beweringen of een negatief (neen; kritiek uiten;...) antwoord op een vraag die door het bedrijf wordt gesteld in een post. Het kan hierbij niet zowel gaan om kritiek op het bedrijf als kritiek op *comments* van andere bezoekers.

Aantal neutrale reacties bezoekers Noteer het **aantal reacties door bezoekers die een neutraal** statement bevatten. Dit wil zeggen dat de reactie informatie bevat die niet positief of negatief is, maar gewoon de feiten weergeeft. Dergelijke *comments* geven geen aanleiding tot opinieveranderingen of discussie. In sommige gevallen kan het gebeuren dat er toch in een andere taal (zoals het Frans) wordt gereageerd op een Nederlandstalige post. Deze anderstalige *comment* dient steeds als neutraal te worden gecodeerd, ongeacht de inhoud.

Aantal reacties bedrijf op reacties van bezoekers Noteer **hoe vaak het bedrijf reageert op een reactie van een fan** op de post geplaatst door het bedrijf. Wanneer het bedrijf zonder aanleiding (comment van buitenstaander) reageert op een eigen post, dient deze reactie niet te worden meegeteld.

Aantal positieve reacties bedrijf Noteer het **aantal reacties** door het **bedrijf** die **positief** zijn. Het kan hierbij gaan om een compliment, een instemmende reactie (bijvoorbeeld: akkoord, vind ik ook, goed gedaan, ik denk er hetzelfde over), een positief emoticon (☺), positieve uitdrukkingen (bijvoorbeeld: cool!!!) of positieve onomatopoeën zoals whoooo.

De loutere vermelding op het einde van bijvoorbeeld 'fijne dag' volstaat niet om de post als positief te coderen. Hierbij dient er goed gekeken te worden naar de rest van de inhoud van de post.

Aantal negatieve reacties bedrijf Noteer het **aantal reacties** door het **bedrijf** die **negatief** van aard zijn, het kan hierbij bijvoorbeeld gaan om de ontkenning van bepaalde feiten door het bedrijf als reactie op een negatieve post van een buitenstaander.

**Aantal neutrale reacties
bedrijf**

Noteer het **aantal reacties** door het **bedrijf** die een **neutraal** statement bevatten. Dit wil zeggen dat de reactie informatie bevat die niet positief of negatief is, maar gewoon de feiten weergeeft. Dergelijke *comments* geven geen aanleiding tot opinieveranderingen of discussie.

**Vier modellen van public
relations**

Deze variabele is gebaseerd op Grunig en Hunts (1984) **vier modellen van public relations**. Duid het gepaste vakje aan, één mogelijkheid dient te worden gekozen. Het is belangrijk om de post en de *comments* hierop als 1 geheel te beschouwen en te kijken welk model van toepassing is op dit geheel. De post zelf kan bijvoorbeeld een *public information* post zijn, maar wanneer hierop negatief wordt gereageerd door bezoekers en het bedrijf lost het probleem op is er sprake van een *two-way symmetrical* post. Het doel van deze variabele is om te achterhalen of Facebook vooral wordt gebruikt om aan eenrichtings- of tweerichtingscommunicatie te doen en of het bedrijf de dialoog gaat met het oog op wederzijdse voordelen of enkel uit eigenbelang.

- Posts dienen gecodeerd te worden onder het **press agency/publicity model** wanneer er duidelijk sprake is van eenrichtingscommunicatie en het bedrijf niet reageert op reacties van bezoekers. De post zelf bevat overtuigende informatie in verband met producten of diensten van het bedrijf en is bedoeld om rechtstreeks voordeel voor hen op te leren. Voorbeelden van *press agency* posts zijn traditionele marketing technieken zoals promoties of reclame met het doel om mensen te overtuigen het product of dienst aan te schaffen.
- Public information posts** zijn informatief van aard en maken gebruik van feitelijke, onvertekende taal. Deze posts zijn gericht op eenrichtingscommunicatie. Er wordt bijgevolg niet gereageerd op comments van bezoekers door het bedrijf. Deze posts komen vaak voor in de vorm van het delen van een link of documenten (zoals nieuwsreleases op de website) en informatie over de organisatie zonder woorden te gebruiken die de organisatie expliciet bevoordeelt. Een voorbeeld van een dergelijke posts is "check onze nieuwe website". Moest er echter staan "Check onze nieuwe super coole website, de mooiste van de hele sector", zou het gaan om een *press agency* post.

Voorbeeld *public information post* van Telenet:



Telenet shared a link.
6 maart

Yelo TV: verbeterde Android app-versie beschikbaar.
Download/upgrade nu, de oude versie werkt niet meer!
[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=be.telenet.yelo ...](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=be.telenet.yelo...)

Yelo TV - Android Apps on Google Play
play.google.com

Yelo – live televisie en film kijken op je tablet en smartphone Kijk met Yelo op jouw tablet of smartphone naar live tv-zenders. Kies uit een collectie films op aanvr...

- **Two-way asymmetrical posts** zijn interactief en engagerend, maar het doel van de post is vooral voor het bedrijf om er voordeel uit te halen. In dit geval is er sprake van tweerichtingscommunicatie en reageert het bedrijf dus op reacties van bezoekers, maar enkel om er zelf voordeel uit te halen. Deze posts bevatten vaak een vraag die het bedrijf stelt om het publiek beter te leren kennen om hen een product te kunnen verkopen en hun service te verbeteren. Ondanks het feit dat dit de Facebook fan/klant indirect ten goede kan komen, is het primaire doel van dergelijke post om het bedrijf zelf te helpen. Een voorbeeld van een *two-way asymmetrical* post is bijvoorbeeld Leonidas die vraagt “Welke nieuwe smaak zou jij graag hebben dat onze nieuwe praline krijgt?”. De interactiviteit staat het bedrijf toe om op een informele manier aan marktonderzoek te doen en op die manier hun producten en diensten beter af te stemmen op de noden van hun doelgroep.
- **Two-way symmetrical posts** zijn interactief, engagerend en lijken zowel het bedrijf als de Facebook fan ten goede te komen. In dit geval is er sprake van tweerichtingscommunicatie, waarbij het bedrijf reageert op comments van bezoekers. De post lijkt een langetermijnrelatie te willen laten ontstaan tussen het bedrijf en zijn Facebook bezoekers en het publiek te willen helpen met zijn bekommernissen en noden. Een voorbeeld van een dergelijke post zou een post zijn die antwoord geeft op een vraag van het publiek, reageert op complimenten of klachten of communiceert dat ze een oplossing zoeken voor problemen.

Links

Deze variabele heeft betrekking op de **link(s)** die worden vermeld in een post.

Duid het passende vakje aan. Meerdere opties tegelijk aankruisen, is mogelijk.

- Post bevat **geen link**
- Link verwijst naar een **evenement** aangemaakt op Facebook.
- Link verwijst naar een **andere Facebook pagina**.
- Een link die je doorverwijst naar een **applicatie**, ingebed in de interface van Facebook. Deze post kan vaak geïdentificeerd worden doordat de applicatie de toestemming vraagt om toegang te krijgen tot persoonlijke informatie wanneer er op de link wordt geklikt. Daarnaast kan een dergelijke applicatie erkend worden doordat de Facebook URL begint met “apps.facebook.com/...”.
- Een link naar een **nieuwssite** is een link naar een site die kan worden beschouwd als een legitieme nieuwssite. Dit wil zeggen dat de site officieel nieuws verspreidt dat geschreven wordt door journalisten die gebonden zijn aan ethische journalistieke regels. Een voorbeeld van een dergelijke nieuwssite is www.hln.be.
- Een link naar een **sociale media site** kan de volgende dingen omvatten (maar deze lijst is niet exhaustief): een link naar *video sharing sites* (YouTube of Vimeo), *blog sites* (Blog Spotter), *micro-blog sites* (Twitter), *foto sharing sites* (Flickr, Instagram), sociale netwerksites (MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn). Het kan gaan om ene link naar een **eigen sociale media site**, of de **sociale media site van een andere organisatie**. Kruis het passende vakje aan.
- Een link die verwijst naar de **website** van het **bedrijf zelf** omvat een link die verwijst naar een externe pagina buiten Facebook, die behoort tot het geanalyseerde bedrijf en door hen wordt beheerd. Of het gaat om een officiële site kan worden geïdentificeerd aan de branding, de URL, de contactgegevens en andere aspecten die tonen dat de site geloofwaardig is als een officiële website van het bedrijf.

- Indien de link verwijst naar nog een **andere website**, duid dit vakje aan en specificeer om wat voor soort website het gaat. Voorbeeld Telenet:



In dit geval gaat het om een link naar een applicatie van Yelo TV.

Andere multimedia

Deze variabele heeft betrekking op andere multimedia die een post kan bevatten. Duid het gepaste vakje aan.

- Geen:** er wordt niet verwezen naar andere multimedia in de post of het commentaar.
- Foto/afbeelding:** een post die een foto of afbeelding bevat die wordt geüpload op het prikbord van de Facebook pagina. Ook een melding dat het bedrijf zijn profielfoto of hoofdingsafbeelding heeft veranderd valt hieronder. Een voorbeeld van Telenet:



- **Video:** een post die video bevat die wordt geüpload op het prikbord van de Facebook pagina.
- **Vraag/poll:** in dit geval wordt er een vraag/poll gesteld via Facebook. Dit is te herkennen aan de naam van het bedrijf gevolgd door 'vraagt' en dan de vraag, waarnaar er wordt gehyperlinkt. Onder de vraag kan je vervolgens een aantal antwoordmogelijkheden zien. Voorbeeld Telenet:



Andere: indien er nog andere multimedia worden vermeld die niet onder te brengen zijn in bovenstaande categorieën, duid dit vakje aan.

CHAPTER III
HOW TO DEAL WITH ONLINE CONSUMER
COMMENTS DURING A CRISIS? THE IMPACT
OF PERSONALIZED ORGANIZATIONAL
RESPONSES ON ORGANIZATIONAL
REPUTATION

CHAPTER III

HOW TO DEAL WITH ONLINE CONSUMER COMMENTS DURING A CRISIS? THE IMPACT OF PERSONALIZED ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES ON ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION¹

ABSTRACT

Social media enable organizations in crisis to communicate regularly about crisis events to the public. Furthermore, consumers have the opportunity to respond to the organization's posts about the crisis. Little is known, however, about how organizations should deal with online consumer comments to such posts. Therefore, the current study examines how organizations in crisis best deal with positive and negative consumer comments to an organizational crisis-related post. A 2 (tone of voice organizational response: personalized versus corporate) x 2 (consumer comment valence: positive versus negative) between-subjects experimental design ($N = 264$) was conducted to examine if a personalized organizational response to consumer comments is advisable to protect the organizational reputation, and whether or not the desirability of it depends on the valence of these comments. Results show that a personalized organizational response to a consumer comment on an organizational crisis message post beneficially affects organizational reputation through higher perceptions of conversational human voice (CHV) and sequentially lower consumer skepticism. However, the effect of response personalization is not unanimously positive. When consumer comments are positive, a personalized organizational response damages organizational reputation due to increased consumer skepticism. The positive effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation through CHV disappeared when responding to positive consumer comments. When consumer reactions are negative, however, personalizing the organizational response is beneficial for organizational reputation due to increased perceptions of CHV.

KEYWORDS

Public relations; crisis communication; personalization; conversational human voice; consumer skepticism; organizational reputation

¹ Chapter three has been published as "Crijns, H., Cauberghe, V., Hudders, L., & Claeys, A.-S. (2017). How to deal with consumer comments during a crisis? The impact of personalized organizational responses on organizational reputation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 75, 619-631." This paper has also been presented at the Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap (3-4th February 2015) in Antwerp.

1 Introduction

Today, social media are indispensable tools for crisis communication managers (Ki & Nekmat, 2014; Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016). Despite the increasing importance of social media in crisis communication (McCorkindale, Distaso, & Carroll, 2013; Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011), several researchers stress that it is still unclear for organizations how they can optimally make use of these media and its dialogic capabilities during a crisis (Eriksson, 2012; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2011; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Several crisis communication studies compared the effectiveness of crisis communication via either social or traditional media (e.g., Schultz et al., 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). However, organizations in crisis will not select either social or traditional media to communicate in times of crisis, rather they will use both. Therefore, besides comparing the use of both media, it would be theoretically relevant to explore how to most effectively use social media. This will allow us to develop specific insights into the impact of crisis communication via social media and thus supplement current theories such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007) that were mainly developed based on crisis communication via traditional media.

As such, it is crucial to explore how organizations can most effectively use social media in times of crisis. The dialogic theory of public relations suggests that organizations best engage in dialogue with stakeholders in the online environment. By doing so, organizations are able to build dynamic and enduring relationships with consumers (Kent & Taylor, 2002). However, organizations can only truly commit to dialogue when they make use of this opportunity by actually engaging in a conversation with stakeholders (Kelleher, 2009). Hence, it is not the technology itself, but rather how the technology is used by organizations that influences the relationship between organization and their stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

When engaging in dialogue with consumers on social media, it is especially important to do so in a human and conversational manner. This is referred to in literature as conversational human voice (CHV) (Kelleher, 2009). CHV can be defined as *“an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by consumers of an organization based on the interaction between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics”* (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177). Research is necessary, however, to determine which dialogic conversation styles are likely to engender CHV (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

Kerkhof, Beukeboom, and Utz (2011) found that personalization of an organizational crisis response resulted in higher perceived CHV. In a personalized response the company addresses consumers by their name, uses personal pronouns and mentions the name of the person who is responding (Kwon

& Sung, 2011; Pollach, 2005; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The study of Kerkhof et al. (2011) took a univocal approach in which the organization in crisis is sending information to consumers but the feedback on this response is not taken into consideration. Hence, current research in crisis communication mainly focuses on the investigation of the senders' perspective (i.e., point of view of organization in crisis) (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). However, several researchers argue that crisis communication needs to evolve into a multi-vocal approach in which both the input of the organization in crisis and consumers is taken into account (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho, Tirkkonen, & Vos, 2013; Vos, Schoemaker, & Luoma-aho, 2014; Zhao, 2017). For example, according to the rhetorical arena theory (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010), crisis publics or receivers of crisis messages can also become crisis communicators within the rhetorical arena, for example by responding to an organizational crisis message post (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Nevertheless, despite the dialogic and interactive capabilities that social media offer, so far, research has shown that crisis communication managers do not extensively make use of the dialogic feature that distinguishes social from traditional media (e.g., Waters & Williams, 2011; Watkins, 2017). One of the reasons might be that organizations in crisis do not know how to engage in dialogue with consumers and what the consequences are.

Little is known about how organizations can most effectively engage in dialogue with consumers and whether there are any boundary conditions connected to a certain response style. In particular, comments on an organizational crisis message post can have a positive or negative valence (Doh & Hwang, 2009). For example, during the Dieselgate scandal in which Volkswagen got involved, there were people who said *"No matter what, I love my Volkswagen"*, but there were also people who argued *"Volkswagen is a fraudulent company, I will never buy a car from this brand again"*. In the current study, we argue that consumer comment valence might form a boundary condition of the impact of a personalized organizational response on organizational' perceptions. Specifically, we propose that a personalized organizational response will not be beneficial when responding to positive consumer comments. For example, a study has recently found that a personalized response to a positive consumer comment resulted in a perceived violation of the privacy (e.g., Demmers, Van Dolen, & Weltevreden, 2014). Hence, this study provides preliminary evidence for the fact that persuasion knowledge might be activated by organizational responses depending on the valence of the content. According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) (Friestad & Wright, 1994), persuasion knowledge refers to personal knowledge and beliefs about the motives and tactics of organizations, mostly considered in the context of advertisements. However, these insights might also be relevant in other contexts outside advertising. For example, Rim and Song (2016) applied the insights of PKM in a corporate social responsibility (CSR) context. In particular, the authors found that the desirability of

organizational responses (i.e., one versus two-sided) to consumer comments on social media in a CSR context depends on the valence of consumer comments. Hence, in this context, consumer comment valence formed a boundary condition of the organizational response effect. Likewise, we argue that the desirability of a personalized response might depend on the valence of the consumers' comments to which the organization is responding. More specifically, we suggest that people do not expect a personalized response on a positive consumer comment. As a result, they might reflect on the underlying persuasive strategy that the organization might use in this response.

Taken together, the current study aims to gain insights in how consumers process, recognize and respond to a personalized organizational response and whether these effects are contingent upon the valence of consumer comments which can be positive or negative. More specifically, we will examine how (i.e., the underlying process) and when (i.e., under which circumstances: based on consumer comment valence) a personalized organizational response on a consumer comment affects organizational reputation. To our knowledge, this is the first study that considers possible negative perceptions such as consumer skepticism initiated by an organizational response. This is surprising, because research examining online word of mouth (e.g., consumer comments) recently found consumer skepticism to play an important role in the formation of consumer perceptions (Boerman & Kruijemeier, 2016; Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Zhang, Ko, & Carpenter, 2016). Valentini (2015, p. 175) also posits that in the current social media environment, consumer skepticism towards organizations is increasing. The author argues that *"consumers are becoming more and more aware of organizations' hidden messages and are likely to immunize themselves against persuasive online messages and social media content"*. Hence, it is important to consider consumer skepticism when examining consumer perceptions of online organizational behavior.

By investigating the abovementioned processes, we aim to contribute to crisis communication theory and practice by examining how organizations in crisis can most effectively engage in dialogue with stakeholders in a social media context. Taken together, the aim of the current study is twofold. First, we will investigate if a personalized organizational response to a consumer comment on an organizational crisis message post beneficially affects organizational reputation through higher perceived CHV and lower consumer skepticism sequentially. Second, we will examine if the desirability of a personalized organizational response depends on the valence of consumer comments. More specifically, we propose a two distinct processes model: on the one hand, we suggest the influence of a personalized organizational response on organizational reputation through CHV for negative consumer comments and on the other hand, through consumer skepticism for positive consumer comments.

2 Literature review

2.1 Crisis communication in a social media environment: opportunities and challenges

Compared to traditional media, social media have some unique features that make them appealing to use for the purpose of crisis communication. One of the opportunities that social media offer is that messages can be spread easily and quickly to a broad public (Jin et al., 2011; Schultz et al., 2011). Furthermore, social media enable organizations to have an active and engaging relationship with consumers because these media enable them to listen to them and respond directly to their feedback (Floreddu, Cabiddu, & Evaristo, 2014). Social media also form a cost-efficient tool for organizations since organizational responses to consumer feedback can also be seen by other consumers who might have the same comments (Bygstad & Presthus, 2012).

At the same time, besides the opportunities, social media also pose some challenges to crisis communication managers. Especially when organizations are in crisis, social media might form a potential threat because consumers are able to share information about an organization very quickly to a wide range of people and the organization has little control over the process (Effing & Spil, 2016). This relates to the argument of Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) who state that organizational communication is becoming less predictable in the current online environment because interactions with consumers cannot be controlled by the organization. Lack of control results in an enhanced organizational vulnerability and thereby increases the frequency and severity of organizational crises (Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt, & James, 2015). In addition, the interactions between organizations and consumers become accessible and visible for a wide public as well (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). When an organization in crisis posts a message on Facebook, consumers can immediately and publicly react to the crisis message. These comments are visible to all individuals visiting the social media page and to friends (and friends of friends) of the individuals who react. Accordingly, these comments can have a large impact and a wide reach. Therefore, the way companies deal with comments on an organizational crisis message post is very important and likely to influence organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Hence, it is important for organizations in crisis to address consumer feedback adequately by making use of an appropriate tone of voice.

2.2 Dialogue between organization in crisis and consumers

The dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) states that organizations have to facilitate dialogue among and with stakeholders by establishing channels and procedures for dialogic

communication to take place. This relates to the idea that social media have created a shift from one to-many communication (i.e., a monologue), to many-to-many communication (i.e., a dialogue) (Mersham, Theunissen, & Peart, 2009).

Nonetheless, Ki and Nekmat (2014) found that many organizations are not responding to the messages of consumers during a crisis and thereby not fully capitalizing on the dialogic potential that social media offer for organizational crisis communication. Roshan et al. (2016) also found that only 15% of the investigated organizations did respond to messages of consumers during a crisis. This is surprising, because research has shown that engaging in dialogue with stakeholders, especially in a human way, generates several beneficial outcomes (e.g., Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Hence, a crucial feature of online communication is the tone of voice adopted by organizations in an online environment (Searls & Weinberger, 2000). Therefore, an important question that needs to be addressed is which tone of voice is able to engender humanness in communication (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), in particular during a crisis. We suggest that personalization of the organizational response might be a feasible strategy.

2.3 Personalization of the organizational response: the sequential mediating role of CHV and consumer skepticism

Personalization refers to a communication strategy in which information about the receiver is used in order to refer to his or her self. It is a commonly used technique in web-based communication because in this environment, personal information is easily accessible. By personalizing a message, it becomes more meaningful and persuasive. The text is tailored to the recipient by incorporating personal cues in a general message (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006).

Personalization can be obtained by means of different strategies. One possible tactic is to address consumers personally by including personal cues which are easily recognizable, such as their name (Dijkstra, 2008). Another strategy to personalize a message is through raising expectations by including overt claims of customization (e.g., if *you* have any other questions or remarks, don't hesitate to contact *me*) (Hawkins, Kreuter, Resnicow, Fishbein, & Dijkstra, 2008). According to Pollach (2005), the use of first-person pronouns, such as 'I', 'we' or 'us' in computer-mediated communication might also help in building a relationship with consumers because these pronouns suggest that the author is communicating personal beliefs instead of facts.

In addition, the use of personal pronouns also suggests that companies are actually listening to consumers and willing to engage with them in a human conversation (Kwon & Sung, 2011). Another cue might be to provide information about the identity of the employee who is responding to

consumers in the organization's name, especially in a social networking context (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). By showing who is the real human being behind the organizations' Facebook page, the organization shows commitment to engage in interpersonal communication with consumers. As a consequence the organizational response might no longer be perceived as initiated by a non-personal public relations department, but rather by an actual human-being who is working for the organization.

A personalized response is the opposite of a corporate response which has a standardized tone of voice that does not include personal information of the receiver such as the name. Furthermore, it does not make use of personal pronouns to address the customer (Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013) and no information about who is responding in name of the company is mentioned. Furthermore, in a corporate response, the organization does not exhibit humanness and warmth (Malone & Fiske, 2013), but rather speaks with one similar voice to each consumer, which is considered persuasive and profit-driven (Locke, Weinberger, & Searls, 2004). This type of response style is respectful, but rather formal and task-oriented whilst limited in affective content (Sparks, Fung So, & Bradley, 2016).

In order to exhibit humanness in their communication, organizations can personalize their response in several of the above-mentioned ways (e.g., Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Expressing humanness is important when engaging in dialogue with consumers. Especially in the social media environment, organizations have to adopt a communication style that emphasizes the building of collaborative relationships with consumers through conversational communication instead of making them a target of marketing-inspired messages with a corporate tone of voice (Locke et al., 2004). Via social media, companies can give the impression that there are 'real people' behind the scenes who want to achieve consumer satisfaction and listen to the needs of consumers (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Based on the abovementioned insights, we can expect that using a personalized (versus corporate) response style in organizational crisis communication leads to a higher perceived CHV.

Next, we could wonder what is the impact of a higher perceived CHV. Crisis communication aims to manage an event that is threatening the goals and operations of an organization and also the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007; Jahng & Hong, 2017). As such, crisis communication contains persuasive intents (which can be explicit or implicit) of an organization in order to effectively manage the crisis. Stakeholders may notice such intents when processing the crisis information (Lee, 2016). According to PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) consumers are likely to develop knowledge about persuasion and use this to cope with persuasive messages. A central idea of this model is that consumers are able to use their persuasion knowledge in order to identify if a party is trying to influence him or her and tries to persuade them in order to achieve goals (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This is a cognitive process. However, according to Rozendaal, Lapierre, Van Reijmersdal, and Buijzen

(2011) it is important to not only consider the cognitive aspect of persuasion knowledge, but also the attitudinal aspect. Attitudinal persuasion knowledge entails critical attitudes such as skepticism and disliking of a specific persuasive message (Boerman, Van Rijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012).

When an organization responds in a human and informal way this expresses humanness and warmth (Malone & Fiske, 2013) and therefore consumers will be less likely to have the impression that the organization in crisis tries to persuade them. Consequently, skepticism towards the response is likely to be attenuated by perceived CHV which is initiated by a personalized response. This is unlike a corporate response which is considered as persuasive and profit-driven (Locke et al., 2004) and therefore likely to raise consumer skepticism. Hence, we could expect that a higher level of perceived CHV, lowers consumer skepticism.

Next, the level of consumer skepticism is likely to influence organizational reputation. Previous research has shown that the evaluation of the intention of online reviewers is a critical aspect to form opinions about online reviews and products (Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee, 2012). Applied to this study context, we could argue that the evaluation of the intention to respond to consumer comments has an important influence on the opinions towards the organization that is responding. Skepticism may influence the judgements and behavior of people (Darke & Ritchie, 2007). It helps people to avoid situations that could harm them as well as to avoid potential harmful consequences (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998). The level of skepticism is likely to affect consumer perceptions. Hwang and Jeong (2016) argued that the more skeptical consumers are towards a product review post, the more negatively they will respond to sponsored posts. People who are highly skeptical towards a specific advertisement also respond more negatively to ads by paying less attention to them (Obermiller, Spangenberg, & MacLachlan, 2005). Hence, the opposite is true for lower levels of skepticism. The lower the level of consumer skepticism, the more positive the subsequent judgements and behavior will be. Likewise, we could expect that lower consumer skepticism towards a personalized organizational response, triggered by higher perceived CHV results in a positive impact on organizational reputation. Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, we hypothesize that:

H₁: *A personalized response to a consumer comment results in a better organizational reputation through higher perceived CHV and lower consumer skepticism sequentially.*

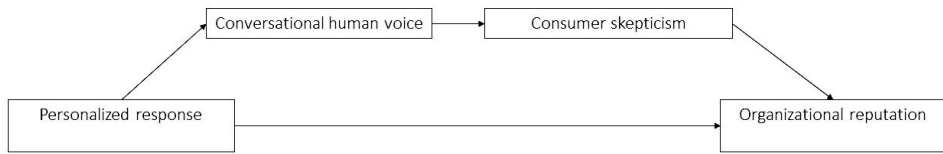


Figure 1: Conceptual sequential mediation model.

2.4 Conditional effectiveness of response personalization: the moderating role of consumer comment valence

So far, we explained how a personalized tone of voice of the organizational response influences organizational reputation by revealing the underlying process through perceived CHV and consumer skepticism sequentially. However, we argue that a personalized response may not always have a beneficial impact on organizational reputation. In particular, we suggest that it is important to consider the valence of consumers' online comments to which the organization is responding. Hence, we expect consumer comment valence to moderate the effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation. More specifically, we expect that the effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation will be positively determined by CHV for negative consumer comments and negatively by consumer skepticism for positive consumer comments.

2.4.1 Responding to negative consumer comments: mediating role of CHV

So far, responding to comments of consumers has predominantly been considered for negative consumer feedback (e.g., complaints) and especially outside a crisis context (Lee & Song, 2010; Shankar & Malthouse, 2007; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Negative feedback might result in negative brand evaluations, reputational damage, and the diffusion of negative information (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Verhagen, Nauta, & Feldberg, 2013). Therefore, companies intervene in negative feedback in order to mitigate its impact (Coomb's, 2004; Hong & Lee, 2005). Inspired by the definition of other scholars (i.e., Harrison-Walker, 2001; Hong & Lee, 2005) van Noort and Willemsen (2012, p. 133) define webcare as "the act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) members of consumers by actively searching the web to address their feedback (questions, concerns, complaints)". Webcare is considered an effective tool to mitigate the detrimental effects of negative consumer feedback. Via webcare interventions in complaints of consumers, brand evaluations become better (e.g., van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Furthermore, not only negative effects can be mitigated by webcare, but also positive effects might be generated such as enhancement of consumer perceptions, loyalty, purchase

intentions, and positive word of mouth (Hong & Lee, 2005; Lee & Song, 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010).

The study of van Noort and Willemsen (2012) is one of the few studies that has investigated the mediating role of CHV in webcare intervening in negative consumer feedback on consumer versus brand-generated platforms. A consumer-generated platform is a platform that is created by consumers themselves or by an independent brand community (e.g., Mercedes car owners club), outside the control of the organization/company, such as a consumer blog or a(n) (anti) brand community. A brand-generated platform, on the contrary, is owned and controlled by the organization or company itself, for example, the brand's official Facebook page or Twitter channel (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). The authors found that perceived CHV depends on the platform on which webcare is established and if the webcare is proactive or reactive. A proactive webcare response means that the company is taking a proactive approach and is responding unsolicited to comments of consumers. A reactive response signifies that a company is responding to a consumer comment, but only when it is explicitly asked to do so by the consumer (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Reactive webcare resulted in a higher perceived CHV on consumer and brand-generated platforms. However, a proactive webcare strategy only resulted in a higher perceived CHV on a brand-generated platform. Hence, a proactive webcare strategy on a brand-generated platform as a response to negative consumer feedback is likely to enhance CHV. Nevertheless, the authors admit that it is still unclear which responses styles are likely to engender CHV (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

Kerkhof et al. (2011) were the first to investigate the impact of a personalized tone of voice on perceived CHV in a crisis context on a brand-generated platform. The authors found that a personal (versus a corporate) tone of voice in the organizational crisis message post is perceived as more human and thus results in a greater perceived CHV (Kerkhof et al., 2011). However, the interaction between the organizational post and comments of consumers was neglected and the subsequent impact of perceived CHV on organizational reputation was not examined.

Previous research about the impact of CHV on organizational perceptions has shown that CHV initiates several positive responses regarding the organization. This can be explained because CHV signifies transparency and openness in the dialogue between the organization and the public (Scoble & Israel, 2006). The examination of CHV in the context of organizational blogs has shown that a CHV engenders a satisfying relationship with the public, fosters trust, reduces crisis perceptions, and enhances commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Even when confronted with a crisis, the use of CHV might increase positive attitudes

towards an organization while reducing negative emotions about the organization in crisis (Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010).

The abovementioned positive outcomes of CHV provide several motives for organizations to use social media in a human way. Activities to achieve these outcomes are often referred to as 'online reputation management' (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015). This can be defined as "*the process of positioning, monitoring, measuring, talking, and listening as the organization engages in a transparent and ethical dialogue with its various online stakeholders*" (Jones, Temperley, & Lima, 2009, p. 934). So far, few studies have explored the link between CHV and organizational reputation in a social media context. Dijkmans, Kerkhof, Buyuckan, and Beukeboom (2015) found that being exposed to the social media activities of a company is beneficial for the organizational reputation and this effect can be explained through an increased perception of CHV. Hence, the current study provides some initial evidence for the causal link between CHV and organizational reputation. Accordingly, we can expect that:

H_{2a}: *A personalized response to a negative consumer comment is beneficial for organizational reputation because of higher perceived CHV.*

2.4.2 Responding to positive consumer comments: mediating role of consumer skepticism

Few studies have investigated the impact of organizational responses to positive instead of negative consumer comments. One of the rare studies that investigated organizational responses to positive consumer comments was conducted outside a crisis context. The study of Schamari and Schaefers (2015) found that personalized responses directed at positive consumer comments are able to increase consumer engagement intentions (i.e., posting about the brand on social media) through enhanced CHV, but only on consumer-generated platforms. On brand-generated platforms, personalized webcare addressing positive consumer comments is not able to increase engagement intentions of consumers through higher perceived CHV. However, the reason why this effect did not occur on brand-generated platforms is unclear.

Consumers can have several motives for giving positive feedback to organizations such as helping other consumers or the organization itself. Others just want to vent their positive feelings or show that they support the brand (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). The motive behind venting positive feedback might have an important influence on the extent to which consumers appreciate a certain response of an organization (Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2013). When consumers are not specifically addressing the organization itself, a personalized response to positive comments might be experienced as a violation of their privacy. More specifically, when answering in a personalized way to a positive consumer comment might think that addressing them by their name is inappropriate or that

the organization comes too close to private area of the consumer (Demmers et al., 2014). On the contrary, when consumers give negative feedback, they use social media to find redress for their complaints (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). This is unlike when they are venting positive comments. In this context, they do not use social media as an instrument of power. When giving negative comments, however, consumers might have in mind the impact that the feedback can have for organizations (i.e., when consumers give negative feedback they might try to harm the organization involved in the crisis by giving comments that can be possibly read by millions of other people) (Kim & Johnson, 2016; Stewart & Pavlou, 2002). Hence, especially when giving negative comments, “consumers are likely to voice their complaints in order to draw the attention of companies and enforce redress” (Willemsen et al., 2013, p. 56).

Taken together, based on the abovementioned studies, we could argue that when consumers are giving positive feedback, a personalized response might not be advisable. More specifically, based on the insights of the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we explain the underlying process of responding in a personalized way to a positive consumer comment. According to PKM, based on people’s persuasion knowledge, they interpret, evaluate and respond to persuasive attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Hence, when people are confronted with a personalized response to a positive consumer comment, they will try to make sense of the information (i.e., Why is the organization responding unsolicitedly in a personalized way to a positive consumer comment?) and they will assess the value of the information based on their persuasion knowledge.

Crisis communication strategies can implicitly or explicitly contain a persuasive intent of the organization in crisis (Lee, 2016). The effectiveness of the strategy therefore might depend on whether consumers detect this intent and how the intent is perceived. PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) suggest that when people detect a persuasive intent this activates persuasion knowledge and people might become suspicious about the motive of the message (Lee, 2016). Consequently, if the persuasive intent is obvious in the crisis communication response, the organization’s honesty might be threatened and the credibility of the information can be compromised. Lee (2016) applied the insights of PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) on crisis timing strategies. He investigated the impact of stealing thunder (i.e., releasing potential damaging information by an organization before it is revealed by a third party, Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993) and the moderating role of persuasive intent. The study has shown that stealing thunder is only effective when participants were not explicitly aware of the persuasive intent of the crisis response. When consumers are giving positive feedback, addressing the consumer by his or her name and using personal pronouns could be seen as an explicit cue of a persuasive intent. This persuasive intent is according to PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), likely to result in defensive reactions. Therefore, in this context, it is likely that people will generate attitudinal

persuasion knowledge or consumer skepticism towards a personalized response on a positive consumer comment.

Hence, we could expect that when an organization in crisis answers positive consumer feedback in a personalized way, this might activate consumer skepticism. We expect skepticism to arise because the organization in crisis is investing time and effort in consumers who are already satisfied and positive and do not explicitly ask for a response (i.e., proactive organizational response). Hence, unlike for negative consumer comments for which it is reasonable for organizations in crisis to answer them because they could escalate the crisis, consumers could have the impression that it is exaggerated and not done to answer positive feedback in a personalized way. Furthermore, during a crisis resources and time are limited (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Therefore, people could become critical about why an organization is investing efforts and time in answering consumer feedback that does not even explicitly asks for a response. Hence, consumer skepticism is likely to occur because people have genuine reasons (i.e., consumer is positive and does not expect a personalized answer) to doubt the motives of the organization (Rim & Song, 2016) to respond in a personalized way.

Rim and Song (2016) also demonstrated that it is indeed important to distinguish responses to positive versus negative consumer comments. The authors conducted a study to examine the influence of consumers' negative versus positive comments regarding a CSR campaign in social media and how to respond to these comments. They investigated the interaction between consumer comment valence (i.e., positive vs. negative) and organizational response sidedness (i.e., one vs. two-sided). Respondents demonstrated differential effects for positive versus negative consumer comments. When consumer comments were negative, a two-sided CSR response is more effective than a one-sided response, because it enhances altruistic motives for CSR, reduces perceived negativity and elicits favorable attitudes. However, the effect of message sidedness was not found when consumers' comments were positive. Hence, just like a two-sided response to a positive consumer comment had no beneficial effects in the study of Rim and Song (2016), in the current study we expect that a personalized response to a positive consumer comment is not beneficial for organizational reputation because it induces consumer skepticism. Research has demonstrated that suspicion of organizations' ulterior motives or a manipulative intent results in resistance to persuasion for example by generating skepticism (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). When respondents see that the organization in crisis is answering positive feedback in a personalized way, personalization can function as an explicit cue of a persuasive intent. Hence, when people think an organization is trying to persuade them, this will result in consumer skepticism. Next, because skepticism negatively influences organizational perceptions (e.g., Boerman & Kruijemeier, 2016), we expect the higher level of consumer skepticism to negatively affect the organizational reputation. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H_{2b}: A personalized response to a positive consumer comment is detrimental for organizational reputation because of higher consumer skepticism towards the response.

Figure 2 summarizes the conceptual model as put forward in hypotheses 2_a and 2_b.

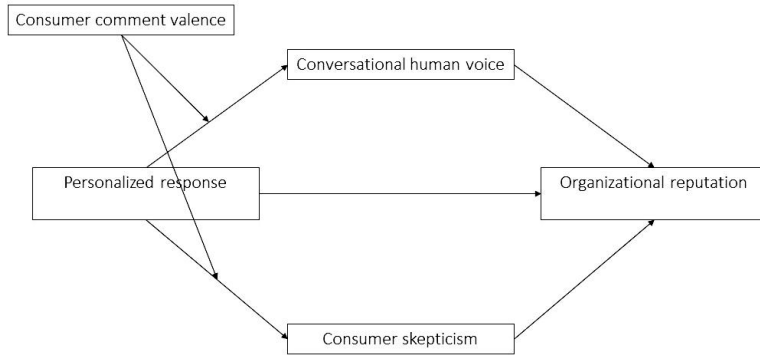


Figure 2: Conceptual moderated mediation model with multiple mediators.

3 Method

3.1 Design

To investigate the hypotheses a 2 (tone of voice organizational response: personalized vs. corporate) by 2 (valence of consumer comment: positive vs. negative) between-subjects experimental design was conducted. Respondents were introduced to a (fictitious) product-harm crisis scenario by reading a newspaper article (cf. appendix) about a technical failure of the ABS brakes of a Mercedes CLA-Class car, built in the year 2013. An existing car brand (i.e., Mercedes) was chosen in order to increase the credibility of the crisis scenario.

In the story, Mercedes organized a recall for the CLA-Class cars. The article mentioned that the cause was possibly a fault in the production process of Mercedes. After reading the newspaper article, respondents were told that the webcare team of Mercedes posted an update on the brand's Facebook page (i.e., brand-generated platform) about the crisis in which the organization apologized for the inconvenience. In the post, the webcare team stated that an e-mail would be sent to all Mercedes CLA-Class owners with some practical details about the reparation of the car. Next, respondents were told that consumers were reacting to the Facebook post, and that the webcare team of Mercedes in turn replied to these comments. Each respondent was shown one specific comment of a consumer, which was either a positive or a negative reaction on the post of Mercedes, depending on the condition. The

positive or negative comment was followed by a proactive organizational response of the webcare team of Mercedes, which had either a personalized or a corporate tone of voice. The response was proactive because the webcare team of Mercedes answered without a specific request from the consumer who engaged in negative or positive feedback.

3.2 Stimuli

To manipulate consumer comment valence, following the study of Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, and Dens (2012) about the impact of positive and negative online reviews, we reframed the comment of the consumer by only changing some words into their positive or negative equivalent in order to generate identical reactions with either positive (i.e., *“Mercedes is the best car I ever bought!!! I feel very safe in this car 😊”*) or negative content (i.e., *“Mercedes is the worst car I ever bought!!! I feel very unsafe in this car 😞”*) about the brand Mercedes (cf. appendix). Because the length of a reaction might have an influence on the enthusiasm of the reader and consequently affect judgements of the reader (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), we kept the length of each reaction constant as much as possible.

To manipulate a personalized tone of voice, the webcare team talked to the consumer in an informal way, by addressing the consumer by his or her name and making use of personal pronouns (i.e., if *you* have any further questions or remarks, *you* can always contact *me* via *my personal* phone number or e-mail address) (Pollach, 2005). A specific phone number and e-mail address of the webcare representative who replied was provided and finally the name of the replier was mentioned as well (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). In the corporate tone of voice condition, the consumers were addressed in a more formal way, by not using their names and utilizing impersonal pronouns (i.e., when having any further question or remarks, contact our customer service via ...). In addition, a general phone number and e-mail address of the customer service was offered. Finally, the name of the replier was not mentioned (cf. appendix).

3.3 Participants and procedure

Respondents were recruited via a professional West-European recruitment agency by e-mail and randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. A sample of 264 respondents representative of the Belgian population (i.e., in terms of age, gender and education) completed the online questionnaire. Respondents had an average age of 47 years ($SD = 15.52$, age range = 18-79) and 51% were men.

The e-mail included a link that redirected the participants to the experiment. We instructed the respondents to carefully read the newspaper article, followed by a comment of a consumer and the proactive response of the webcare team of Mercedes on it. We also asked them to finish the

questionnaire all at once, without focusing on other things at the same time. After exposure to the stimuli, respondents answered a series of questions to measure their perceptions about the response of the webcare team and the brand (i.e., Mercedes). We also posed some questions to check whether the two manipulations (i.e., organizational response and consumer comment valence) were correctly assessed by the respondents. Finally, all participants got a debriefing and were thanked for their participation.

3.4 Measures

In appendix, full measurements are provided for each variable. To check the level of *personalization* ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.71$, $\alpha = 0.90$) of the organizational response offered by the Mercedes webcare team, a scale consisting of three items was used ("*The reaction of the webcare team is personally addressed to the consumer*"; "*The reaction of the webcare team is specially created for the consumer*"; "*The webcare team talks to the consumer in a personal way*") (Bol, van Weert, de Haes, Loos, & Smets, 2013; Maslowska, Smith, & van den Putte, 2011).

Furthermore, to check the manipulation of *consumer comment valence* ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 2.24$), participants had to answer one statement, "*Overall, I think the consumer comment is*" either very negative (1) to very positive (7) on a 7-point scale.

CHV ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.15$, $\alpha = 0.71$) was measured based on the scale of Kelleher and Miller (2006) consisting of seven items, such as "*The webcare team is open to dialogue*"; "*The webcare team threatens the customer and others as humans*"; "*The webcare team uses conversation-style communication*."

Consumer skepticism towards the response ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.90$, $\alpha = 0.73$) was measured based on the scale of Zhang et al. (2016)² which was designed to measure skepticism towards electronic word-of-mouth. The scale consisted of six items, such as "*In the response, the webcare team is telling the truth*"; "*I believe what the webcare team says in their response*"; "*The webcare team is the best source of information with regard to the crisis situation*". Some items were reverse coded in order that a higher score on the scale signifies a higher level of consumer skepticism.

Organizational reputation ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.08$, $\alpha = 0.95$) was measured based on a shortened version of the scale of Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2000) consisting of eight items such as "*I trust Mercedes*"; "*Mercedes develops innovative products and services*"; "*I admire and respect Mercedes*".

² Zhang et al. (2016) identified three sub constructs to measure consumer skepticism, namely: truthfulness, motivation, and identity. According to the study, the construct of identity formed the weakest predictor of consumer skepticism. For this reason, we decided to omit this sub construct in the scale used in the current study.

Because the study examined an existing brand (i.e., Mercedes), we measured *identification with the brand Mercedes* ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.29$, $\alpha = 0.96$) as a control variable by means of a 7 item scale from Marin, Ruiz, and Rubio (2009) such as “Mercedes reflects who I am as a person”; “I can identify with Mercedes”; “I feel a personal connection with Mercedes”.

All items (except consumer comment valence) were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree (1) until totally agree (7). Finally, some demographical variables were measured such as gender, age, and education.

3.5 Pretests

In order to prepare for the main study and to test the stimuli, we conducted two different pretests. In the first pretest ($n = 22$), we checked the manipulation of consumer comment valence in a within-subjects experimental design via a convenience sample. A paired samples t-test showed that the positive consumer comment was perceived as significantly more positive ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 0.67$) than the negative consumer comment ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.14$, $t(21) = -22.00$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.98$). Furthermore, the strength of the consumer comment valence did not significantly differ between the positive and negative condition, $t(21) = 0.90$, $p = 0.38$, $r = 0.19$.

Next, we conducted a second pretest based on a convenience sample ($n = 32$) to check the manipulation of the personalized versus corporate tone of voice of the organizational response of the Mercedes webcare team in a within-subjects experimental design. A paired-samples t-test showed that the personalized response ($M = 4.09$; $SD = 0.68$) was considered significantly more personalized than the corporate response ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.64$, $t(31) = 7.18$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.79$). Consequently, the manipulation was also correctly established.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive analyses

To start, Pearson correlations between variables of interest (CHV, consumer skepticism and organizational reputation) as well as mean and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CHV	Organizational reputation	Consumer skepticism
CHV	3.49	1.15	-	0.23**	-0.21**
Organizational reputation	4.57	1.08	0.23**	-	0.23
Consumer skepticism	4.11	0.90	-0.21**	-0.50**	-

Table 1: Univariate and bivariate statistics for variables of interest.

Note. *N* = 264. *M* = mean. *SD* = standard deviations.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Consumer skepticism was negatively correlated with CHV and organizational reputation. Hence, the higher consumer skepticism, the lower perceived CHV, and the lower organizational reputation was evaluated. Furthermore, CHV was positively related with organizational reputation. Thus, the higher the perceived CHV, the more positive organizational reputation was perceived.

4.2 Test of sequential mediation model

In order to test the first hypothesis, if there is a beneficial effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation through perceived CHV and consumer skepticism sequentially, the SPSS MACRO of Hayes (2009) was adopted to perform a sequential mediation analysis (i.e., model 6) using the recommended 5000 bootstrap samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). In the model, organizational response was added as independent variable, CHV and consumer skepticism as sequential mediators, organizational reputation as dependent variable and identification with the brand Mercedes as a covariate.

Results demonstrated that the impact of a personalized response on organizational reputation through perceived CHV and consumer skepticism sequentially was indeed significant, $B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.0185, 0.1317]. A personalized response resulted in greater perceived CHV, $B = 0.83$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = 6.42$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.5784, 1.0907], which in turn resulted in lower consumer skepticism, $B = -0.17$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = -3.36$, $p < 0.001$, 96% CI [-0.2664, -0.0695] that subsequently beneficially influenced organizational reputation, $B = -0.46$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -7.36$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-0.5828, -0.3367]. Hence, we can accept the first hypothesis.

4.3 Test of the moderated mediation model

In order to test the second hypotheses, whether consumer comment valence moderates the impact of a personalized response on perceived CHV and consumer skepticism, which in turn influences

organizational reputation, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted with organizational response as an independent variable, consumer comment valence as moderator, perceived CHV and consumer skepticism as parallel mediators, organizational reputation as dependent variable and identification with the brand Mercedes as covariate. We established the SPSS MACRO of Hayes (2015) (i.e., model 7) using the recommended 5000 bootstrap samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

4.3.1 Consumer comment valence as moderator and CHV as mediator

When we looked at the results of the moderated mediation analysis, the moderated mediation index demonstrated that consumer comment valence does not moderate the impact of personalized response on organizational reputation through CHV, $B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.0265, 0.1653]. Accordingly, when we look at the conditional indirect effects at different values of the moderator (i.e., positive and negative consumer comment valence), results showed that both when responding to negative, (Path c'), $B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.0292, 0.2439], and positive, (Path c'), $B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.0349, 0.2997] consumer comments, a personalized response resulted in a higher perceived CHV and subsequent better organizational reputation. Hence, in hypothesis 2_a, we expected that a personalized response to negative consumer comments would result in higher perceived CHV which is in turn beneficial for organizational reputation. This was indeed the case according to the results. However, results also demonstrate that the beneficial impact of a personalized response through perceived CHV on organizational reputation is also true for positive consumer comments. Hence, we could partially accept H_{2a} because we only expected a positive impact for a personalized response to negative consumer comments. Furthermore, the direct effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation was not significant, (Path c), $B = -0.11$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = -0.55$, $p > 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.4891, 0.2769].

4.3.2 Consumer comment valence as moderator and consumer skepticism as mediator

Next, another moderated mediation analysis was conducted with the SPSS macro of Hayes (2015) (model 7, 5000 bootstrap samples) with organizational response as independent variable, consumer comment valence as moderator, consumer skepticism as mediator, organizational reputation as dependent variable and identification with the brand Mercedes as covariate. The moderated mediation index demonstrated that there is a significant difference in the impact of a personalized response on consumer skepticism when responding to negative versus positive consumer comments, $B = -0.35$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [-0.5887, -0.1613]. When we looked in detail at the interaction effect between consumer comment valence and organizational response on consumer skepticism with identification with the brand Mercedes as a covariate, a univariate analysis of variance also

demonstrated a significant interaction, $F(1, 259) = 12.42, p = 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Figure 3 illustrates the interaction effect.

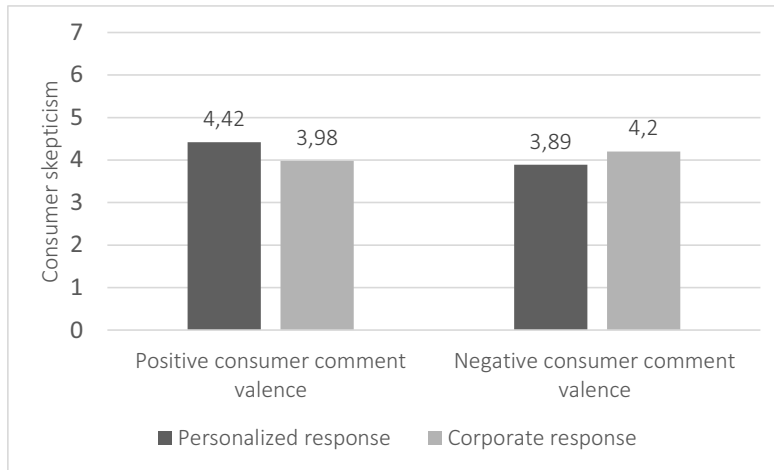


Figure 3: Interaction between consumer comment valence and organizational response on consumer skepticism.

Results showed that when responding to a positive consumer comment, a personalized response resulted in significant higher consumer skepticism ($M = 4.42, SD = 0.92$) than a corporate response ($M = 3.98, SD = 0.74$), $t(131) = -2.81, p < 0.01, r = 0.24$. Furthermore, there was also a significant difference for a personalized response to a negative consumer comment, in this case: a personalized response resulted in significant lower consumer skepticism ($M = 3.89, SD = 0.74$) than a corporate response ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.99$), $t(129) = -2.02, p = 0.05, r = 0.18$.

When we looked at the conditional indirect effects of the moderated mediation analysis, we saw that when the organization is responding to a positive consumer comment, there is a negative indirect effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation through consumer skepticism, (Path c'), $B = -0.23, SE = 0.08, 95\% CI [-0.3934, -0.0984]$. More specifically, results demonstrated that a personalized response resulted in higher consumer skepticism towards the response, (Path a), $B = 0.47, SE = 0.15, t = 3.16, p < 0.01, 95\% CI [0.1767, 0.7697]$. Next, a higher level of consumer skepticism resulted in a lower organizational reputation, (Path b), $B = -0.44, SE = 0.09, t = -5.05, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [-0.6178, -0.2698]$. The direct effect of organizational response on organizational reputation was not significant, (Path c), $B = 0.18, SE = 0.16, t = 1.16, p > 0.05, 95\% CI [-0.1269, 0.4901]$. When we looked at the conditional indirect effect for responding to a negative consumer comment, results demonstrated that there was no indirect effect of a personalized response on organizational

reputation through consumer skepticism, (Path c'), $B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [-0.0163, 0.2726]. Hence, hypothesis 2_b is confirmed.

4.3.3 Supplemental analyses

Furthermore, to test if the moderator of consumer comment valence did not initiate a sequential mediation instead of multiple (i.e., parallel) mediation path as hypothesized, we additionally tested a moderated sequential mediation model in which we tested if the sequential mediation of a personalized response on organizational reputation through CHV and subsequently through consumer skepticism is moderated by consumer comment valence. The independent variable (personalized response), the moderator (consumer comment valence), two sequential mediators (CHV and consumer skepticism) and the dependent variable (organizational reputation) were submitted to the SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2015) for a moderated serial mediation analysis. PROCESS uses an ordinary-least squares (OLS) path analysis to identify the direct and indirect effects. However, since there was no such model programmed in PROCESS 2.15, we conducted the test in line with Hayes (2015) recommendations. In a first step, we computed the mean center of the independent variable and the moderating variable. We calculated their product and then performed model 6 (5000 bootstrap samples) which includes personalized response as independent variable, CHV as first mediator, consumer skepticism as second sequential mediator and organizational reputation as dependent variable. Results indeed showed that there was a significant sequential mediation effect of a personalized response on organizational reputation through CHV and consumer skepticism serially, $B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.0457; 0.2080]. Hence, this result again confirmed the first hypothesis.

Next, we tested whether this sequential mediation effect is moderated by consumer comment valence. PROCESS generated a data file of the 5000 bootstrap estimates of the 15 regression coefficients. The program produced a 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the indices of moderated mediation for the three indirect effects through CHV only, through consumer skepticism only and through CHV and consumer skepticism serially. Results showed that consumer comment valence did not moderate the effect of personalized response on organizational reputation through CHV, 95% CI [-0.0320; 0.1139]. This confirms the abovementioned findings of H_{2a} . Furthermore, there was also no moderation by consumer comment valence of the sequential mediation through CHV and consumer skepticism, 95% CI [-0.0395; 0.1175]. Finally, in line with the previously reported findings for H_{2b} , results demonstrated that consumer comment valence did moderate the impact of personalized organizational response on organizational reputation through consumer skepticism, 95% CI [-0.7541; -0.2121]. Consequently, we could conclude that the additional analyses confirmed the abovementioned findings.

Finally, based on the results, we could conclude that a personalized response to a positive consumer comment might both beneficially (i.e., through increased perceived CHV) and detrimentally (i.e., through increased consumer skepticism) influence organizational reputation. In order to explore which mediator prevails and hence determines the impact on organizational reputation, an additional analysis was conducted. We selected only positive consumer comments and established a multiple mediation analysis (Model 4, Hayes, 2009) with organizational response as independent variable, perceived CHV, and consumer skepticism as multiple, parallel mediators, organizational reputation as dependent variable and identification with the brand Mercedes as co-variate. Results of the analysis showed that when responding to a positive consumer comment, the indirect negative effect of organizational response on organizational reputation through consumer skepticism remained significant, $B = -0.20$, 95% CI [-0.3795, -0.0844]. However, the indirect positive effect of organizational response on organizational reputation through perceived CHV was not significant anymore, $B = 0.08$, 95% CI [-0.0665, 0.2537]. Furthermore, we conducted a planned contrast in order to compare the indirect effects. Results demonstrated that the two indirect effects were significantly different from each other, $B = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.0837, 0.4865]. Therefore, we can conclude that the mediating role of consumer skepticism prevails when responding to positive consumer comments.

5 General discussion

The aim of this study was to examine whether a personalized organizational response to online consumer comments beneficially affects organizational reputation during a crisis and whether or not the desirability of the tone of voice of the organizational response depends on the valence of consumer comments. In the first hypothesis, we investigated the effect of a personalized versus corporate organizational response on organizational reputation through CHV and consumer skepticism sequentially. According to van Noort and Willemsen (2012), CHV should get focal attention when organizations are attempting to develop an effective online response strategy. The authors admit that research is necessary to investigate which strategies are likely to engender perceived CHV. They suggested personalization as a possible strategy to reach CHV.

Results demonstrate that organizations are able to engender CHV by personalizing their response. This is in turn also beneficial for organizational reputation. Hereby, we confirm the findings of Dijkmans, Kerkhof and Beukeboom (2015), Dijkmans, Kerkhof, Buyukcan-Tetik et al. (2015) who also found a positive link between a perceived CHV and organizational reputation. In addition, we demonstrated that perceived CHV engenders a positive reputational effect on Facebook besides the positive influence on, for example, crisis perceptions, relational trust, enhanced commitment, satisfaction, and

control mutuality as already demonstrated in the context of blogs (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Hence, in a crisis context, higher perceived CHV and lower consumer skepticism are able to positively affect organizational reputation, which is a very important goal of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). Consequently, as suggested by previous research (e.g., Ki & Nekmat, 2014), the current study provides additional evidence that it is beneficial for organizations to engage in dialogue with consumers. More specifically, personalizing a response is advisable because it enhances CHV and decreases consumer skepticism which is in turn beneficial for organizational reputation.

Notwithstanding, personalization of the response is not advisable in all circumstances. The desirability depends on the valence of consumers' comments. In hypothesis 2_a, we hypothesized that a personalized organizational response is advisable to answer negative consumer feedback on an organizational crisis message post. We expected that a personalized response to negative consumer feedback would enhance perceived CHV and in turn have a beneficial influence on organizational reputation. Results show that it is indeed the case. The finding of a personalized response that increases perceived CHV is in line with previous studies. van Noort and Willemsen (2012) found that proactive webcare directed at negative consumer feedback enhances perceived CHV on a brand-generated platform. Kerkhof et al. (2011) found that a personalized organizational response engenders CHV. Results of the current study demonstrated that personalization is not only a feasible strategy starting from a sender-perspective, as shown by the study of Kerkhof et al. (2011). The current study illustrated that personalization is also a feasible strategy to engender CHV when interacting with consumers on social media platforms in the context of an organizational crisis.

In hypothesis 2_b, we suggested that a personalized organizational response is not advisable to answer positive consumer feedback. Based on the insights of PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we expected that a personalized response to positive consumer feedback would result in increased consumer skepticism towards the response, which is in turn detrimental for organizational reputation. Results indeed confirmed that when an organization is responding in a personalized way to a positive consumer comment, it triggered consumer skepticism, which in turn detrimentally influenced organizational reputation. Hence, when an organization is answering positive consumer comments in a personalized way, personalization might trigger the critical reflections of consumers related to the persuasive intent of the organization in crisis (Lee, 2016). As a defense mechanism, people are likely to evolve attitudinal persuasion knowledge: their level of skepticism towards the response increased.

Furthermore, findings also provide additional evidence that it is important to distinguish between responses to positive and negative consumer comments as suggested by Rim and Song (2016). The

current study clearly showed a similar pattern. Just like a two-sided response to positive consumer comments was not able to enhance altruistic motives for CSR, reduce perceived negativity and elicit favorable attitudes, a personalized response is neither advisable to answer positive consumer comments, because it enhances consumer skepticism which is in turn detrimental for organizational reputation.

In addition, the findings offer also a possible explanation for prior research according to which a personalized response to positive consumer feedback does not enhance consumer engagement intentions (Schamari & Schaefer, 2015). Accordingly, because a personalized response to positive consumer comments initiates consumer skepticism, it is possible that as a result this would therefore not enhance consumer engagement intentions. Furthermore, the study also provides additional evidence for the possible negative effects of a personalized response when answering positive consumer feedback as suggested by Demmers et al. (2014), who demonstrated that a personalized response to positive consumer feedback resulted in a perceived violation of the privacy. It also confirms the findings of previous research (e.g., Boerman & Kruikemeier, 2016; Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Valentini, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016) about the important role of consumer skepticism in determining consumer perceptions in the current digital environment.

Finally, we can also conclude, based on an additional analysis, that when responding to positive consumer comments, the negative influence of consumer skepticism on organizational reputation is more dominant than the positive influence of perceived CHV. Therefore, when organizations in crisis are confronted with positive consumer comments, they have to respond using a corporate tone of voice rather than a personalized one. However, when they are confronted with negative consumer comments, personalization of the response is advisable in order to protect organizational reputation.

6 Theoretical and practical implications

The current study enhances insights about how to deal with consumer feedback that arises on an organizational crisis post launched on the social network site Facebook. Whilst there is a considerable amount of research paying attention to a univocal approach which focuses on what organizations have to say during a crisis, there is a lack of research that investigates how organizations have to deal with the input of consumers and adapt a multi-vocal approach (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The current study clearly demonstrates that it is important both for practitioners as well as for scholars to adapt a multi-vocal approach (cf. Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho et al., 2013; Vos et al., 2014; Zhao, 2017). Or in other words: it is important to not only focus on what organizations in crisis have to say, but also: how do they have to deal with

consumers' positive or negative comments? In line with dialogic communication theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) the study demonstrates that engaging in dialogue with consumers can indeed be beneficial for organizations. More specifically, organizations are able to protect organizational reputation by engaging in dialogue. Furthermore, as suggested by Frandsen and Johansen (2010) in their rhetorical arena theory, according to the results of the current study, consumers are indeed also important senders of information during a crisis and organizations have to pay attention to their input in order to protect organizational reputation.

We also found evidence for the fact that it is important for research to explore how social media can be optimally used to protect organizational reputation. According to the results of the current study, this is indeed important to supplement existing crisis communication theories (e.g., SCCT, Coombs, 2007) that do not specifically provide guidelines about how to communicate via social media during crises. In addition, this study is, to our knowledge, the first one to address how organizations in crisis can best respond to the positive versus negative feedback of consumers on an organizational crisis message post. It provides evidence-based guidelines about how to respond to positive versus negative feedback (cf. Jin et al., 2011). Furthermore, in line with previous research (Vendemia, 2017), this study demonstrated that simply providing a response is not enough to generate beneficial outcomes. It is important to consider the valence of the response to which the organization is responding as well as the content of the organizational response itself. Depending on the valence of the consumer comments, a personalized response is advisable to use or not.

Findings show that is important for organizations to invest time and efforts in responding to comments of consumers in times of crises. Organizations have to pay attention to their social media activities during a crisis and it is important to determine what to say and to whom on these media. The study helps organizations to get some kind of control over the unpredictable social media environment (e.g., Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) by showing what kind of responses generate beneficial outcomes for the organization involved in a crisis. Several studies demonstrated that organizations are not capitalizing on the dialogic features that social media offer to them (e.g., Ki & Nekmat, 2014). The current study provides evidence that is important to address consumers' feedback on social media during a crisis.

The present study did not only investigate responses to negative consumer feedback as other studies do (e.g., Kerkhof et al., 2011), but also positive consumer feedback, which is also likely to arise during a crisis as shown by examples from practice (e.g., Dieseltgate, in which Volkswagen got involved). Hereby, as suggested by Schamari and Schaefer (2015), this study shows webcare does not have to be considered only as a tool to mitigate the potential harm of negative online comments (Lee & Song, 2010; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), but also as a tool to respond to positive comments.

Negative consumer comments are likely to damage the organizational reputation (Lee & Song, 2010), and companies are not eager to address negative feedback because they fear that a response would escalate the crisis (Middleberg, 1996). The study demonstrates that organizations can protect organizational reputation by engaging in a personalized dialogue with consumers who post comments on social media. A personalized response can have favorable effects because other individuals are able to watch the response of the company in crisis. Personalization is an effective strategy for online complaint management that provides the opportunity to not only win back the complainant, but also other consumers, which makes it a crucial factor of reputation management (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015).

Finally, we can state that personalization of the organizational response is not always an appropriate response style to answer consumer feedback. Accordingly, a personalized response to negative consumer feedback is beneficial for organizational reputation, namely through increased CHV and lower consumer skepticism sequentially. For positive consumer feedback, a personalized response increases consumer skepticism towards the response, which in turn negatively affects organizational reputation. At the same time, the beneficial influence of a personalized organizational response on organizational reputation through perceived CHV disappears. The study clearly shows that for crisis communication managers it is important to be aware that the impact of personalized responses might be more nuanced than actually thought. They have to actually take into account the possible negative effects initiated by consumer skepticism. To conclude, we can state that response strategies on social media of organizations have to be strategically chosen in order to be truly successful.

7 Limitations and suggestions for further research

Although the study revealed some interesting new findings about the use of Facebook as a dialogic communication tool by organizations in crisis, there are also some limitations that have to be recognized and that offer opportunities for further research.

First, in the current study consumer comment valence was manipulated by means of a consumer comment that was either positive or negative about the car brand and its safety. However, people can be positive or negative about lots of other aspects as well, for example, people could be positive or negative about how Mercedes handles the crisis. Hence, for future research it could be interesting to test other aspects about which consumers are positive or negative. In addition, randomly comparing the impact of several positive comments to several negative comments, would have increased the generalizability of our findings. Furthermore, in the current study, perceptions are measured among consumers who read the consumers comments on an organizational crisis message post and the subsequent organizational response to this comment. We measured how he or she gives meaning to

the stimuli that are observed. For future research, it could be interesting to investigate the perceptions of the consumer who posts the negative or positive comment, since these interactive consumers are likely to be highly involved with the crisis and/or the brand in crisis.

Next, during a crisis, communication managers have a limited amount of time and staff to engage in dialogue with consumers (Waters et al., 2009). Consequently, communication managers have to decide which comments they are going to respond to or not. In the current study, the company always responded to the comments of consumers in a corporate or personalized way. However, in reality, when a crisis strikes, it will probably not be possible to answer each comment. It would be interesting for future research to investigate under which conditions it is important for an organization in crisis to respond to comments of consumers and when it is less crucial.

A possible element that could determine when it is important to respond or not could be the credibility of the source that is posting comments. The level of credibility is likely to affect the degree to which other people believe such information (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2002). This is interesting to know for crisis communication managers because if many people agree with the person who is spreading negative information about the organization, it might result in an escalation of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Hence, because organizations have limited resources, it is not only important to consider how to respond, but also whom to respond to (Lee & Song, 2010). In the present study, it was just one of thousands of anonymous individuals who gave feedback on the organization in crisis. However, the impact might be a lot bigger when an influential stakeholder such as an employee of the company in crisis or someone with a lot of friends and followers posts feedback. According to Sanderson, Barnes, Williamson, and Kian (2016) it is important to not underestimate the capabilities of social media audiences to create a further exaggeration of crisis situations.

In addition, the results of the current study might also be relevant in other contexts besides crises, such as in the context of health related behavior. For example, Shin and Biocca (2017) found that health information that is presented in a textual and comparative context is more effective to reach health preservation than if the identical information is mentioned in a non-comparative image context. For future research, it could be interesting to elaborate on what kind of textual information is more effective, for example: is personalized textual health information that addresses the recipient by name more effective than mentioning the information without addressing the recipient by name?

Furthermore, the response time of handling consumers' responses might also play a critical role in determining the effects of personalization as a response strategy. For example, Istanbuluoglu (2017) has found that participants expect organizations to respond to complaints in 3-6 h on Facebook. Hence, for future research, it could be interesting to investigate the moderating role of response time. In

addition, Li and Liu (2017) tested the impact of a personalized message (i.e., addressing the consumer by name) and the moderating role of involvement with the subject of the message in an advertising context. Results demonstrated that personalization is more effective than a standardized message when the message recipient was highly involved. Hence, for future research it could also be interesting to take into account the level of involvement of consumers with the message.

Despite its limitations, the current study contributes to a better understanding of the interactive social media environment in which online communication takes place today. Results showed that it is important for further research to not only consider the messages sent out by the company, but also to carefully consider the input of consumers via social media. It would be interesting to explore the impact of comments of consumers on Facebook and other social network sites and how organizations in crisis can optimally deal with it.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Measurements of variables of interest

Variables	Item statement	Item measurement
Personalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The reaction of the webcare team is personally addressed to the consumer- The reaction of the webcare team is specially created for the consumer- The webcare team talks to the consumer in a personal way	7-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree
Consumer comment valence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Overall, I think the consumer comment is...	7-point semantic differential Very negative – very positive
CHV	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The webcare team is open to dialogue- The webcare team treats the customer and others as humans- The webcare team uses conversation-style communication- The webcare team tries to communicate in a human voice- The webcare team would admit a mistake- The webcare team provides prompt feedback	7-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree

	<p>addressing criticism in a direct but uncritical manner</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The webcare team attempts to make communication enjoyable 	
Consumer skepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In the response, the webcare team is telling the truth - I believe what the webcare team says in their response - The webcare team is the best source of information with regard to the crisis situation - In general, the webcare team does not reflect the true picture of the situation - The webcare team mostly cares about getting me to buy things - What the webcare team says is intended to mislead me 	<p>7-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>
Organizational reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I trust Mercedes - I have a good feeling about Mercedes - Mercedes develops innovative products and services - I admire and respect Mercedes 	<p>7-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mercedes stands behind its products and services - Mercedes offers products and services of high quality - Mercedes offers products and services that give good value for money - Mercedes has excellent leadership 	
Identification with the brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mercedes reflects who I am as a person - I can identify with Mercedes - I feel a personal connection with Mercedes - I can use Mercedes as a way to communicate to other people who I am as a person - I think Mercedes could help or is helping me with becoming the person I want to be - I consider Mercedes as 'myself' - Mercedes fits me well as a person 	<p>7-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>

9.2 Newspaper article

ds De Standaard Abonneer u vanaf 1 euro Aanbod voor abonnees Klantendienst Shop Aanmelden

NIEUWS KRANT AVOND ARCHIEF+

Meest recent **Binnenland** Buitenland Biz Cultuur Sport Life&Style Opinie Beroemd&Bizar 7°C 100km 0,27%

HOME > NIEUWS > BINNENLAND

Mercedes roept CLA-Klasse auto's terug wegens probleem met ABS-remsysteem

Vandaag om 14:36 | Bron: BELGA



Gisteren is bekend gemaakt dat in België Mercedes CLA-klasse auto's van het bouwjaar 2013 worden teruggeroepen voor een herstelling van het ABS-remsysteem. Deze terugroepactie vindt plaats naar aanleiding van een incident eerder deze week, waarbij het ABS-remsysteem blokkeerde op een nat wegdek. De bestuurder in kwestie kon niet meer remmen, waardoor een aanrijding met een voorligger onvermijdelijk was. De schade bleef echter beperkt aangezien de auto tegen een lage snelheid een rood licht naderde. Indien de auto echter aan een normale snelheid had gereden, zou dit incident heel waarschijnlijk een tragische afloop kunnen gekend hebben. In totaal zou het probleem zich kunnen voordoen bij ongeveer 95 000 auto's in België. Deze modellen worden nu teruggeroepen naar de garage. Mogelijk is het mankement te wijten aan een fout in het productieproces van Mercedes.

Figure 4: Manipulation crisis scenario.

9.3 Personalized response to a positive consumer comment



The screenshot shows a Facebook interface. At the top is a text input field with the placeholder "Schrijf een reactie..." and a camera icon. Below this is a post by Tom Evens, whose profile picture shows a man in a suit. The post text reads: "Mercedes is de beste auto die ik ooit al heb gekocht!!! Voel me zeer veilig in deze auto :-)". Below the post are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by the timestamp "8 maart om 14:03". A response from Mercedes-Benz, with their logo and a verified badge, follows. The response text says: "Bedankt voor deze reactie, Tom! Indien je verdere vragen of opmerkingen hebt, mag je me altijd contacteren via mijn persoonlijk gratis telefoonnummer 015 17 77 63 of via jonas@Mercedes.be ^Jonas". Below the response are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by the timestamp "8 maart om 15:07".

Figure 5: Manipulation personalized response to positive consumer comment.

9.4 Personalized response to a negative consumer comment



The screenshot shows a Facebook interface. At the top is a text input field with the placeholder "Schrijf een reactie..." and a camera icon. Below this is a post by Tom Evens, whose profile picture shows a man in a suit. The post text reads: "Mercedes is de slechtste auto die ik ooit al heb gekocht!!! Voel me zeer onveilig in deze auto :-(". Below the post are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by the timestamp "8 maart om 14:03". A response from Mercedes-Benz, with their logo and a verified badge, follows. The response text says: "Het spijt ons dit te lezen, Tom. Indien je nog verdere vragen of opmerkingen hebt, mag je me altijd contacteren via mijn persoonlijk gratis telefoonnummer 015 17 77 63 of via jonas@Mercedes.be ^Jonas". Below the response are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by the timestamp "8 maart om 15:07".

Figure 6: Manipulation personalized response to negative consumer comment.

9.5 Corporate response to a positive consumer comment



A screenshot of a Facebook post and response. At the top is a text input field with a placeholder "Schrijf een reactie..." and a camera icon. Below it is a post by Tom Evens with a profile picture of a man in a suit. The post text reads: "Mercedes is de beste auto die ik ooit al heb gekocht!!! Voel me zeer veilig in deze auto :-)". Below the post are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by "8 maart om 14:03". The response is from Mercedes-Benz, with their logo and a verified badge. The response text reads: "Bedankt voor deze reactie! Bij verdere vragen of opmerkingen, contacteer de klantendienst via het gratis telefoonnummer 0800 17 77 65 of via info@Mercedes.be". Below the response are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by "8 maart om 15:07".

Figure 7: Manipulation corporate response to positive consumer comment.

9.6 Corporate response to a negative consumer comment



A screenshot of a Facebook post and response. At the top is a text input field with a placeholder "Schrijf een reactie..." and a camera icon. Below it is a post by Tom Evens with a profile picture of a man in a suit. The post text reads: "Mercedes is de slechtste auto die ik ooit al heb gekocht!!! Voel me zeer onveilig in deze auto :-)". Below the post are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by "8 maart om 14:03". The response is from Mercedes-Benz, with their logo and a verified badge. The response text reads: "Het spijt ons dit te lezen. Bij verdere vragen of opmerkingen, contacteer de klantendienst via het gratis telefoonnummer 0800 17 77 65 of via info@Mercedes.be". Below the response are the options "Like · Antwoorden" and a thumbs-up icon, followed by "8 maart om 15:07".

Figure 8: Manipulation corporate response to negative consumer comment.

CHAPTER IV
PROBABLY, DEFINITELY, MAYBE: THE USE OF
AMBIGUITY MARKERS IN CRISIS
COMMUNICATION AND THE MODERATING
ROLE OF SOURCE OF INFORMATION
DISCLOSURE

CHAPTER IV

PROBABLY, DEFINITELY, MAYBE: THE USE OF AMBIGUITY MARKERS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND THE MODERATING ROLE OF SOURCE OF INFORMATION DISCLOSURE¹

ABSTRACT

When organizations are confronted with a crisis, they inevitably face several uncertainties regarding that event. So far, however, there is a lack of research that explores how communicating such uncertainties influences perceptions of the affected organization. Therefore, the current study investigates the impact of communicating uncertain (i.e., hedges) versus certain (i.e., pledges) statements (i.e., ambiguity markers) during crises on organizational reputation. We further examine if the impact of ambiguity markers differs depending on whether the affected organization self-discloses the crisis. A 2 (ambiguity markers: uncertain statements or hedges vs. certain statements or pledges) x 2 (source of information disclosure: self-disclosure vs. third party disclosure) between-subjects experiment is conducted ($N = 270$). Results demonstrate that overall communication of uncertainties is detrimental to organizational reputation because it lowers organizational trust. Nevertheless, communicating uncertainties can generate a positive impact on organizational reputation, but only when the affected organization self-discloses the crisis. In this context, the uncertain statements lower perceived organizational responsibility, which in turn improves organizational reputation. However, when a third party discloses the crisis, uncertain statements lower organizational trust and, subsequently, organizational reputation.

KEYWORDS

Ambiguity; uncertainty; crisis communication; stealing thunder; self-disclosure

¹ Chapter four is currently under review in *Journal of Business Research* as "Crijns, H., Cauberghe, V., Hudders, L., & Claeys, A.-S. (2018). Probably, definitely, maybe: The use of ambiguity markers in crisis communication and the moderating role of source of information disclosure." This paper has also been presented at the European Marketing Academy Conference (23-26th May 2017).

1 Introduction

Crises are unexpected events that threaten the reputation of the affected organizations (Coombs, 2007). The organizational reputation is a valuable intangible asset for several reasons (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015). First, it is an important determinant for (potential) consumers in their process of selecting a brand (Walsh, Mitchell, Jackson, & Beatty, 2009). Consumers are also willing to pay more for the products and services of organizations that have a good reputation (Graham & Moore, 2007). In addition, a positive organizational reputation may prevent competitors from entering the market and stimulate consumer loyalty and retention (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). Therefore, one of the priorities of organizations in crisis is the prevention or minimization of reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

In order to protect their reputation during crises, organizations must communicate with consumers in an effective way (Coombs, 2004). For example, it is important that this communication is established in a frequent, open and honest manner (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). However, especially in the initial stages of a crisis, crisis communication is complicated because there are several uncertainties that surround the crisis (Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016). Furthermore, the likelihood of uncertain statements in crisis communication is amplified by the widespread use of social media. These media create expectations amongst stakeholders that organizations will engage in quick and frequent communication when a crisis hits (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016). Hence, on social media, organizations in crisis are forced to communicate more quickly than ever before because other parties can easily disclose information about a crisis first (Johnson, 2009).

A review of the literature regarding uncertainties in times of crisis argues that despite the prominent role of uncertainties in crisis communication, so far, there is a lack of research that investigates its impact on consumers' perceptions of the organization (Liu et al., 2016). This is surprising because best practices in crisis communication have repeatedly emphasized the importance of admitting uncertainties to consumers in the initial stages of a crisis (Covello, 2003; Heath, 2006; Janoske, Liu, & Madden, 2013; Seeger, 2006). We argue that the use of ambiguity markers might be a feasible and necessary strategy for crisis communicators to use when they must communicate quickly on social media about a crisis. Ambiguity markers are "*specific words or phrases that are used to signal a certain likelihood that the given claim is true*" (Banks & De Pelsmacker, 2014, p. 196). Whilst studies in marketing research have started to explore the impact of ambiguity markers in advertisements (e.g., Banks & De Pelsmacker, 2014), to date, studies in crisis communication research have not (Liu et al.,

2016). Nevertheless, because of the inherent uncertainty of crises' nature, it would be especially interesting to investigate the use of ambiguity markers during crises (Coombs, 2015).

Therefore, the aim of the current study is to investigate the impact of communicating uncertainties during a crisis on organizational reputation. Based on the insights of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), we argue that overall, the communication of uncertainties in times of crises can be detrimental to an organization's reputation. However, if the organization discloses information regarding the crisis first, then there is a positive impact of communicating uncertainties on the organizational reputation through the reduction of consumers' perceptions that the organization itself is responsible for the crisis.

Using uncertainties could be an effective way to be able to communicate during the early stages of the crisis. In-depth interviews with crisis communication practitioners demonstrated that one of the reasons why practitioners are hesitant to self-disclose a crisis is because at the onset of a crisis they often feel that they lack information. This makes them fear to not be able to draw an accurate picture of what is going on to the public (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). The result may be that communication is held off for too long, which enables other (third) parties to reveal the crisis first. This is not advisable, as research has shown that third party disclosure (compared to self-disclosure) of a crisis is detrimental to an organization in crisis in several ways (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Pandelaere, 2016). When self-disclosing a crisis, organizations in crisis can communicate uncertain statements without the fear of giving out incorrect information that may later seem to be false or exaggerated (Veil, Beuhner, & Palenchar, 2011). By investigating this topic, the current study addresses an important issue raised by both practitioners (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016) and scholars (Liu et al., 2016).

2 Literature review

2.1 Communicating uncertainties in times of organizational crises

Crisis definitions often contain uncertainty as a key characteristic. Seeger (2006, p. 239-240) explains that *"crises are, by definition, high-uncertainty events, where information is not immediately available"*. In other words, crises are events that generate many uncertainties as well as a high perceived threat (Seeger, Vennette, Ulmer, & Sellnow, 2002). So far, studies in crisis communication have not clearly defined 'uncertainty' in the context of crises. However, studies on interpersonal and health communication have extensively investigated this topic and offer some specific definitions of uncertainty (Liu et al., 2016). For example, Brashers (2001) argued that uncertainty occurs when the

details of a certain situation are ambiguous, probabilistic, unpredictable or complex. Ambiguity and uncertainty are interrelated concepts (Issar, 2006). Weick (1995, p. 91-92), for example, defines ambiguity as “*an ongoing stream that supports several interpretations at the same time*”. In the current study, ambiguity and uncertainty will be used interchangeably.

Several authors stress the importance of communicating ambiguity or uncertainty by organizations in crisis. For example, Ulmer and Sellnow (2000) argue that effective crisis communication often entails a component of ambiguity. Best practices in risk and crisis communication also suggest that it is important for crisis communication managers to accept ambiguity and uncertainty, as these are inherent characteristics of most crises (Seeger, 2006; Veil et al., 2011). Crisis situations create an information need amongst stakeholders. Accordingly, organizations must ensure that they provide stakeholders with sufficient information, while at the same time avoiding overly reassuring statements or information that may need to be corrected afterwards (Heath, 2006).

The conflict between communicating quickly versus waiting before all the facts are confirmed is even more prominent on social media. Social media have several unique features that make them useful as crisis communication tools for organizations (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014). These media are interactive, reach a broad audience and enable organizations to respond to stakeholder messages (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). However, social media has also made crisis communication more challenging because stakeholders expect organizations in crisis to communicate in a frequent and timely manner (Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt, & James, 2015). If organizations fail to do this, it is likely that negative information and rumors will start to circulate on social media (Park, Cha, Kim, & Jeong, 2012).

Therefore, especially in the context of crisis communication on social media, the use of ambiguity markers may be an effective way to communicate regularly about the crisis situation and simultaneously offer nothing but correct information. In advertising, ambiguity markers are widely used to express a specific degree of (un)certainty (Areni, 2002). Markers that indicate a probability rather than an absolute truth are called ‘hedges’ in the literature. ‘Probably’ is an example of a hedge that is used in Carlsberg’s advertising campaign “*probably the best beer in the world*” (Banks & De Pelsmacker, 2014). Markers that indicate a complete commitment to the truthfulness of a claim are called ‘pledges’ (e.g., Absolut’s Vodka “*Absolut Perfection*”) (Berney-Reddish & Areni, 2005). In the current study, we argue that the use of hedges may be inevitable when organizations in crisis must communicate during the early stages of a crisis (Liu et al., 2016). It is therefore important to examine how these uncertain statements affect important perceptions of the organization in crisis, such as organizational trust.

2.2 Communicating uncertainties and organizational trust

The establishment of organizational trust is a crucial component of effective crisis communication (DiStaso, Vafeiadis, & Amaral, 2015; Miller & Sinclair, 2009). Trust can be defined as the shared perception of stakeholders that the other party will communicate in an honest and open manner and will fulfill its responsibilities (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Open, honest and responsible communication is particularly important during crises: people are vulnerable because they have no control over the situation and are dependent of the organization in crisis. Hence, in unpredictable and unfamiliar situations, trust is crucial (Holmström, 2007). Therefore, for organizations in crisis, it is important to generate trust among stakeholders (DiStaso et al., 2015).

A relevant theory to examine the impact of communicating uncertainties on the level of organizational trust is the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Liu et al., 2016). Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) argues that when people are confronted with an uncertain environment, a knowledge gap occurs. Because of this gap, people are likely to look for information that decreases uncertainties. Hence, according to this theory, it is important for organizations in crisis to communicate certainties in order to reduce the knowledge gap that people experience. However, especially in the initial phases of a crisis, organizations could be forced to be ambiguous when they must communicate quickly, as not all facts are confirmed immediately (Seeger, 2006). This uncertain information is likely to have a negative impact on the level of organizational trust that people experience because it does not satisfy their need to minimize their knowledge gap. Subsequently, the lower level of organizational trust will negatively influence organizational reputation (cf. Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000; chapter six). Hence, as shown in Figure 1, based on the abovementioned insights, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: *Uncertain statements (compared to certain statements) will lower organizational trust, which is detrimental for the organizational reputation.*

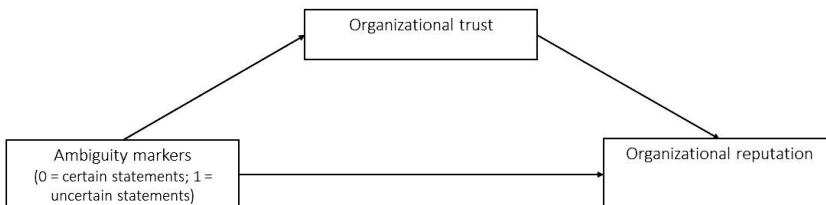


Figure 1: Conceptual mediation model.

2.3 The moderating role of the source of information disclosure

Although we expect communicating uncertain statements to be detrimental for the organizational reputation, we do not expect that communicating uncertainties will have an unanimously negative impact on organizational reputation. We suggest that the direction of the effect depends on who discloses the crisis first.

When confronted with a crisis, organizations have two possibilities: self-disclosing the information or waiting until another party does so (Wigley, 2011). The former is called 'stealing thunder' in the crisis communication literature, while the latter has been labeled 'thunder'. Stealing thunder signifies that an organization in crisis "*breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties*" (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldson, 2005, p. 425). Hence, when applying this strategy, the organization is self-disclosing the crisis information before external parties can do so (Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003). Thunder, on the contrary, means that the news about the crisis is announced by an external, third party (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993).

Studies on stealing thunder originate from law studies. During a trial, when a defendant is revealing negative information before the prosecutor does so, a mock jury is likely to evaluate the defendant as less guilty (Dolnik et al., 2003; Williams et al., 1993). Research in social psychology similarly revealed that when people who are responsible for a negative event in their own lives and meet a new potential partner, their attractiveness is likely to rise when they self-disclose this negative information rather than when the potential partner finds out another way (Archer & Burleson, 1980; Jones & Gordon, 1972). In addition, research about impression formation has demonstrated that when a person is self-disclosing information that is against his or her self-interest, he or she is perceived as more credible and consequently more persuasive (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). Consequently, these studies suggest that self-disclosure of negative information is advantageous in several different areas.

In recent years, studies in crisis communication have also investigated the impact of self-disclosing negative information. The findings of these studies demonstrate the benefits of self-disclosure of a crisis (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2013; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). For example, self-disclosure was shown to result in higher credibility ratings (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). In addition, media and consumers seem to pay less attention to information related to the crisis in the case of self-disclosure (Claeys et al., 2016). Consumers also have less intentions to spread negative information about the organization in crisis (Einwiller & Johar, 2013). Stealing thunder also seems to be associated with more positively framed stories and headlines and fewer negatively framed ones (Wigley, 2011). Hence, the abovementioned research findings demonstrate a variety of beneficial effects of self-disclosure of a crisis. Therefore, we argue that when

an organization in crisis self-discloses crisis information, the public will both be more understanding if information is ambiguous and will give the company more credit overall. Consequently, we expect that communicating uncertainties may be tolerated by stakeholders when an organization is self-disclosing the crisis.

In addition, an organization's use of uncertain statements when it has self-disclosed the crisis may signal that the organization tries to communicate as open and quickly as possible even though it may not know all the facts yet (Seeger, 2006). The use of hedges can reconcile the need to communicate early on in a crisis with the fear of sending out the wrong information (cf. Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). As such, communicating uncertainties in a self-disclosure context can signal that the organization simply has nothing to hide and is not afraid of any new information that may surface later. Communicating certainties when self-disclosing a crisis could even be perceived as a bad thing because this may create the impression that the organization held off the communication until it had gathered all the information. As such, using pledges in a self-disclosure statement may create the impression that the organization waited a while before disclosing the crisis or even that the organization bears responsibility for what happened and thus knew all along without communicating about it. Therefore, we expect that in the case of self-disclosure of a crisis, uncertainties (compared to certainties) will reduce (instead of enhance) perceived crisis responsibility. The latter refers to the amount of responsibility that stakeholders are attributing to the organization for the crisis (Coombs, 1995). The less responsibility is attributed to the organization in crisis, the less the organizational reputation will suffer (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; cf. chapter six).

When a third party reveals the crisis, however, we expect that the use of ambiguity markers will not affect the organizational reputation. In the case of third party disclosure, the organization in crisis loses the privilege of setting the tone of the crisis. According to the framing hypothesis, which has been proposed as an explanation for the beneficial effects of stealing thunder, the framing of information will have little impact on perceptions in the case of thunder (Williams et al., 1993). One of the benefits of stealing thunder is that because you communicate first, you can set the tone and frame the crisis in a manner that is most beneficial for the organization in crisis. If you wait for thunder, however, you are left in a defensive position in which the only thing you can do is follow the frame set by a third party. This was confirmed by Claeys et al.'s (2013) study. The authors investigated the interaction between information disclosure (i.e., self-disclosure vs. third party disclosure) and the framing of the information (i.e., emotional vs. rational). The authors found that while framing was beneficial in the case of self-disclosure, framing did not influence organizational reputation in the case of third party disclosure. Therefore, we expect that when a third party reveals the crisis, framing of the crisis

information using uncertain statements (i.e., hedges) will not affect organizational reputation. Hence, as depicted in the conceptual model in Figure 2, we hypothesize the following:

H₂: *In the case of self-disclosure, uncertain statements (compared to certain statements) will result in lower attributed organizational crisis responsibility, which is beneficial for the organizational reputation. When a third party discloses crisis information, ambiguity markers will not affect the organizational reputation.*

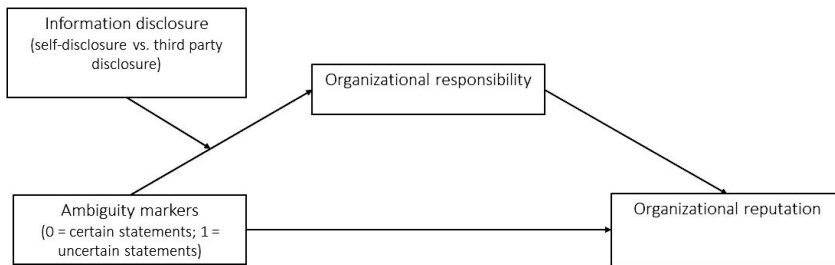


Figure 2: Conceptual moderated mediation model.

3 Method

3.1 Design and stimuli

A 2 (ambiguity markers: uncertain statements or hedges vs. certain statements or pledges) x 2 (source of information disclosure: self-disclosure vs. third party disclosure) between-subjects experiment was conducted. A fictitious crisis was used to test the hypotheses. The crisis scenario mentioned a fictitious brand from which salmon was infected with the salmonella bacteria and thus a product recall was organized.

The information about the crisis was revealed through Facebook, either by the involved fictitious organization (i.e., self-disclosure condition) or the Federal Agency for Food Safety (i.e., third party disclosure condition). This Facebook post disclosed that salmon is infected with salmonella bacteria. The message recommended that consumers bring the salmon with specific validity dates back to the store where the consumers had bought it and to not consume it anymore. Next, in all conditions, respondents were told that following that initial Facebook post, the fictitious organization in crisis tweeted about the event. In these tweets, the ambiguity markers were manipulated. All respondents saw three different tweets of the organization in crisis in which ambiguity markers were manipulated by using either certain statements or pledges (i.e., “At this moment, we know for sure that 10 people became sick after eating the salmon [1/3]”; Symptoms that undoubtedly arise when people get

contaminated are illness, diarrhea, and fever [2/3]”; “The cause is certainly a contamination of the salmon with a salmonella bacteria because we did not manage the hygienic prescriptions accurately [3/3]”) or uncertain statements or hedges (i.e., “At this moment, we think that possibly 10 people became sick after eating the salmon [1/3]”; “Symptoms that might arise when people get contaminated are illness, diarrhea, and possibly also fever [2/3]”; “The cause is probably a contamination of the salmon with a salmonella bacteria because we did not manage the hygienic prescriptions accurately [3/3]”). These tweets were presented in Dutch, the language of the participants, and contained no more than the 140 characters allowed on Twitter at the time the study was conducted. In the tweets, it was also clarified that the described crisis scenario was a preventable crisis for which the organization was fully responsible (cf. the third tweet, they did not respect the hygienic prescriptions) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This type of crisis was chosen because it poses the highest threat to the reputation of the organization involved in the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

3.2 Pretest

A pretest was conducted using a convenience sample ($N = 47$; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.78$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.05$) in order to determine if the experimental materials had the intended effects. Results from an independent samples t-test showed that participants in the pledges condition felt that the statements contained significantly more certainties ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.99$) than the participant in the hedges condition ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 0.90$), $t(25) = -2.77$, $p = 0.01$, $r = 0.59$. The majority of respondents (approximately 85 % per condition) indicated correctly who communicated first about the event ($X^2(1, N = 27) = 13.36$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, based on the results of the pretest, we could conclude that both manipulations had the intended effect.

3.3 Participants and procedure

A convenience sample of 270 Dutch-speaking Belgian men and women took part in the online study ($M_{\text{age}} = 36$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 15.85$, age range = 17-81). Approximately 44 % were males, and 56 % were females. Most of the respondents (i.e., 43.2 %) had obtained a bachelors’ degree, while 32.3 % of the respondents had finished secondary school and 23 % of the respondents had obtained a master’s degree. The questionnaire was developed with Qualtrics software, and the link was distributed by students to respondents through e-mail in exchange for course credits.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions by the website. Participants first either saw a Facebook post of the organization in crisis (i.e., self-disclosure condition) or of the Federal Agency for Food Safety (i.e., third party disclosure condition). Next, respondents were shown three tweets of the organization in crisis in which either certain statements (i.e., pledges condition) or

uncertain statements (i.e., hedges condition) were used. After this, respondents filled in an online questionnaire, which contained manipulation checks, measures of mediating and dependent variables and sociodemographic variables.

3.4 Measures

In appendix, full measurements for all variables of interest are mentioned. First, we checked if the *manipulation of ambiguity markers* was correctly established. The participants were asked to what extent they thought the tweets of the organization in crisis contained either lots of uncertainties or rather lots of certainties on a five-point, semantic differential scale.

Next, the manipulation of *the source of information disclosure* was measured. We asked respondents who they thought initially released the news about the crisis on its Facebook page. Three answer categories were provided: the name of the organization in crisis, the Federal Agency for Food Safety and 'I don't know.'

To measure *organizational trust*, we used six items from Griffin, Yang, ter Huurne, Boerner, Ortiz, and Dunwoody's (2008) scale (e.g., "*The organization knows how to handle the problem*"; "*The organizations takes all necessary actions in order to solve the crisis*"; "*The organization protects its consumers sufficiently against a possible contamination*") ($\alpha = 0.76$). Answers were indicated on a five-point Likert-scale ranging from totally disagree to totally agree.

To measure the *level of attributed crisis responsibility*, Griffin, Babin and Darden's (1992) four-item scale was used ($\alpha = 0.81$) (e.g., "*How responsible is the organization itself for the crisis?*"; "*How responsible are external circumstances for the crisis?*"). Answer categories ranged from not at all (1) to very much (5). Two items were re-coded in order to ensure that all four items were scaled in the same direction.

Organizational reputation was measured based on 9 items from Fombrun et al.'s (2000) scale (e.g., "*I admire and respect the company*"; "*I have a good feeling about this company*", "*The company offers products of high quality*") ($\alpha = 0.91$). The original scale consisted of 20 items, but because the crisis scenario depicted a fictitious organization, it may have been difficult for respondents to answer some items, such as "*The company looks like a low risk investment*". Items like this are difficult to answer without any background knowledge. Therefore, we omitted these items (cf. Claeys et al., 2016). The remaining nine items were measured on a five-point Likert-scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5).

Furthermore, *perceived crisis severity* was also measured in order to control for whether the manipulation of ambiguity markers influenced severity perceptions of the crisis. This measure was based on Witte's (1992) perceived crisis severity scale, which consisted of three items (e.g., "*The contamination of food with salmonella bacteria is a severe incident*"; "*The contamination of food with salmonella bacteria is a serious incident*"; "*The contamination of food with salmonella bacteria forms a significant threat for people's health*") ($\alpha = 0.85$). The scale was measured on a five-point Likert-scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5). Finally, several socio-demographical variables were measured, including age, gender and education level of the respondents.

4 Results

4.1 Manipulation check

Results of the manipulation check showed that participants in the certain statements condition indicated that the tweets contained significantly more certainties ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.09$) than participants in the uncertain statements condition ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.07$) ($t(268) = -6.97$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 0.39$). In addition, in order to determine whether the manipulation of ambiguity markers did not significantly influence perceived severity of the crisis, we conducted an independent samples t-test. The results showed no significant difference between the uncertain statements ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.80$) and certain statements ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.83$) conditions in terms of perceived crisis severity ($t(259) = -0.31$, $p = 0.76$, $r = 0.02$). Finally, regarding the source of information disclosure, 92.2 % of the respondents indicated correctly who communicated first about the event. Respondents who indicated the wrong source or did not know who revealed the information first were excluded from the analyses. The remaining sample consisted of 224 respondents.

4.2 Hypothesis testing

To determine whether uncertain statements or hedges negatively influenced the organizational post-crisis reputation by negatively affecting organizational trust, we conducted a simple mediation test using Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013, model 4, $N = 5\,000$ bootstrap samples). Ambiguity markers were added as the independent variable, organizational trust was added as the mediator, and organizational reputation was added as the dependent variable. The results demonstrated that there is an indirect, negative effect of ambiguity markers on organizational reputation through organizational trust ($B = -0.14$, $SE = 0.05$; 95% CI = [-0.2480; -0.0322]). In particular, hedges resulted in lower organizational trust than pledges ($B = -0.21$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = -2.50$, $p = 0.01$), which, in turn, negatively influenced organizational reputation ($B = 0.66$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 13.81$, $p < 0.001$). The direct effect of ambiguity

markers on organizational reputation was not significant ($B = 0.11, SE = 0.07; 95\% CI = [-0.0161; 0.2409]$). Hence, as shown in Figure 3, we can accept the first hypothesis. When organizations use uncertain statements or hedges in response to a crisis, organizational trust decreases, which results in reputational damage.

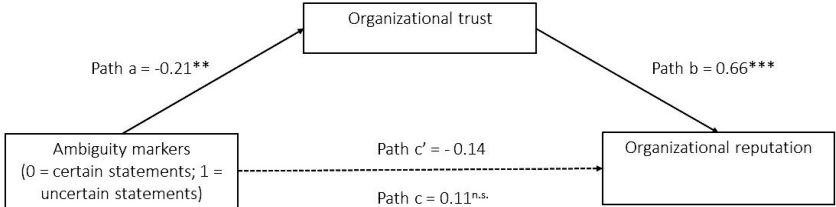


Figure 3: Summary of results for mediation analysis ($N = 5\,000$ bootstrap samples).

Note. All paths are quantified with unstandardized regression coefficients.

$p > .05 = n.s.; p < .05 = *; p < .01 = **; p < .001 = ***$

In order to test whether the source of information disclosure moderated the impact of ambiguity markers on organizational responsibility and, subsequently, organizational reputation, a moderated mediation analysis was conducted (Hayes, 2013; model 7, $N = 5\,000$ bootstrap samples). In this analysis, ambiguity markers were included as the independent variable, source of information disclosure as the moderator, organizational responsibility was added as the mediator, and organizational reputation was added as the dependent variable. The results of the moderated mediation analysis showed that information disclosure moderated the impact of ambiguity markers on organizational responsibility and, subsequently, on organizational reputation ($B = -0.10, SE = 0.06; 95\% CI = [-0.2407; -0.0173]$). The conditional, indirect effect shows that when an organization self-disclosed the crisis, organizational responsibility mediated the impact of ambiguity markers on organizational reputation ($B = 0.09, SE = 0.04; 95\% CI = [0.0236; 0.1887]$). In particular, hedges resulted in lower attribution of crisis responsibility compared to pledges ($B = -0.49, SE = 0.18, t = -2.76, p < 0.01$), which is beneficial for organizational reputation ($B = -0.22, SE = 0.06, t = -3.65, p < 0.001$). This is illustrated in Figure 4.

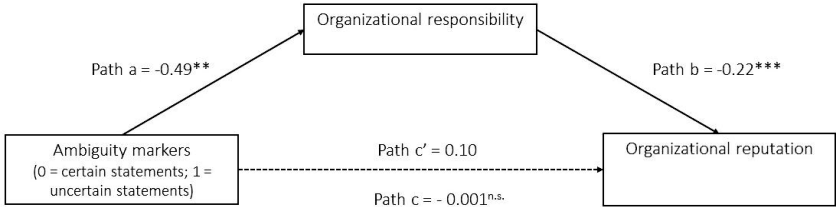


Figure 4: Summary of results for mediation analysis of the self-disclosure condition ($N = 5\,000$ bootstrap samples).

Note. All paths are quantified with unstandardized regression coefficients.

$p > .05 = \text{n.s.}; p < .05 = *; p < .01 = **; p < .001 = ***$

However, as shown in Figure 5, crisis responsibility did not mediate the effect of ambiguity markers on organizational reputation when the third party disclosed the information ($B = -0.01, SE = 0.03; 95\% CI = [-0.0922; 0.0416]$). Consequently, we can accept the second hypothesis.

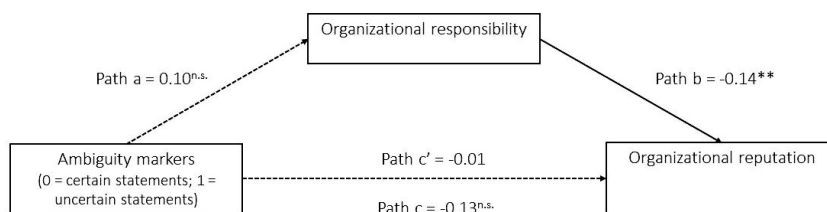


Figure 5: Summary of results for mediation analysis of the third party disclosure condition ($N = 5\,000$ bootstrap samples).

Note. All paths are quantified with unstandardized regression coefficients.

$p > .05 = \text{n.s.}; p < .05 = *; p < .01 = **; p < .001 = ***$

4.3 Supplemental analyses

Based on the abovementioned findings, we can conclude that an organization's self-disclosure of uncertain statements is beneficial for organizational reputation, through lower attributed organizational crisis responsibility. However, a negative impact on organizational reputation might also occur through lower trust perceptions (cf. findings of the first hypothesis). In order to reveal which of the two processes (i.e., through organizational trust and/or through organizational responsibility perceptions) is dominant in the context of self-disclosure, a parallel mediation model (Hayes, 2013; model 4; $N = 5\,000$ bootstrap samples) was tested. Ambiguity markers are added as independent variable, organizational trust and responsibility were added as parallel mediators, and organizational reputation was added as a dependent variable. In the analyses, the indirect effects were compared by means of a planned contrast. The results of this analysis showed that in the case of self-disclosure of uncertain statements, the indirect effect through organizational responsibility remained significant ($B = 0.08, SE = 0.04; 95\% CI = [0.0188; 0.1706]$). However, the indirect effect through organizational trust was not significant ($B = -0.10, SE = 0.07; 95\% CI = [-0.2554; 0.0282]$). Further, a planned contrast showed that these two indirect effects were significantly different from each other ($B = -0.18, SE = 0.07; 95\% CI = [-0.3337; -0.0402]$). Hence, in the case of self-disclosure, using uncertain statements has a positive effect on organizational reputation by reducing perceptions of organizational responsibility.

Additionally, for third party disclosure, another parallel mediation model (Hayes, 2013; model 4; $N = 5000$ bootstrap samples) was tested. Ambiguity markers was added as the independent variable, organizational trust and responsibility were added as parallel mediators, and organizational reputation was added as the dependent variable. The indirect effects were also compared based on planned contrasts. The analyses showed that in the case of third party disclosure, the effect through organizational responsibility was not significant ($B = -0.01$, $SE = 0.02$; 95% CI = [-0.0597; 0.0206]). This confirmed our previous findings (cf. second hypothesis). However, the indirect effect through organizational trust was significant ($B = -0.16$, $SE = 0.08$; 95% CI = [-0.3161; -0.0172]). A planned contrast showed that these two indirect effects significantly differed from each other ($B = -0.15$, $SE = 0.08$; 95% CI = [-0.3039; -0.0022]). Hence, in the case of third party disclosure, when both mediators are added simultaneously in the model, though there was no significant effect on organizational reputation through organizational responsibility, there was a negative impact through trust.

5 Discussion

Crises are by nature characterized by uncertainties and ambiguity (Ulmer and Sellnow, 1997). In the initial phases of a crisis, organizations' communication is likely to include uncertain statements. So far, there is a lack of empirically-validated research that examines the impact of communicating uncertainties on perceptions of the organization (Liu et al., 2016). Nevertheless, multiple studies about best practices in risk and crisis communication suggest that it is important for organizations to admit that uncertainties surround the crisis instead of communicating statements that have to be corrected afterwards (e.g., Covello, 2003; Heath, 2006; Janoske et al., 2013; Seeger, 2006). Therefore, the aim of the current study was to explore the impact of communicating uncertainties on organizational reputation.

Overall, we expected that communicating uncertainties is detrimental to organizational reputation because it lowers organizational trust. According to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), a knowledge gap will occur when people are confronted with uncertainties, such as those that occur during a crisis. Hence, people want information that decreases this gap and are therefore likely to look for confirmed information, or certainties. We expected that uncertainties communicated in times of crisis decrease organizational trust, which is detrimental to organizational reputation (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun et al., 2000; cf. chapter six). This was confirmed by the findings of the first hypothesis. Thus, the current study confirmed the influential role of organizational trust in crisis communication (cf. DiStaso et al., 2015; Miller & Sinclair, 2009) (i.e., because it influences perceptions

of organizational reputation). In particular, it showed that by expressing uncertainties in crisis communication, this might lower organizational trust.

However, we also suggested that communicating uncertainties does not necessarily always negatively affect organizational reputation. Whether the organization in crisis discloses the crisis first or a third party was introduced as a moderator of the impact of communicating uncertainties. Studies have shown that an organization's self-disclosure of information has a wide variety of benefits for the organization in crisis (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Claeys et al., 2013; Claeys et al., 2016; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014; Wigley, 2011). Therefore, we argued that consumers will be more favorable towards organizations in crisis if the organization in crisis engages in self-disclosure of the crisis, regardless of whether that communicated information is largely uncertain. In addition, self-disclosure implies that an organization discloses all information as soon as possible, even when the information is not yet complete or confirmed (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldson, 2005). Hence, by revealing the information first, the organization in crisis demonstrates that as soon as it had information available about the crisis, they communicated about it. Therefore, in this context, it is reasonable that there are still several uncertainties surrounding the crisis. Uncertainties thus make sense in the context of early self-disclosure.

If an organization in crisis would be communicating certainties when self-disclosing the crisis, this could give the impression that the organization waited a while before communicating about the crisis. This can be explained by the fact that when an organization self-discloses a crisis as soon as it becomes aware that anything happened, it will most likely not have all the facts regarding what happened. Thus, communicating through hedges will reflect the organization's true openness and transparency, whereas communicating through pledges may create the impression that the organization waited a while before communicating or that it had some responsibility in whatever went wrong. Therefore, we expect uncertainties to reduce perceived crisis responsibility and certainties to enhance perceived crisis responsibility. Finally, we expected the level of crisis responsibility to be negatively linked to perceptions of the organizational reputation based on previous research (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Claeys et al., 2010; cf. chapter six). The results of the current study indeed demonstrated that when an organization in crisis self-discloses information regarding the crisis, communicating hedges or uncertainties lowered crisis responsibility, which was in turn beneficial for organizational reputation.

However, for third party disclosure, we argued that communicating uncertainties would not influence organizational reputation because previous research has shown that framing has no impact in this context. In the case of third party disclosure, because another party reveals the crisis first and sets the tone, the organization in crisis loses its opportunity to frame the crisis (Williams et al., 1993; Claeys et

al., 2013). This was partially confirmed by the findings of the current study. We found no impact of uncertainties on organizational reputation through responsibility perceptions in the case of third party disclosure. However, the findings did show that an uncertain framing of the crisis information, after a third party communicated first about the crisis, can also have a backfire effect on the organization in crisis. If a third party discloses the crisis and organizational trust is introduced as a mediator, we found that uncertainties communicated by the organization in crisis lower organizational trust, which is detrimental for the organizational reputation. This could possibly be explained by the fact that if an organization does not self-disclose the crisis, but its earliest communication is to respond to the revelations from a third party, people expect the organization to communicate certainties and leave no room for ambiguity.

6 Limitations and future directions

Despite its insights for both theory and practice, the current study had some limitations that offer opportunities for further research. First, in the current study we only used verbal cues to express ambiguity or uncertainties: ambiguity markers. Future research could use other expressions of ambiguity, such as eye contact or body posture (Aguinis & Henle, 2001). This might be interesting to do because previous research has shown that besides verbal cues, nonverbal cues could also influence perceptions of organizational reputation (cf. chapter five).

Second, the results of the current study may differ based on the respondents' personal characteristics, such as tolerance for ambiguity (Banks & De Pelsmacker, 2014). Tolerance for ambiguity refers to the way individuals react to ambiguous, unfamiliar or incongruent information (Furnham & Ribchester, 1995). Similarly, the impact of ambiguity markers may also differ in different cultures, depending on how the public in that culture scores on Hofstede's (1997) cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent that people feel uncomfortable or threatened by ambiguity or uncertainty and are likely to avoid such situations (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Hence, future research on this topic can involve a cross-cultural study in which the effects are compared between countries that score low and high on uncertainty avoidance. The relevance of a cross-cultural study about ambiguity markers in crisis communication is also suggested by Huang, Lin and Su (2005) who found that Chinese organizations are more inclined to use ambiguity in their crisis communication compared to Western organizations.

Third, the current study compared the impact of communicating uncertainties versus certainties on organizational reputation. However, we did not investigate the impact on organizational reputation of giving no information at all. We found that overall the use of uncertain statements or hedges results

in lower trust, and hence more reputational damage, than the use of pledges. However, the question remains if hedges are more beneficial than offering no information at all. It may be better for an organization to tell consumers uncertain statements about the elements of a crisis than for an organization to tell consumers it has no idea what is going on. Especially when self-disclosing a crisis in an early stage, it is possible that organizations know that something went wrong but have no further information. For instance, when a Germanwings plane crashed in 2015 between Barcelona and Dusseldorf, the organization had no idea if the rumors about a possible crash, that circulated in the media, were indeed true. Another strategy that organizations could apply in such contexts, when they have no information yet, is 'filling the silence' (Fowler, 2016). This is *"a crisis management technique that proactively updates the public on an incident when there is no new information to report by alerting the public to what the organization is currently investigating or by simply informing the public that there is no new information to report"* (Fowler, 2016, p. 726). A recent study has shown that it is important to apply this strategy in conjunction with self-disclosure. Likewise, the organization in crisis is able to engage the public and might inhibit that they will search for other information sources which might be less accurate (Fowler, 2016). For future research, it would be interesting to compare the effects communicating uncertainties vs. filling the silence, when the organization in crisis has self-disclosed the crisis.

Fourth, and finally, further research should examine the long-term effects of ambiguity markers on perceptions of the organization in crisis. The current study provides insights regarding the short-term effects of communicating uncertainties. If information regarding the crisis is self-disclosed by the affected organization, consumers tolerate uncertainties and accept that the organization is not yet certain about all the facts. Future studies should test the impact of communicating uncertainties in the long-term to determine whether consumers' tolerance for uncertainty decreases as the organizations have more time to check all the facts.

7 Conclusions and managerial implications

A wide range of studies in different research areas has shown that self-disclosure of negative information can have several beneficial effects for those who self-disclose the incriminating information. In particular, multiple studies in communication literature provide substantial evidence that organizations should self-disclose negative information (e.g., Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys et al., 2016). However, in-depth interviews with crisis communication practitioners have revealed that even though self-disclosure is considered a valuable strategy in practice, organizations are reluctant to apply it because communicating early in a crisis inevitably involves uncertainties

(Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Hence, practitioners are not eager to steal thunder. The current study indicates that communicating uncertainties is no problem for organizations when they self-disclose the crisis. On the contrary, communicating uncertainties can beneficially impact organizational reputation by lowering consumers' perceptions that the organization is responsible for the crisis. Hence, this study provides proof for crisis communicators that communicating hedges is not detrimental when the organization self-discloses information regarding the crisis. While certain information is required by consumers when a third-party disclosed the crisis, self-disclosure provides the opportunity to acknowledge that the organization does not have all the facts yet.

The findings of this study offer several implications for practice. Overall, we can conclude that communicating certainties is useful for protecting the organizational reputation because it enhances trust in the organization in crisis. It is especially important that certainties are communicated if a third party disclosed the crisis first. Otherwise, the level of organizational trust decreases, which negatively affects organizational reputation. However, if the organization in crisis self-discloses the events, the uncertainties are tolerated by consumers.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the current study does not propose the communication of uncertainties or ambiguity as a deliberate strategy, for example, to produce ambiguous views of the situation. The latter conflicts with ethical standards (Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997). On the contrary, the current study explores and explains the effects that occur when a source discloses the crisis whilst there are still uncertainties that surround it. The goal of crisis communication is to inform stakeholders as adequately as possible and to reassure them (Coombs, 2012). Therefore, the current insights are only valuable in an initial phase of the crisis communication process, when uncertainties actually surround the crisis events. As soon as more facts are confirmed, the organization in crisis must communicate clear, confirmed information because it is ethical and because consumers presumably would demand more information in the long run. In particular, we could argue that it is important to communicate certainties in later phases of the crisis. Further research is necessary to empirically test this. Hence, we expect that, in the context of self-disclosure, hedges are only beneficial to the organization in crisis when uncertainties still characterize the crisis event. In the later stages of a crises, consumers will likely expect the organization to implement a restorative crisis response strategy (cf. Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). In that case, a rebuild strategy has to be used in order to protect organizational reputation when a preventable crisis occurs (Coombs, 2007).

Furthermore, the results of the current study clearly show that organizations should pay attention to third parties that may reveal the crisis. Hence, it is important for an organization in crisis to monitor what others are saying about the crisis. Both the organization in crisis and third parties can influence

perceptions of the organization by means of their communication. This aligns with the rhetorical arena theory. This theory represents crisis communication as a space where several actors are communicating about a crisis. It adopts a multi-vocal approach by arguing that multiple voices can determine the outcomes of a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

To conclude, the insights offered by this study are especially valuable in the current environment in which social media are prevalent. During crises, social media are important sources of information (Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Sutton, Palen, & Schlovski, 2008). Stakeholders expect organizations in crises to communicate in a timely manner via social media (Gruber et al., 2015). The results of the current study show that organizations can capitalize on the possibilities to communicate quickly to a broad public when a crisis hits, especially when they self-disclose the crisis information, even when there are still uncertainties. The results also provide organizations with a useful way to deal with rumors about a crisis that are spread on social media (Zhao, Yin, & Song, 2016). This study demonstrates that if an organization in crisis is the first to say, “*An incident has possibly occurred. We are currently investigating it and try to communicate as quickly as possible*”, this could lower organizational responsibility, which is beneficial for organizational reputation. The aforementioned statement is what Germanwings communicated on Twitter after rumors of a potential plane crash started to circulate. The results of this study may encourage organizations to actively communicate on social media as soon as they have some information about the crisis.

8 References

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9 Appendices

9.1 Measurements variables of interest

Variables	Item statement	Item measurement
Ambiguity markers	- To what extent do you think the tweets of the organization in crisis about the crisis event contain this kind of information?	5-point semantic differential Lots of uncertainties – Lots of certainties
Source of information disclosure	- Who do you think that initially released the news about the crisis on its Facebook page?	Fresh&Fish The Federal Agency for Food Safety I don't know
Organizational trust	- The organization knows how to handle the crisis - The organization takes all necessary actions in order to solve the crisis - The organization protects its consumers sufficiently against a possible contamination - When the organizations tells they have control over the crisis, I am inclined to believe them - The organizations neglects the	5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree

	<p>health of consumers²</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The organization communicates openly about the crisis 	
Attributed crisis responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How responsible is the organization itself for the crisis? - How responsible are external circumstances for the crisis?³ - How guilty is the organization itself for causing the crisis? - How guilty are external circumstances for causing the crisis?⁴ 	<p>5-point semantic differential Not at all – very much</p>
Organizational reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I have a good feeling about Fresh&Fish - I admire and respect Fresh&Fish - I trust Fresh&Fish - Fresh&Fish offers products of high quality - Fresh&Fish stands behind its products - Fresh&Fish offers products that are good value for the money 	<p>5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>

² This item was reverse-coded.

³ This item was reverse-coded

⁴ This item was reverse-coded

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fresh&Fish has a clear view on the future - Fresh&Fish has excellent leadership - Fresh&Fish has high standards in the way it treats people 	
Perceived crisis severity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The contamination of food with salmonella bacteria is a severe incident - The contamination of food with a salmonella bacteria is a serious incident - The contamination of food with a salmonella bacteria forms a significant threat for people's health 	<p>5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>

Table 1: Full measurements variables of interest.

9.2 Self-disclosure of the crisis



Figure 6: Manipulation self-disclosure of the crisis.

9.3 Third party disclosure of the crisis



Figure 7: Manipulation third party disclosure of the crisis.

9.4 Communication of uncertainties



Figure 8: Manipulation of communicating uncertainties (i.e., hedges).

9.5 Communication of certainties



Figure 9: Manipulation of communicating certainties (i.e., pledges).

CHAPTER V
WHO SAYS WHAT DURING CRISES? A STUDY
ABOUT THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN GENDER
SIMILARITY WITH THE SPOKESPERSON AND
CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY

CHAPTER V

WHO SAYS WHAT DURING CRISES? A STUDY ABOUT THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN GENDER SIMILARITY WITH THE SPOKESPERSON AND CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGY¹

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relative importance of verbal and nonverbal cues in organizational crisis communication, focusing on the importance of gender similarity between an organizational spokesperson and stakeholders and the moderating role of the crisis response strategy used. A 2(gender match: similar vs. dissimilar) × 2 (crisis response strategy: rebuild vs. deny) between-subjects quasi-experimental design is established ($N = 199$). The findings indicate that gender similarity is beneficial for organizational reputation because it enhances stakeholders' empathy towards the spokesperson. However, this effect is only found when the spokesperson uses an appropriate crisis response strategy based on the guidelines of situational crisis communication theory. More specifically, when a spokesperson offers a rebuild strategy in the context of a preventable crisis, gender similarity results in more empathy towards the spokesperson and, subsequently, in improved organizational reputation. However, the effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation through empathy towards the spokesperson was not found when a deny strategy was used.

KEYWORDS

Crisis communication; gender similarity; empathy; organizational reputation; crisis response strategy; apologies

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1 Introduction

Organizations have come to increasingly recognize the importance of organizational reputation as a means of achieving business goals and remaining competitive (Wang, Yu, & Chiang, 2016). Accordingly, from a management perspective, organizational reputation has been considered as a significant source of competitive advantage as well as a resource that creates value and delivers consistent and superior market performance (Deephouse, 2000). A good reputation also leads to other benefits, such as loyal customers, motivated employees, and being more attractive to potential financial investors (Dowling, 2002). During crises, however, the organizational reputation often becomes under intense scrutiny (Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). Therefore, organizations are inclined to protect and strengthen their reputation when a crisis hits (Coombs, 2007).

Thus far, crisis communication research has stressed the importance of verbal cues in the crisis communication message (i.e., the content and framing), also referred to as the organizational crisis response strategy (e.g., apology, denial), in order to restore the organization's reputation during and after a crisis (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). However, people form their opinions about others not only on the basis of what they say (i.e., verbal content, such as crisis response strategies), but also on what they see. Consequently, nonverbal visual aspects are also important (Sporer & Schwandt, 2006). One nonverbal visual aspect of relevance for crisis communication may be the gender of the spokesperson.

Researchers in social psychology (e.g., Aguinis & Henle, 2001; Aguinis, Simonsen, & Pierce, 1998) have illustrated the importance of nonverbal visual cues in the formation of perceptions of the communicator and his or her message. However, these insights might also be useful in a crisis context. Stakeholders seem to be very sensitive to nonverbal cues, especially when the situation is uncertain, as is the case during a crisis (Coleman & Wu, 2006). In addition, especially in the contemporary social media environment, videos and photos are often used to communicate crisis responses (e.g., the statement by the CEO of Volkswagen, Martin Winterkorn, uploaded in a video to the brand's Facebook page during the Dieselgate). Thus, in crisis communication research, it is important to take not only verbal cues into account but also nonverbal visual cues (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010).

Nonverbal visual cues, such as spokespersons' gestures, eye contact, ethnic similarity, and facial features have only recently gained research attention (Arpan, 2002; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014b; Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008). For example, Arpan (2002) found that ethnic similarity with a spokesperson is positively associated with the spokesperson's credibility ratings. Furthermore, Gorn et al. (2008) showed that natural associations between having a baby face and being honest underlie inferences

about perceived honesty and persuasion. Claeys and Cauberghe (2014b) found that eye contact while speaking, expressive body movements, and a relaxed facial expression increase stakeholders' perceptions that the spokesperson is competent. These findings show that a spokespersons' nonverbal cues can play an important role in the context of corporate communication, and more specifically crisis communication, by influencing the perceptions of spokespersons and organizations.

Nevertheless, researchers have neglected to test the impact of an obvious and easily accessible visual cue that can be immediately observed about the spokesperson (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990): gender similarity between the sender and the receiver of a crisis message. Research in other contexts has demonstrated the beneficial impact of gender similarity. For example, Smith (1998) found that gender similarity between a buyer and a seller in the sales context resulted in greater relational investment.

Moreover, in addition to the lack of research on gender similarity to the spokesperson in a crisis context, there is a dearth of research regarding the interaction between nonverbal and verbal cues in crisis communication. This is surprising because in communication, these aspects are mostly combined. Thus, it is important to study these aspects not separately, but as an integrated whole (Jones & LeBaron, 2002). Although researchers have investigated which verbal response strategies are beneficial to use in certain crisis contexts (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014a), they have not yet examined what happens when a response strategy is communicated by a spokesperson to whom stakeholders may relate based on nonverbal cues such as gender similarity.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the impact of gender similarity between the crisis spokesperson and stakeholders on organizational reputation in a crisis context. More specifically, we unravel the underlying process that initiates the impact by examining the mediating role of empathy towards the spokesperson. Based on insights of interpersonal forgiveness, we argue that in interpersonal relationships, people are likely to ask for forgiveness for their wrongdoings in order to minimize the victim's motivation to retaliate against the transgressor (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). These insights are also valuable in a crisis context because organizations in crisis aim to minimize negative perceptions among stakeholders in order to protect the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). In the current study, we propose the empathy model of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997) as an interesting model to explain the initiation of empathy in a crisis context. According to this model, people forgive others to the extent that they experience empathy for them. Because many issues are not one-sided, empathy allows victims to understand the crisis from the other's perspective, which creates a greater understanding for the organization's behavior (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Furthermore, empathy results in a connection between the victim and the perpetrator, which can

attenuate negative feelings resulting from the crisis (Riek & Mania, 2012). Thus, empathy forms a crucial facilitative condition for overcoming stakeholders' destructive responses. Empathy is therefore a crucial precursor of forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012).

According to McCullough et al. (1997), relational closeness is a precursor of the initiation of empathy. Therefore, the current study investigates whether gender similarity between stakeholders and the spokesperson initiates relational closeness and, thus, enhances empathy towards the spokesperson. In addition, according to Seeger's (2006) best practices in crisis communication, demonstrating empathic concern is important in crisis situations. However, the author stated that crisis communication spokespersons might be reluctant to frame their statements with empathic concern because of the fear of signaling a lack of professionalism (Seeger, 2006). Therefore, the present study sought to investigate whether gender similarity, as a more implicit expression of empathy, is also able to induce empathy towards the spokesperson.

In particular, we argue that gender similarity will only affect organizational reputation when apologies are offered (i.e., rebuild strategy). According to the empathy model of forgiveness, a crucial precursor of empathy is offering apologies (McCullough et al., 1997). Therefore, we examine the moderating influence of a verbal cue, the crisis response strategy (i.e., rebuild or deny), on the impact of gender similarity on empathy towards the spokesperson. According to situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007), organizations in crisis have to offer an apology when a crisis occurs for which the organization is held responsible. We argue that the beneficial impact of gender similarity on empathy towards the spokesperson depends on whether apologies are offered in the crisis response strategy. Before discussing the results of the empirical study, we explain the theoretical framework and develop the hypothesis. We conclude with a discussion of the results and practical implications of the study.

2 Literature review

2.1 Similarity attraction based on gender similarity

Similarity is "*the extent to which members of a(n) (incidental) relationship are similar in characteristics*" (Smith, 1998, p. 6). It might be created based on external observable characteristics (Lichtenthal & Tellefsen, 2001). Studies on the impact of observable bases of similarity examine visual aspects such as ethnic background, gender, and age (e.g., Arpan, 2002; Dwyer, Richard, & Shepherd, 1998; Goldberg, 2003). The common aspect of these characteristics is that they can be observed with a quick

visual inspection during a short interaction with the person (Crosby et al., 1990). According to Perloff (1993), similarity is a relevant nonverbal cue of the spokesperson.

People feel attracted to others who look similar to themselves because this similarity reinforces their self-esteem and helps them to maintain a stable sense of congruence in their self-identity (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel, 1972). This assumption is based on social identity theory, which has been used in several contexts to show how similarity to others becomes a meaningful construct, for example, to identify with organizations (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). The basic assumption of this theory is that individuals demonstrate a tendency to classify themselves in several social categories in order to maintain a positive self-identity. Several studies have shown that when someone includes himself or herself in a certain category, this individual evaluates similar in-group members positively (Tajfel, 1982).

Demographic characteristics, such as gender, form a category that an individual might consider relevant in determining his or her self-identity. Various researchers have argued that these surface-level traits form useful cues for categorizing oneself and others as these traits are visible and easily available. This is particularly so when information about the deep-level traits (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, and values) of others is unknown (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Kulik & Ambrose, 1992; Pelled, 1997). Thus, when stakeholders are not familiar with the organizational spokesperson, his or her demographic features, such as gender similarity, is likely to play an important role in the formation of individuals' perceptions of the spokesperson and the organization in crisis. A condition of this effect is that stakeholders are able to see the spokesperson (e.g., in the news or an online video). By positively evaluating people who are demographically similar, a person is able to maintain his or her own positive self-identity (Goldberg, 2003).

Tajfel (1982) argues that this process underlies the similarity-at-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) which suggests that the more people perceive another person as similar to themselves, the greater the likelihood that the other person will be liked. According to this paradigm, individuals who share demographic dimensions have more common life experiences and beliefs. Thus, these individuals find social interactions with each other to be less stressful and more positively reinforcing (Vecchio & Bullis, 2001). The paradigm posits that the generation of affect that results from demographic similarity in a relationship results from a sense of comfort and supportive behavior towards each other (Tsui, Xin, & Egan, 1995).

Arpan (2002) was one of the first researchers to investigate similarity between stakeholders and a crisis spokesperson. Her study showed that the similarity between an organization's spokesperson and its stakeholders in terms of ethnic background positively affects perceptions of the spokesperson's

credibility. Similar to ethnicity, gender can be derived from the spokesperson's physical appearance (Dwyer et al., 1998). Consequently, a spokesperson's gender can function as a nonverbal visual cue that stakeholders might use to determine their similarity with the spokesperson. The spokesperson can be considered a representative of the broader organization in crisis. This idea is in accordance with, for instance, Goldberg's (2003) assumption that a recruiter represents the broader organization that is hiring people.

Nevertheless, gender similarity has not yet been tested in a crisis context, although positive effects have been found in other domains such as the buyer-seller relationship (Smith, 1998) or the supervisor-subordinate context (e.g., Bakar & McCann, 2014; Foley, Linnehan, Greenhaus, & Weer, 2006; Lankau, Riordan, & Thomas, 2005). For example, Foley et al. (2006) investigated the impact of gender similarity in the supervisor-subordinate dyad and family-supportive supervision. The authors found that gender similarity might be beneficial in this context because supervisors are inclined to provide more family support to subordinates who are similar in gender. Furthermore, another study about mentoring dyads showed that gender similarity between a mentor and protégé resulted in significantly higher protégé liking. Gender similarity also had other beneficial outcomes in a supervisor-subordinate context, as illustrated by Bakar and McCann (2014). The authors found that gender similarity between supervisor and subordinate resulted in better leader-member exchange quality evaluations by subordinates as well as higher job satisfaction and commitment to the work group. Furthermore, gender similarity between mentor and protégé had a beneficial impact on the mentor's perceptions: when protégés were of the same gender as the mentor, higher ratings of mentoring functions provided to protégés ensued (Lankau et al., 2005). In this study, gender similarity was beneficial for both parties (i.e., the mentor and protégé).

In the current study, based on insights from social psychology, we argue that gender similarity between the crisis spokesperson and stakeholders can also generate beneficial outcomes in a crisis context. More specifically, we expect that stakeholders who share their gender with the spokesperson will experience empathy towards the spokesperson, which is a crucial precursor of forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, 1998), and thus might benefit the organizational reputation.

2.2 The mediating role of empathy towards the spokesperson

According to Seeger (2006), empathy is a crucial aspect of corporate communication. Empathy has a cognitive as well as an affective component (Wade & Worthington, 2005). When people experience empathy, they cognitively perceive the world from someone else's perspective. At the same time, they experience the feelings of another person (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). McCullough et al. (1997) suggested that relationship factors, such as relational closeness, can have a strong impact on

whether and how empathy develops. Empathy can be communicated through verbal and nonverbal aspects (McHenry, Parker, Baile, & Lenzi, 2012). Based on social identity theory and the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel, 1972), we expect that gender similarity will create relational closeness with the spokesperson, thereby resulting in a unit relationship with him or her (Gino & Galinsky, 2012). Thus, empathy towards the spokesperson is likely to occur in this context.

Numerous models of forgiveness consider empathy a crucial aspect of the process of forgiving (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, 1998). McCullough et al. (1998) put forward different categories of the antecedents of forgiveness, which vary in terms of the impact on the actual act of forgiveness. The more the antecedent contributes to the act of forgiveness, the more likely this antecedent will enhance stakeholders' forgiveness and, thus, people's intention to feel empathy towards that person. Individual similarities are antecedents that contributes to the formation of empathy, though at the lowest level. The closer the individual similarities, the more people will be inclined to forgive someone and thus feel empathy towards him or her (McCullough et al., 1998).

When stakeholders are of the same gender as the spokesperson, they are more likely to minimize negative events to the extent that these stakeholders experience empathy for the spokesperson. Empathy results in the minimization of the wrongdoing that might, in turn, decrease the impact of that event (Davis & Gold, 2011). Using insights from the empathy model of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997), we state that empathy will positively affect organizational reputation because as stakeholders feel empathy towards the spokesperson, they will experience an increased feeling of caring for the organization in crisis, which, in turn, overshadows its wrongdoing.

2.3 The moderating role of the crisis response strategy

We expect gender similarity to influence organizational reputation through increased feelings of empathy towards the spokesperson. However, the impact of this nonverbal visual aspect might be moderated by the verbal aspect, namely, the crisis response strategy that the spokesperson is delivering to organizational stakeholders. The crisis response strategy plays a crucial role in the process of crisis recovery (Barrett, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). A dominant theory in crisis communication literature about crisis response strategies is Coombs's SCCT (2007). This theory suggests that an organization in crisis should match its crisis response strategy to the degree of responsibility that is attributed to it for the crisis. SCCT distinguishes between three clusters of crisis types (i.e., victim, accidental, and preventable crises) based on the amount of crisis responsibility attributed to the organization. Based on the type of crisis, a matching crisis response strategy has to be selected, that is, the strategy that allows the organization to accept the amount of responsibility that is attributed to it by stakeholders. For instance, when a preventable crisis occurs, for which the organization is

perceived as highly responsible, the organization should use a rebuild strategy in which it apologizes for the crisis. Coombs (2007) argued that implementing the appropriate crisis response strategy protects the organizational reputation.

In addition to individual similarities, an antecedent that supersedes individual similarities in terms of its contribution to the initiation of empathy is the presence or absence of an apology. In contrast to individual similarities, apologies are a major antecedent of empathy and are thus very important (McCullough et al., 1998; Riek & Mania, 2012). According to the empathy model of forgiveness, people are more likely to feel empathy for someone when apologies are offered (McCullough et al., 1998; Riek & Mania, 2012). Thus, when the stakeholder and the spokesperson are of the same gender and the spokesperson uses a rebuild strategy in which apologies are offered, two empathy-initiating antecedents (i.e., apologies and gender similarity) are represented. Because people will feel more empathy towards the spokesperson, we expect this to have a positive effect on organizational reputation.

However, when the spokesperson uses a deny strategy in response to a preventable crisis, crisis responsibility is neglected, and no apologies are offered (Coombs, 2007). Consequently, stakeholders will be less inclined to forgive the organization in crisis and would therefore feel less empathy towards the spokesperson, which is not beneficial for organizational reputation. Thus, when the crisis spokesperson uses a deny strategy (Coombs, 2007), the most influential antecedent of empathy, according to McCullough et al. (1998)—an apology—is absent. Therefore, we expect that the impact of gender similarity on organizational reputation will be stronger when a rebuild strategy is used instead of a deny strategy. In sum, as shown in Figure 1, we hypothesize that:

H₁: *When the organizational spokesperson uses a rebuild strategy, gender similarity (compared to gender dissimilarity) with the spokesperson results in higher perceived empathy towards the spokesperson and, subsequently, better organizational reputation than when the spokesperson uses a deny strategy in which no apologies are offered.*

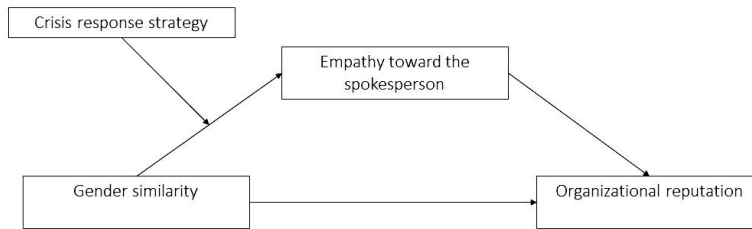


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual moderated mediation model.

3 Method

3.1 Design and stimuli

Respondents received a crisis scenario with information about a fictitious crisis. The scenario explained that 20 students became ill after eating a sandwich from a fictitious bread company. The scenarios described a fictitious organization in order to prevent confounding the effects from the organization's pre-crisis reputation (Laufer & Jung, 2010). The scenario clarified that the company had failed to live up to the necessary hygiene standards, thus attributing a high level of responsibility to the organization in crisis and indicating a preventable crisis. This type of crisis inflicts a high amount of reputational damage and requires a rebuild crisis response strategy according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007). The respondents then read a statement of the spokesperson expressed during a press conference. In this statement, in the rebuild condition, the spokesperson used a rebuild strategy in which he or she offers apologies and takes responsibility for the crisis. More specifically, the spokesperson said that the company could have prevented the incident. He or she argued that the company was aware that it did not take all necessary precautions to respect hygiene standards. Thus, the spokesperson took full responsibility for the event and expressed the company's sincere apologies to all affected parties (i.e., *"We take full responsibility for what happened, and I want to express my sincere apologies to all affected parties."*) (cf. appendix, Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6).

In the other press conference statement, the spokesperson applied a deny strategy by saying that all necessary precautions had been taken and that the company was not responsible for the crisis. More specifically, the spokesperson said that the company could in no way have avoided the incident. He or she explained that unlike what has been claimed, the company took all necessary precautions in order to respect hygiene standards. Thus, the spokesperson claimed that the company did not bear any responsibility for the event. It was argued that the incident could have occurred in any food company (cf. appendix, Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10).

Each scenario was accompanied by a photo of the spokesperson and the spokesperson's name. Two photos depicted a male spokesperson, and two photos depicted a female spokesperson (cf. appendices). Each respondent saw one picture. We chose to show two photos per gender in order to avoid potential effects regarding physical appearance.²³ We also checked whether or not the different photos of the male and female spokespersons significantly influenced empathy towards the spokesperson in order to make sure that there were no confounding effects of the appearance of the person depicted in each picture. The results show that for the two photos of the male spokespersons ($M_{\text{photo1}} = 3.41$, $SD_{\text{photo1}} = 1.23$ vs. $M_{\text{photo2}} = 3.04$, $SD_{\text{photo2}} = 1.19$), there was no significant difference in the level of empathy towards the spokesperson, $t(94) = 1.50$, $p = 0.14$, $r = 0.15$. This was also the case for the two photos of the female spokespersons ($M_{\text{photo1}} = 3.15$, $SD_{\text{photo1}} = 1.24$ vs. $M_{\text{photo2}} = 3.24$, $SD_{\text{photo2}} = 1.34$), with the results showing no significant difference in empathy towards the spokespersons in the two photos, $t(101) = -0.37$, $p = 0.72$, $r = 0.04$. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between the four photos (2 of the female and 2 of the male spokespersons) regarding the level of empathy towards the spokesperson, $F(3, 195) = 0.75$, $p = 0.53$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$. To reduce environmental influences, the pictures of the spokespersons had a neutral background. The spokespersons wore approximately the same type of business attire (i.e., a neutral shirt) and had a neutral facial expression. By mentioning the spokespersons' names, we gave an additional indicator of their gender. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants' were asked to reveal their gender.

Before the analyses were performed, gender similarity was coded. The respondents' gender was coded as the same as that of the spokesperson (i.e., coded as 1) or different from that of the spokesperson (i.e., coded as 0). Code 1 represented gender similarity, while code 0 represented gender dissimilarity with the spokesperson. A 2 (gender match: similar vs. dissimilar) \times 2 (crisis response strategy: rebuild vs. deny) between-subjects quasi-experimental design was established, which enabled us to manipulate the match between the gender of the spokesperson and stakeholders, which could be similar or dissimilar, and the crisis response strategy used by the spokesperson, which was either a rebuild or deny strategy. The photos depicting the gender of the spokesperson were randomly

² We checked whether there was no bias, in terms of sympathy for the four different characters, between the male and female respondents. For this purpose, we asked participants about the extent to which they felt sympathy towards the spokesperson on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to very much. The results of an independent samples t-test demonstrated that there was no significant difference between male ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.56$) and female ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.57$) respondents regarding their level of sympathy towards the spokesperson, $t(197) = 0.63$, $p = 0.53$, $r = 0.05$.

³ We measured the perceived attractiveness of the spokesperson based on the item "To what extent do you think the spokesperson is attractive?" This item had to be answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from not at all to very much. We conducted an additional analysis in which we tested whether there was no significant difference in attractiveness between the male and female spokespersons. The results showed no significant difference between male ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.54$) and female spokespersons in terms of attractiveness ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(197) = -1.40$, $p = 0.16$, $r = 0.09$.

assigned to all conditions. Thereafter, we coded the gender match. Hence, gender similarity was a fixed, non-random factor, with the experimental design therefore being quasi-experimental.

3.2 Participants and procedure

A convenience sample of 199 respondents from a Western European country participated in the study. A link to the questionnaire was distributed via e-mail, forums, and flyers at a large university. The respondents were, on average, 22 years old ($SD = 1.89$, range = 17–26), approximately 60% of whom were female. Altogether, 105 respondents read the scenario in which the spokesperson used a rebuild strategy, while the remaining 94 respondents read the scenario in which the spokesperson applied a deny strategy. Table 1 demonstrates the male-vs.-female distribution of the participants across the gender similarity and dissimilarity conditions. The respondents were randomly assigned to one of the eight scenarios⁴.

Gender of the participant	Gender similarity	Gender dissimilarity
Male	31	48
Female	55	65

Table 1: Distribution of respondents across gender similarity versus dissimilarity manipulation.

First, the crisis scenario was shown to the respondents, with a picture of the spokesperson accompanied by a statement of the spokesperson in a press conference in which either a rebuild or a deny strategy was used. The scenario included the spokesperson's name and picture and respondents were asked to look at it attentively and to read the scenario thoroughly. After reading the scenario, all respondents were asked to fill in an online questionnaire. The manipulation check of the crisis response strategy was immediately measured after exposure to the stimuli, followed by empathy towards the spokesperson and the organizational reputation measure. At the end of the questionnaire, some demographic information was solicited (e.g., gender, age, education).

3.3 Measures

Full measurements of all variables of interest are mentioned in appendix (cf. 9.1). To ascertain whether the respondents assigned greater responsibility for the crisis when they read the statement in which the spokesperson used a rebuild strategy compared to when the spokesperson used a deny strategy, *crisis responsibility* ($\alpha = 0.80$) was measured using Griffin, Babin, and Darden's (1992) scale, which consists of four items (e.g., the organization is responsible for the crisis; external circumstances are

⁴ Table 1 shows that more women (55) were of the same gender as the spokesperson than men (31). Therefore, we added the participants' gender as a covariate in the analyses of H_1 .

responsible for the crisis; the organization is to blame for the crisis; external circumstances are to blame for the crisis).⁵ These items are related to SCCT (Coombs, 2007) which argues that crisis response strategies differ from each other in terms of the amount of responsibility that organizations take (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014a).

Empathy towards the spokesperson was measured using McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang's (2003) scale ($\alpha = 0.89$). The participants were asked to indicate how they felt about the spokesperson based on five items (i.e., sympathetic, empathic, concerned, moved, and compassionate).

Organizational reputation was measured using Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever's (2000) 20-item scale ($\alpha = 0.94$) (e.g., I have a good feeling about this company; I trust this company; I admire and respect this company; this company has a clear view on the future; this company is well managed).

All items were again measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the variables measured in the study.

Measures	Empathy towards the spokesperson	Organizational reputation	Crisis responsibility	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Empathy towards the spokesperson	–	0.52***	–0.01 ^{n.s.}	3.30	1.34
Organizational reputation	0.52***	–	–0.31***	3.20	0.88
Crisis responsibility	–0.01 ^{n.s.}	–0.31***	–	5.22	0.98

Table 2: Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics.

Note: ^{n.s.} = not significant.

N = 199.

M = mean.

SD = standard deviation.

* Significant at $p < .05$.

** Significant at $p < .01$.

*** Significant at $p < .001$.

⁵ The second and fourth items were reverse coded in order to ensure that the items were scaled in the same direction.

4 Results

4.1 Manipulation check

To check the manipulation of the crisis response strategy, we examined whether the organization was perceived as taking more responsibility for the crisis in the rebuild condition than in the deny condition. An independent samples t-test confirmed this: using a rebuild strategy ($M = 5.49, SD = 0.93$) resulted in a statistically significantly higher perceived level of responsibility for the crisis by the organization compared to the use of a deny strategy ($M = 4.91, SD = 0.95, t(197) = 4.29, p < 0.01, r = 0.29$). Thus, the crisis response strategy was manipulated as intended.

4.2 Hypothesis testing

To test whether a crisis response strategy moderated the impact of gender similarity on empathy towards the spokesperson and, subsequently, organizational reputation, we first tested the interaction effect between gender similarity and crisis response strategy on empathy towards the spokesperson by means of a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results demonstrated that there was significant interaction between these two factors on empathy towards the spokesperson, $F(1, 195) = 4.00, p = 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Next, in order to test whether the mediation, as hypothesized in H_1 , was moderated by a crisis response strategy, a moderated mediation (i.e., model 7; 5000 bootstrap samples) analysis was conducted, using Hayes' PROCESS macro (2015). Gender similarity was added as an independent variable, crisis response strategy as a moderator, empathy towards the spokesperson as a mediator, and organizational reputation as a dependent variable. The index of moderated mediation shows that the crisis response strategy indeed moderated the relationship between gender similarity and empathy towards the spokesperson ($B = 0.25, SE = 0.12, 95\% CI [0.0051, 0.5376]$). Figure 2 provides a detailed look at the interaction effect between gender similarity and crisis response strategy on empathy towards the spokesperson ($F(1, 199) = 4.00, p = 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$).

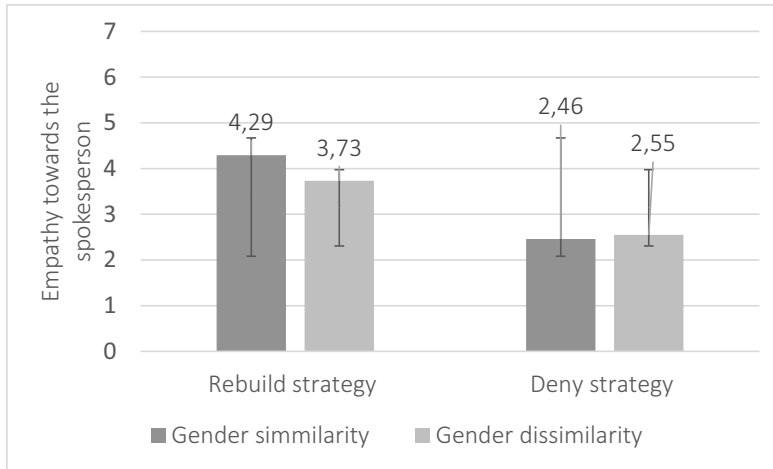


Figure 2: Interaction effect between gender similarity and crisis response strategy on empathy towards the spokesperson.

Note. Error bars: +/- 2 standard deviations.

Figure 2 shows that when the spokesperson used a deny strategy, gender similarity ($M_{\text{similarity}} = 2.46$, $SD = 1.11$) did not statistically significantly affect empathy towards this spokesperson compared to gender dissimilarity ($M_{\text{dissimilarity}} = 2.55$, $SD = 1.12$) ($t(92) = 0.38$, $p = 0.70$, $r = 0.04$). However, when the spokesperson used a rebuild strategy in which apologies were offered, gender similarity resulted in more empathy towards this spokesperson ($M_{\text{similarity}} = 4.29$, $SD = 1.08$) than gender dissimilarity ($M_{\text{dissimilarity}} = 3.73$, $SD = 1.18$, $t(103) = -2.53$, $p = 0.01$, $r = 0.24$). Thus, hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Accordingly, regarding this hypothesis, we expected that gender similarity in combination with a rebuild strategy would result in a higher level of empathy towards the spokesperson than gender similarity accompanied by a deny strategy. However, the results showed that the effect of gender similarity on empathy towards the spokesperson disappeared when a deny strategy was used.

Furthermore, the moderated mediation analysis showed that based on the conditional indirect effects, empathy towards the spokesperson mediated the effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation but only when the spokesperson used a rebuild strategy (Path c' , $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.0501, 0.5376]). In this case, gender similarity resulted in empathy towards the spokesperson (Path a , $B = 0.56$, $SE = 0.22$, $t = 2.53$, $p = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.1215, 0.9976]). Subsequently, empathy towards the spokesperson significantly affected organizational reputation (Path b , $B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 4.35$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.1927, 0.5160]). Moreover, there was no direct effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation (Path c , $B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 0.85$, 95% CI [-0.1338, 0.3352]).

When the spokesperson used a deny strategy, the indirect effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation through empathy towards the spokesperson was lacking (Path c' , $B = -0.03$, $SE = 0.08$, 95%

CI [-0.2251, 0.1458]). Specifically, gender similarity did not statistically significantly affect empathy towards the spokesperson (Path a, $B = -0.09$, $SE = 0.24$, $t = -0.38$, $p = 0.70$, 95% CI [-0.5648, 0.3830]), while empathy towards the spokesperson significantly affected organizational reputation (Path b, $B = 0.50$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 8.28$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.3799, 0.6198]). These results show that hypothesis 1 was partially supported. The direct effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation remained statistically insignificant (Path c, $B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -0.35$, 95% CI [-0.3231, 0.2264]).

In addition, to check whether the participants' gender triggered the abovementioned moderated mediation effect, we added this variable as a covariate in the analyses. The results demonstrated that the gender of the participants did not significantly influence the results of the moderated mediation analysis. The moderated index remained significant, ($B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.0051, 0.5376]). Finally, we also want to mention that results demonstrated a significant main effect of the crisis response strategy on organizational reputation. The use of a rebuild strategy ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.96$) resulted in a significantly better organizational reputation than the use of a deny strategy ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.76$), $t(194) = 2.70$, $p < 0.01$, $r = 0.19$).

5 Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the impact of gender similarity between an organization's spokesperson and stakeholders on organizational reputation. More specifically, we examined whether this effect could be attributed to the empathic concern that results from similarity and whether this effect could be influenced by the verbal crisis response strategy that the spokesperson communicates. The results showed that gender similarity increased empathy among stakeholders and that this, in turn, positively affected organizational reputation. Being of the same gender as the spokesperson probably initiated a closer relationship with the spokesperson (Gino & Galinsky, 2012), which then generated empathy towards the spokesperson. Gender similarity has a significant positive outcome in a crisis context. It increases reputation repair, which is the primary concern of crisis communication managers (Coombs, 2007). Thus, besides having beneficial outcomes in a supervisor-subordinate context (Bakar & McCann, 2014; Foley et al., 2006) and mentor-protégé relationships (Lankau et al., 2005), gender similarity is also able to create beneficial outcomes for organizations in crisis both for the stakeholders (i.e., feelings of empathy) as well as for the organization in crisis (i.e., protection of organizational reputation).

The present findings are in line with the premises of social identity theory and the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel, 1972), which argues that demographics form a category that defines people's self-identity and forms opinions about others. However, the study also revealed additional

insights from social psychology about interpersonal forgiveness and its different antecedents (McCullough et al., 1998). Here, the study showed that when no responsibility is taken and no apologies are offered, individual similarities with the spokesperson, which also form an antecedent of forgiveness and empathy, no longer play a role.

In addition, we found a significant interaction between gender similarity as a visual cue in crisis communication and the verbal aspect of crisis communication, namely, the crisis response strategy. Only when a rebuild strategy was used (Coombs, 2007) gender similarity did play a beneficial role in crisis communication. Consequently, we revealed a boundary condition of the gender similarity effect. Gender similarity can positively influence organizational reputation through an increase in empathy towards the spokesperson, but only when the spokesperson offers apologies. These apologies form a precursor of empathy and forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998) that, in turn, benefits the organizational reputation. These findings are in line with the guidelines of SCCT (Coombs, 2007), which advise that apologies should be offered and that responsibility should be taken when an organization is responsible for a crisis. At the same time, the present findings refine these guidelines by showing that other aspects, besides the verbal content, such as gender similarity, play a significant role by providing opportunities to further optimize the effectiveness of the crisis response strategy. However, choosing the appropriate crisis response strategy according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007) remains important because, in line with previous studies (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996), we found a statistically significant main effect of the use of the matching crisis response strategy (i.e., the rebuild strategy) on organizational reputation.

6 Limitations and future research directions

The findings of the present study point to a number of areas in which future research would be useful. The study examined a preventable crisis because this type of crisis results in the highest reputational loss and represents the greatest threat to an organization (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010). However, Coombs (2007) distinguished other types of crises, namely, victim and accidental crises. Future research could investigate what happens if an organization is confronted with these types of crises. Unlike in preventable and accidental crises, in a victim crisis, the organization is not responsible for the crisis and is itself a victim. Thus, there are only weak attributions of crisis responsibility and therefore no apologies have to be offered according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007). In this context, there is only a low reputational threat. Hence, in this context empathy is not likely to occur because no apologies are offered in the response strategy. However, other processes could be initiated because the organization in crisis is a victim. For example, stakeholders might identify with the organization in

crisis and have compassion (Coombs, 1999). Future research is necessary to determine the role of nonverbal cues in such types of crises.

Furthermore, according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007), the level of responsibility taken in the crisis response strategy forms the main difference between rebuild and deny strategies. Therefore, we ascertained the manipulation of the crisis response strategy by measuring how much responsibility the respondents perceived that the organization in crisis has taken based on the spokespersons' communication. This manipulation is in accordance with other studies that manipulated crisis response strategies (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014a; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Furthermore, in the rebuild strategy condition, actual apologies were mentioned (i.e., "*I want to express my sincere apologies to all affected parties*"). Several authors (Fuchs-Burnett, 2002; Patel & Reinsch, 2003; Tyler, 1997) have argued that taking responsibility forms the focal point of an apology. Based on these arguments, we have chosen the current manipulation check. Nevertheless, because apologies are offered in the rebuild strategy, it would be interesting for future research to explore whether respondents perceive the organization as offering apologies so as to better distinguish between deny and rebuild strategies.

In addition, the current study operationalized a rebuild strategy as taking responsibility and offering apologies because apologies play a crucial role in the empathy model of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). However, according to Coombs (2007), offering compensation might also be an important reputational action when a preventable crisis occurs. Thus, future research could test whether the effect on organizational reputation is even more pronounced when the spokesperson also offers a form of compensation in the rebuild strategy.

Moreover, it might also be interesting to examine the gender similarity effect in a more robust way, for example, instead of showing pictures of a male or female spokesperson in the scenario, gender could be distinguished by simply saying "Mr. Spokesman" vs. "Mrs. Spokeswoman" or by showing male or female pictograms that only portray the gender aspect. This way, the potential confounding effects of appearance and the clothing style of the spokesperson can be ruled out. However, we aimed to rule out much of these confounding effects in the study by offering two male and two female spokespersons, each in a similar picture with the same neutral background and similar neutral clothing. Furthermore, similarity could also be created based on internal characteristics such as shared values or lifestyle (Lichtenthal & Tellefsen, 2001). The current study did not consider these types of similarities. Future research could test an operationalization of similarity that also encompasses internal characteristics besides external visual characteristics such as gender.

In addition, previous research has shown that women experience higher levels of empathy than men (e.g., Gault & Sabini; 2000; Schieman & Van Gundy, 2000; Toussaint & Webb, 2005) which makes

empathy a gender-related issue according to these studies. However, in the present study, we did not investigate the impact of gender but the impact of gender similarity. Nevertheless, we controlled for the potential predisposition of men versus women regarding empathy by adding the gender of the participants as a covariate in the analyses. The results demonstrate that participants' gender did not significantly influence the results.

Moreover, in both experiments, we used a written crisis scenario with a photo of the spokesperson. Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall (1996), however, argued that the characteristics of a person can be expressed using different dimensions, such as physical appearance, body movements, voice pitch, etc. By using audiovisual media such as videos, we would have been able to investigate the interaction of different visual or vocal cues (for example, gender, voice pitch, and gestures). Consequently, it would have been interesting to use a video instead of a written crisis scenario, as in Claeys and Cauberghe's (2014b) study on the effect of a spokesperson's vocal and visual cues.

In addition, in the present study, only gender similarity was investigated. However, demographic similarity can also be examined through age or racial similarities. According to Goldberg (2003), race is a more salient category with which one can identify compared to age and gender (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Goldberg (2003) only found an effect of racial similarity on organizational perceptions in a recruiter–applicant context and not in relation to age and gender similarity. Therefore, it would be interesting to test a broader form of demographic similarity and investigate the moderating role of the crisis response strategy in this context.

In the current study, we used the term 'gender similarity' to determine whether the spokesperson's gender matches that of stakeholders. However, differences in the definition of gender (i.e., socially constructed roles related to gender distinctions) vs. sex (i.e., anatomical or chromosomal categories of male and female) (Walker & Cook, 1998) have to be recognized. Since previous studies about the same topic used the concept of 'gender similarity' (e.g., Foley et al., 2006), we also decided to use this term. Consequently, we did not consider that participants' sex might not be synonymous with their gender. Therefore, future research might wish to measure participants' gender.

In this study, we chose an organizational spokesperson who was not familiar with the study participants because, in this context, nonverbal cues are most influential (Harrison et al., 1998; Kulik & Ambrose, 1992; Pelled, 1997). However, for future research, it would be interesting to examine the impact of gender similarity if, for example, a well-known CEO of an organization takes on the role of crisis communicator.

Next, similar to most other studies on demographic similarity (e.g., Goldberg, 2003), the present study assumed identification with a demographic group instead of explicitly testing this identification.

Therefore, future studies could include an explicit measure of identification with a particular group (cf. Coats, Smith, Claypool, & Banner, 2000).

It would also be interesting to set up a cross-cultural study because cultural masculinity differs across countries and this might influence the impact of gender similarity. According to Hofstede (1980), in high culturally masculine countries, men are expected to be assertive, dominant, tough, and focused on material success. The expectations for women differ from those for men. In these societies, women are expected to be modest, subordinate, tender, and concerned with life quality. Thus, future research could compare the impact of gender similarity between a country that is high in cultural masculinity and low in cultural masculinity.

Finally, although every effort was taken to ensure that manipulations of the experiment were as realistic as possible, we could never fully replicate a real-life setting by means of an experiment. For example, in the experimental setting, we instructed respondents to carefully read the scenario and attentively watch the photo of the spokesperson. This instruction might have affected the findings and perhaps limited the generalizability to a real-life context in which people often scan through news more superficially. Therefore, the instruction could have induced more systematic processing of the stimuli (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Prior research on nonverbal visual communication indicates, however, that this type of communication can function as a peripheral cue (Lichtenthal & Tellefsen, 2001). As such, we would expect that the impact of gender similarity might be even more pronounced in the context of peripheral rather than systematic processing.

7 Conclusion and managerial implications

Previous research has stressed that organizations have to protect their reputation when a crisis occurs (Avery et al., 2010). The present findings suggest that this reputation can be protected not only verbally, such as through crisis response strategies, but also nonverbally, such as in the context of gender similarity. In particular, organizations that produce commodities aimed at a specific male or female audience can benefit from these findings by choosing a spokesperson of the same gender as their (main) target stakeholders.

These findings also show an alternative for communication managers who are reluctant to express empathy as this might signal unprofessionalism. The present study showed that a spokesperson's visual characteristics can create empathy towards the spokesperson, which is a crucial asset in crisis communication (Seeger, 2006).

Furthermore, the present findings add to previous studies by providing evidence that people are not only more inclined to forgive in the context of satisfactory, committed relationships. Based on a more incidental relational basis, forgiveness also ensues through the interpersonal transgression of sharing the spokesperson's gender (McCullough et al., 1997). In addition, in line with Claeys and Cauberghe's (2014b) findings, the present study showed that it is important to be aware of the impact of implicit processes that underlie the effectiveness of crisis communication, instead of focusing exclusively on the verbal aspect of crisis communication.

Taken together, the study's findings make important contributions to the field of crisis communication research. In line with An and Cheng's (2010) suggestion, the study started from a social psychologically backdrop to gain a more thorough understanding of the implicit processes of crisis communication. As such, the study differs substantially from previous crisis communication research that focused primarily on the verbal aspect of crisis communication (Avery et al., 2010). Furthermore, this study is the first to investigate the interaction between verbal aspects (i.e., crisis response strategy) and visual aspects (i.e., gender similarity) in crisis communication. Thus, it is important for future research to have a broader view of crisis communication instead of simply narrowing it down to content (Avery et al., 2010) and the medium via which the communication takes place (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

These results are interesting not only in a crisis communication context but also in a broader corporate communication domain in which a spokesperson has to deliver a message to an audience and in which the creation of empathy is important. Although, in practice, it may be difficult or impossible to actually match the spokesperson's gender to that of stakeholders, for some crises (i.e., sexual violence) and some organizations, these findings are relevant. In addition, the purpose of this study was not to provide a strategy for organizations in crisis. Instead, we wanted to reveal the processes underlying the effectiveness of communication through gender similarity with the organizational spokesperson.

8 References

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9 Appendices

9.1 Measurements of variables of interest

Variables	Item statement	Item measurement
Crisis responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The organization itself is responsible for the crisis- External circumstances are responsible for the crisis⁶- The organization is to blame for the crisis- External circumstances are to blame for the crisis⁷	7-point Likert scale Totally disagree-totally agree
Empathy towards the spokesperson	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Sympathetic- Empathic- Concerned- Moved- Compassionate	7-point Likert scale Totally disagree-totally agree
Organizational reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- I have a good feeling about the organization- I admire and respect the organization- I trust this organization- The organization offers products of high quality	7-point Likert scale Totally disagree-totally agree

⁶ This item was reverse-coded

⁷ This item was reverse-coded

- The organization stands behind its products
- The organization offers products that are good value for the money
- The organization has a clear view on the future
- The organization has excellent leadership
- The organization has high standards in the way it treats people
- The organization recognizes market opportunities and utilizes them
- The organization is well managed
- The organization seems like a good one to work for
- The organization supports good causes
- This seems an organization with good employees
- This organization supports good causes
- This is an environmentally conscious organization
- This organization is very profitable

- This organization seems a riskless investment
 - I think this organization is doing better than competitors
 - It seems like an organization with strong prospects for future growth
-

9.2 Female spokesperson 1 and rebuild strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoester Mart Fiems van B&S reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Uit onderzoek is inderdaad gebleken dat het probleem door ons vermeden kon worden. We zijn er ons bewust van dat we onvoldoende maatregelen genomen hebben om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We nemen dan ook de volledige verantwoordelijkheid op voor wat hier gebeurd is en ik wens mijn oprechte excuses uit te drukken aan alle betrokkenen”.



Figure 3: Manipulation female spokesperson 1 (rebuild)

9.3 Female spokesperson 2 and rebuild strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoerder Natalie Claerhout van B&S (zie onderstaande foto) reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Uit onderzoek is inderdaad gebleken dat het probleem door ons vermeden kon worden. We zijn er ons bewust van dat we onvoldoende maatregelen genomen hebben om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We nemen dan ook de volledige verantwoordelijkheid op voor wat hier gebeurd is en ik wens mijn oprechte excuses uit te drukken aan alle betrokkenen”.



Figure 4: Manipulation female spokesperson 2 (rebuild)

9.4 Male spokesperson 1 and rebuild strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoerder Maarten Fiems van B&S (zie onderstaande foto) reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Uit onderzoek is inderdaad gebleken dat het probleem door ons vermeden kon worden. We zijn er ons bewust van dat we onvoldoende maatregelen genomen hebben om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We nemen dan ook de volledige verantwoordelijkheid op voor wat hier gebeurd is en ik wens mijn oprechte excuses uit te drukken aan alle betrokkenen”.



Figure 5: Manipulation male spokesperson 1 (rebuild)

9.5 Male spokesperson 2 and rebuild strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoerder Raf Rodeyns van B&S (zie onderstaande foto), reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Uit onderzoek is inderdaad gebleken dat het probleem door ons vermeden kon worden. We zijn er ons bewust van dat we onvoldoende maatregelen genomen hebben om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We nemen dan ook de volledige verantwoordelijkheid op voor wat hier gebeurd is en ik wens mijn oprechte excuses uit te drukken aan alle betrokkenen”.



Figure 6: Manipulation male spokesperson 2 (rebuild)

9.6 Female spokesperson 1 and deny strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoester Mart Fiems van B&S reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Ik kan u enkel zeggen dat het probleem door ons onmogelijk vermeden kon worden. In tegenstelling tot wat beweerd wordt, werden er voldoende maatregelen genomen om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We dragen dan ook geen enkele verantwoordelijkheid voor wat gebeurd is. Dit kon in eender welke andere broodjeszaak ook voorgevallen zijn.”



Figure 7: Manipulation female spokesperson 1 (deny)

9.7 Female spokesperson 2 and deny strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoerder Natalie Claerhout van B&S reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Ik kan u enkel zeggen dat het probleem door ons onmogelijk vermeden kon worden. In tegenstelling tot wat beweerd wordt, werden er voldoende maatregelen genomen om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We dragen dan ook geen enkele verantwoordelijkheid voor wat gebeurd is. Dit kon in eender welke andere broodjeszaak ook voorgevallen zijn”.



Figure 8: Manipulation female spokesperson 2 (deny)

9.8 Male spokesperson 1 and deny strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoerder Maarten Fiems van B&S reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Ik kan u enkel zeggen dat het probleem door ons onmogelijk vermeden kon worden. In tegenstelling tot wat beweerd wordt, werden er voldoende maatregelen genomen om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We dragen dan ook geen enkele verantwoordelijkheid voor wat gebeurd is. Dit kon in eender welke andere broodjeszaak ook voorgevallen zijn”.



Figure 9: Manipulation male spokesperson 1 (deny)

9.9 Male spokesperson 2 and deny strategy

Zopas is aan het licht gekomen dat een twintigtal studenten ziek werden na het eten van een broodje uit de broodjesketen B&S. De zieke studenten kregen last van misselijkheid, buikpijn, overgeven en diarree. Deze symptomen wijzen op een voedselvergiftiging. De meeste studenten waren er na een tijdje terug bovenop, maar een aantal werden naar het ziekenhuis overgebracht voor verdere verzorging en onderzoek. Vermoedelijk is de voedselvergiftiging te wijten aan een gebrek aan hygiëne in de broodjesketen, door het onvoldoende reinigen en schoonmaken van de gebruiksvoorwerpen en het aanrecht. Daarnaast blijkt ook dat de voedingsmiddelen op een onjuiste manier bewaard werden. Hieruit blijkt dus dat de broodjesketen dit probleem perfect had kunnen vermijden. De woordvoerder Raf Rodeyns van B&S reageerde na dit bericht op de aantijgingen in een persconferentie:

“Beste mensen, ik heb u vandaag bijeengeroepen om te reageren op de recente gebeurtenissen in verband met de voedselvergiftigingen. Ik kan u enkel zeggen dat het probleem door ons onmogelijk vermeden kon worden. In tegenstelling tot wat beweerd wordt, werden er voldoende maatregelen genomen om de wetten omtrent hygiëne na te leven. We dragen dan ook geen enkele verantwoordelijkheid voor wat gebeurd is. Dit kon in eender welke andere broodjeszaak ook voorgevallen zijn”.



Figure 10: Manipulation male spokesperson 2 (deny)

CHAPTER VI
TERRORISM THREAT IN BELGIUM: THE
RESILIENCE OF BELGIAN CITIZENS AND THE
PROTECTION OF THE GOVERNMENTAL
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TERRORISM THREAT IN BELGIUM: THE RESILIENCE OF BELGIAN CITIZENS AND THE PROTECTION OF THE GOVERNMENTAL REPUTATION BY MEANS OF COMMUNICATION¹

ABSTRACT

In November 2015, the terrorism threat in Belgium confronted both citizens and the government with a situation characterized by high uncertainty. In this context, a national survey was conducted among 805 respondents, with three purposes. First, this case study aimed to explore how Belgians deal with the threat by examining if they change their behavior in public places and seek information about the threat. Second, we investigated why people seek information about the terrorism threat based on three determinants, namely their level of involvement with the threat, the expert efficacy of the government, and attitudes towards mass media communication. Finally, this study elaborated on perceived governmental efficacy, researching how governmental reputation is affected through institutional trust and governmental responsibility. The results showed that the terrorism threat leads citizens to be more alert in public places and participate less in mass events. Moreover, one fifth stopped traveling by public transport. It was found that Belgian citizens also searched for information several times a day, mostly via traditional media such as television and radio. Furthermore, based on structural equation modelling, we found that information seeking and processing behavior was determined by the cognitive assessment of the risk. This cognitive risk assessment was in turn positively influenced by risk involvement and perceived governmental expert efficacy. However, if the mass media are seen to focus too much on drama and sensationalism then the perception of risk decreased, and this in turn reduced information seeking behavior. In addition, results showed that perceived governmental expert efficacy was able to increase trust and decrease the level of governmental responsibility, which was in turn beneficial for governmental reputation. The implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Information seeking behavior; risk perception; negative affective responses; reputation; institutional trust; responsibility

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1 Introduction

The majority of Belgians consider terrorism to be the most important challenge for internal security within the European Union (Eurobarometer, 2015).² Several incidents in Belgium have confirmed the validity of this concern. The terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 were coordinated from within Belgium. Moreover, Salah Abdeslam, a terrorist involved in the Parisian terrorist attacks was arrested in the capital city Brussels. Hence, terrorism has formed a significant threat in Belgium, characterized by some unique features that determine it as a risk management issue. It produced significant uncertainties in two different ways, namely the likelihood that a terrorist attack will take place and the extent of its consequences (Kunreuther, 2002). Consequently, terrorism became a main concern for Belgian citizens and a top priority of the Belgian federal government.

Unfortunately, the government could not prevent terrorist attacks to take place four months after the attacks in Paris, in Brussels Airport and in the metro station in Maalbeek, at the heart of the capital city of Belgium. This case study, however, was conducted before these attacks, in the context of a terrorism threat that formed a unique challenge for both the government and Belgian citizens who must deal with a very uncertain and turbulent situation. Unlike other types of crises, terrorism forms a relatively new threat because it is often unknown who exactly the enemy is. Hence, the threat is constantly evolving and hard to assess (Gray & Ropeik, 2002; Innes, 2006). In this context, it is possible that Belgians will change their behavior in public places by avoiding public transport for example (Nellis, 2009) or engaging in information seeking behavior. The latter enables citizens to reduce their feelings of uncertainty and increase their feelings of control (Ford, 2004; Kievik & Gutteling, 2011). Hence, by seeking information about the threat, Belgian citizens try to form a resilient community that is able to bounce back after a possible terrorist attack (Carpenter, 2015).

Resilience is important to consider in the context of terrorism as terrorist attacks are not always preventable. However, the government and other authorities can provide information to citizens in order to anticipate threats, minimize the vulnerability of citizens, and help them to recover from attacks when they occur (Patin, 2015). In this process, communication is of crucial importance as it can reduce damage and losses of lives, and minimize rumors and misinformation (Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). The mass media also play an important

² The Eurobarometer is a barometer used to measure the attitudes of Europeans towards security conducted in March 2015. Results showed terrorism is the highest-ranked challenge in Belgium (65%), followed by organized crime (45%), cybercrime (37%), management of the EU's external borders (34%), and natural and man-made disasters (30%).

role in this process and should do so responsibly, as sensationalizing information about risk can hinder adequate responses and recovery (Frisby, Veill, & Sellnow, 2014).

In contrast to other studies, which primarily focus on how organizations deal with risks or crises (e.g., Liu & Fraustino, 2014), this case study takes the perspective of the stakeholders by investigating how citizens cope with a terrorism threat. More specifically, we will first examine to what extent Belgian citizens change their behavior in public places because of the threat and seek information about the threat. Second, this case study will elaborate on information seeking behavior by investigating the factors that trigger this behavior. In particular, we will analyze how the level of involvement with the terrorism threat, governmental expert efficacy, and attitudes towards mass media communication influence the cognitive assessment of the risk and affective responses of citizens and subsequently their information seeking behavior. Hereby, we will gain insights in what drives information seeking behavior of people towards the risk, which is crucial for improving risk and crisis communication (Lee & Lemyre, 2009; Rogers, Amlôt, Rubin, Wessely, & Krieger, 2007; Slovic, 1987).

Moreover, this case study investigates the impact of the attitudes towards the mass media and perceived governmental efficacy on the cognitive and affective assessment of the risk. In doing so, the study sheds light on a so far indecisive topic, namely how communication is able to form the cognitive and affective perceptions of people and hence their information seeking behavior (Griffin, Yang, ter Huurne, Boerner, Ortiz, & Dunwoody, 2008). For example, in the Risk Information Seeking and Processing (RISP) model, beliefs about mass media coverage of a risk are referred to as 'relevant channel beliefs' (Griffin, Dunwoody, & Neuwirth, 1999). However, research on the impact of these beliefs remains exploratory (Griffin et al., 2008) and is often inconclusive about the impact on information seeking behavior as well as whether positive or negative beliefs result in more or less information seeking (Griffin, Powell, Dunwoody, Neuwirth, Clark, & Novotny, 2004; Griffin et al., 2008; Yang, 2012). Hence, it is important to clarify the impact of perceptions about mass media coverage in the context of the terrorism threat. Nevertheless, besides the mass media, the government and its representative experts (i.e., ministers) are also crucial communicating actors during a terrorism threat. Therefore, we will also investigate the impact of governmental expert efficacy on information seeking behavior.

Finally, we have to recognize that the terrorism threat is not only challenging for Belgian citizens, but also for the Belgian federal government and its experts, who have the delicate task of communicating information about the terrorism threat while avoiding interruptions to the investigations of police services. Therefore, the third aim of this study is to investigate how governmental communication affects the governmental reputation. The latter is a very important asset for the government as it

reflects the level of public approval towards their actions (Watson, 2007). In particular, we will research the mediating roles of institutional trust (Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016; ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008) and governmental responsibility (Coombs, 2007), which are both important factors in a context of high uncertainties.

To start, in order to get a better understanding of the context of the terrorism threat in Belgium, the second section of this chapters provides a brief overview of the facts.

2 Situational background of the terrorism threat in Belgium

On the 15th of January 2015, the Belgian federal police was able to neutralize a terrorist cell of Islamic State located in the Belgian city Verviers. The terrorists were organizing an attack against the Belgian police services (Eeckhaut, Vanhecke, & Tack, 2015). Later that year, on the 13th of November 2015, terrorists conducted the worst attack against France since World War II. In Paris, the capital of France, 129 people died and 352 people were injured of whom 99 with injuries that were life threatening. People were shot in the venue Bataclan and in several Parisian restaurants and one suicide bomber exploded a device close to the Stade de France (Bergmans, 2015). These terrorist attacks were all claimed by Islamic State.

After the Parisian attacks, a hunt to find Salah Abdeslam was launched. He is a Belgian citizen with Moroccan roots who lived in Brussels, the capital city of Belgium, for most of his life. According to Islamic State, he was the only living terrorist connected to the Parisian attacks. Abdeslam fled back to Belgium on the 14th of November 2015 and his presumed presence in Brussels was one of the key factors behind a security lockdown of the city. The Belgian federal government feared an imminent Paris-style attack, and therefore the security alert was raised to a maximum in Brussels and to the second highest level in the rest of the country. Metro stations and city schools were closed and 300 additional police officers and 200 soldiers were deployed in the capital city. Belgium became the heart of investigations of the Paris' attacks (Rose & Blenkinsop, 2015). The mass media in Belgium gave extensive attention to the terrorism threat through live reporting and by releasing extra news items. Moreover, the government was communicating very often via the mass media about the terrorism threat. On the 22nd of March 2016, after the current study was established, the terrorism threat was no longer a threat, but a reality since terrorists attacks took place on the national airport in Brussels and a metro station in the city center. 35 people lost their lives and more than 300 people were injured (Baert & Huygebaert, 2016).

3 Literature review

3.1 How are Belgian citizens coping with the terrorism threat?

According to Heath, Lee and Ni (2009), people have different levels of concern based on the belief that they, or the ones they love, could be harmed by a certain event. For a terrorist attack the level of concern was 72% in this study (Heath et al., 2009), which is higher than that of other investigated risks such as a storm or a chemical release. Hence, people will try to find a way to cope with this high concern. In the following paragraphs two different coping strategies will be discussed, namely behavior in public places and information seeking behavior.

3.1.1 Behavior in public places

Based on the insights of risk communication literature, we expect that Belgians can deal with the terrorism threat in several ways. According to Witte's (1992) Extended Parallel Processing Model (EPPM), a threat appeal triggers a process in which people appraise two components, namely the perceived threat of the risk and the perceived efficacy. The perceived threat is determined by the perceived susceptibility to being directly affected by the threat, and the perceived severity of the threat. This perception of the threat is also referred to as the risk perception or cognitive assessment of the risk (ter Huurne, 2008). Perceived efficacy is the feeling of personal control, and consists of self-efficacy and response-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the individual's belief in following the recommendations of the message, whereas response-efficacy refers to the individual's belief that the recommended response will be effective in dealing with the threat. A danger control process is initiated only when both the threat and the efficacy are perceived as high. This process results in the motivation of individuals to protect themselves. Hence, they accept the message and adopt the recommended protective behavior (Witte, 1992). This is unlikely to occur when the threat is perceived as high but the efficacy as low. In this case, a fear control process is initiated: the negative feelings of fear and worry are too high, and they cannot be reduced by the recommended behavior as people feel incapable of following this.

The first research question will investigate to what extent Belgians changed their behavior in public places, specifically by avoiding mass events and public transport (Lee, Gibson, Markon, & Lemyre, 2009). We argue that people change their behavior in public places, following the advice of government experts, in an attempt to enhance their self-efficacy. However, response-efficacy may be low because, in times of a terrorist threat, people are not really safe anywhere. Hence, the first research question is:

RQ₁ : *To what extent do Belgians adapt their behavior in public places because of the terrorism threat?*

3.1.2 Information seeking behavior

Nevertheless, people might also try to cope with the threat instead of avoiding it. A possible way to increase the feeling of control over the threat of terrorism is to seek information about it (Ford, 2004; Kievik & Gutteling, 2011; Palenchar & Heath, 2002). Therefore, we also formulate the following research question:

RQ₂ : *To what extent do Belgians engage in information seeking behavior because of the terrorism threat?*

3.2 Why are Belgians coping with the terrorism threat? Determinants of information seeking behavior

Next, we will examine some factors that might drive Belgians' information seeking behavior about the terrorism threat. In risk communication, several models have been used to investigate the determinants that influence information seeking (and processing) behavior; example are the EPPM model as discussed earlier (Witte, 1992), the Risk Information Seeking and Processing (RISP) model (Griffin et al., 1999), the Framework For Risk Information and Seeking (FRIS) (ter Huurne, 2008) and the Planned Risk Information Seeking Model (PRISM) (Kahlor, 2010). All these models share the assumption that people make appraisals of a certain risk in both a cognitive and affective way, which in turn positively influences their risk information seeking behavior. Moreover, these models also suggest several factors that influence the cognitive and/or affective processing of the risk. Next, we will elaborate on three factors that might have an impact on the cognitive and affective processing of the terrorism threat and consequently influence information seeking behavior.

3.2.1 Involvement with the terrorism threat

Involvement refers to a personal interest that results from the belief that a threat might have significant consequences for one's life (Andrews, Durvasula, & Akhter, 1990; Cho & Boster, 2005). In other words, involvement refers to the feeling that someone's interest is at stake (Palenchar, Heath, & Orberton, 2005). Involvement has been found to be fundamental in explaining how and why people seek, process, and use information (Grunig, 1989; Heath & Douglas, 1990; Palenchar & Heath, 2000; Petty & Caccioppo, 1981, 1986). When people are confronted with a risk such as a terrorism threat, their problem recognition is likely to rise when they think their self or altruistic interests are affected (ter Huurne, 2008).

The more people think an event will have an impact on the self or a loved one, the greater their level of involvement will be. This is important for risk communication because when people are highly involved they are more willing to think and communicate about an issue (Heath & Douglas, 1991; Kunreuther, Easterling, Desvousges, & Slovic, 1990). The more people are aware of the risk, the more they will be inclined to form or change their attitudes and behavior via central cognitive and message-driven routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986). This has been formulated in the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986), who are the founders of one of the most important information processing models. This was also argued by Heath, Liao and Douglas (1995) in the specific context of risk communication. Hence, when involvement is elicited because people think that important future consequences are at stake, people are more likely to process the information in-depth (Kievik, ter Huurne, & Gutteling, 2012). Moreover, Kievik et al. (2012) found that higher levels of involvement with the threat results in more information seeking behavior. However, it is unclear if a higher level of involvement increases the cognitive assessment of the risk (ter Huurne, 2008). Therefore, we formulated the following research question:

RQ₃: *How is involvement with the terrorism threat linked to the cognitive assessment of the risk?*

Unlike the influence of the involvement with the risk on the cognitive assessment of the risk, the FRIS (ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008) model already suggests that higher levels of involvement with the risk increase negative affective responses. Therefore, we expect that:

H₁: *The more people feel involved with the terrorism threat, the greater their negative affective responses will be towards the terrorism threat.*

In addition to the level of involvement with the terrorism threat, it is also important to consider the communication sources that provide information about the risk to the public (Krewski et al., 2006). According to Ganor and Ben-Lavy (2003) good communication is essential to create resilience. In the case of the terrorism threat, the two primary sources of communication and information were the mass media and the Belgian federal government as represented by its experts.

3.2.2 Mass media communication

The mass media form very convenient providers of information in the context of a terrorism threat because of their availability and accessibility (Wray, Kreuter, Jacobsen, Clements, & Evans, 2004). Therefore, they play a crucial role in the provision of information on the terrorism threat to the public (Krewski et al., 2006). However, often the media do not play a neutral role when reporting about risks. Several authors agree that the media might help to amplify or attenuate a certain risk perception and sense of danger, selecting certain facts or presenting them in a certain way (Kasperson & Kasperson,

1996; Wray et al., 2004). Therefore, media have been criticized for reporting in a selective and biased way, while emphasizing conflict, dramatic, and sensational aspects (Sandman, 1994). This might in turn have a strong effect on the way people perceive certain risks and how their attitudes and behaviors subsequently change (Stevens, 2010).

Hence, the way people perceive communications about the terrorism threat by the mass media, such as the perceived level of sensationalism, might have an influence on information seeking and processing behavior (Griffin et al., 1999; Kahlor, Dunwoody, Griffin, & Neuwirth, 2006). However, the specific role that these perceptions play in information seeking and processing behavior, and in particular whether the relationship is positive or negative, remains unclear (Griffin et al., 2008). According to Griffin et al. (2004) further research is necessary to clarify the impact of attitudes towards the sources who deliver risk information. However, several studies investigating risk information seeking and processing behavior do not incorporate this determinant (e.g., ter Huurne, Griffin, & Gutteling, 2009) or remain exploratory (Griffin et al., 2008).

When discovering the impact of sensational and dramatized mass media coverage, research has shown that sensational information is often thought to elicit negative affective responses such as fear (Gorney, 1992), and inhibit the ability of people to genuinely cognitively assess a certain risk (Covello, Peters, Wojtecki, & Hyde, 2001). Moreover, news stories which highlight alarming information often result in a greater perceived risk than stories which contain more reassuring information (Signorielli, 1993). However, when people think that the mass media focus too strongly on sensationalism, this could create an opposite effect: the dramatized news stories might lower rather than enhance risk perception and create less negative affective responses. Inspired by these insights, we expect that:

H₂: *The lower people's evaluation of the communications of the mass media about the terrorism threat, the lower their (a) cognitive assessment of the terrorism threat and (b) the lower their negative affective responses towards the terrorism threat will be.*

3.2.3 Governmental expert efficacy

Moreover, in times of terrorist threats, governments and more specifically its ministerial representatives have the challenging task of communicating about a very delicate topic. They must find a balance between creating awareness and avoiding inducing fear amongst citizens, while avoiding interrupting the actions of the police services (Altheide, 2006; Mythen & Walklate, 2006). When risks are not personally controllable as is the case for terrorist attacks (where people have no knowledge about when or how an attack will take place), people are particularly concerned to know what the government is doing or has done to protect them. People can only know this from what the government is communicating about these preventive actions (ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). The

importance of governmental communication is also stressed by a study by Heath et al. (2009), who showed that in risky situations citizens prefer expert advice over that of family or friends.

Emergency management communication is initiated by experts representing the government. The public expects these experts to understand the risk and to be able to predict and mitigate the threat. While the mass media might amplify the drama of the event (i.e., social amplification of the risk, Kaspersen, 1992), governmental communication is able to provide what appears to be more objective information to the public regarding efficacy cues (Heath et al., 2009). According to Heath et al. (2009) a crucial determinant of communication in times of emergencies is the persuasiveness of the experts' advice. When the public does not trust the advice of the experts or has the impression that they are at their mercy, they will respond by refusing to accept the experts' advice (Heath, 1997). Therefore, the level of expert efficacy (i.e. the trust in the experts' response advice, Heath & Lee, 2015, p. 1112) might have an important influence on how people perceive the threat. However, so far studies have not yet investigated if governmental expert efficacy affects the cognitive and affective assessment of the risk. Therefore, we formulate the following research question:

RQ₄: *How is perceived governmental expert efficacy linked to (a) the cognitive assessment of the terrorism threat and (b) the negative affective responses towards the terrorism threat?*

3.3 Cognitive and affective assessment of the terrorism threat

As described earlier, people assess risks such as the terrorism threat not only based on what they think cognitively (i.e., the analytical system), but also on what they feel affectively (i.e., the experiential system) (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2004). Kievik et al. (2012) investigated the assumptions of the FRIS model (ter Huurne, 2008) in the context of terrorism. The authors found that a high cognitive risk perception resulted in more information seeking behavior. However, the authors admit that the initial FRIS model suggests an indirect relationship between risk perception and information seeking behavior via negative affective responses (ter Huurne et al., 2009). Moreover, several other well established information seeking and processing models such as the RISP (Griffin et al., 1999) and the EPPM (Witte, 1992) also expect an indirect effect of the cognitive assessment of the risk on information seeking behavior. In these models, the cognitive assessment will have an effect on the negative affective responses people have towards this risk. The higher people assess the risk cognitively (i.e., in terms of severity and susceptibility), the stronger their negative affective responses will be. Moreover, these stronger negative responses in turn initiate more active information seeking behavior (Griffin et al., 2004). Hence, we expect a direct effect of the cognitive assessment of the risk on information seeking behavior and an indirect effect via negative affective responses. Therefore, we assume that:

H3_a: *The higher people’s cognitive assessment of the risk of the terrorism threat, the more they will seek information about it.*

H3_b: *The higher people’s cognitive assessment of the risk of the terrorism threat, the stronger their negative affective responses towards the threat will be.*

H3_c: *The higher people’s negative affective responses towards the terrorism threat, the more they will seek for information about it.*

In Figure 1, the proposed conceptual model of information seeking and processing behavior is shown:

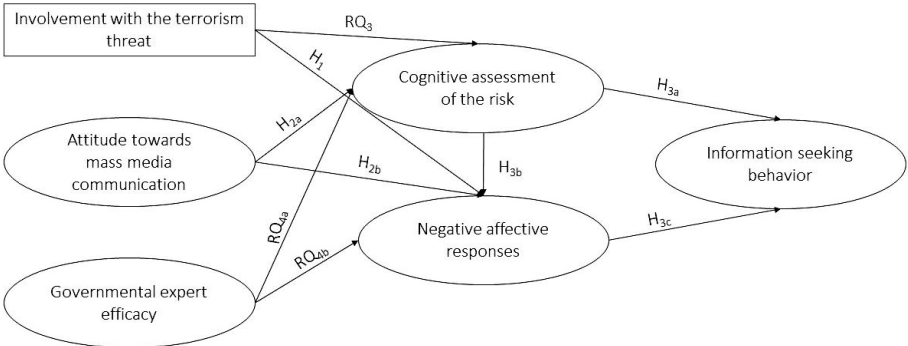


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual model of information seeking and processing behavior.

3.4 Impact of governmental expert efficacy on governmental reputation

Finally, we will also examine how governmental expert efficacy affects governmental reputation in order to gain insights into how the communication about the terrorism threat affects the perceptions people have about the reputation of the Belgian federal government. Reputation can be described as “a cognitive representation of an organization’s actions and results that crystallizes the organization’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to its stakeholders” (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Barnett, 2000, p. 87). Hence, the governmental reputation is a cognitive representation of citizens of the actions and results that the government made with regard to the terrorism threat. It crystallizes the government’s ability to protect the citizens from harm. According to Rindova and Fombrun (1998) communication enables the government to show their transparency to the public, which enables people to appreciate the governmental operations better and hence facilitates a better governmental reputation. This is in line with the suggestion of Burke (1999) that one of the primary roles of communication is to sustain, foster, and develop an organization’s reputation. Accordingly, we investigate whether perceived

governmental expert efficacy affects governmental reputation. We argue that this relationship will be mediated by two different processes: institutional trust and attributed responsibility.

3.4.1 The mediating role of institutional trust

Liu et al. (2016) describe trust as a key variable when communicating uncertainties. More specifically, in this context, institutional trust is important and can be described as the willingness of individuals to rely on those who have the power and responsibility to make decisions and take actions related to the management of public safety (McComas, 2006; Siegrist, Cvetkovich, & Roth, 2000; ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). Hence, applied to the terrorism threat, institutional trust can be seen as the interaction between the government and the citizens, in which the citizens believe that the government does its job and will act according to their best interests (Hosking, 2009; Shore, 2003). Research has shown that the more trust people have in the government, the better they will be able to deal with the uncertain situations, especially in highly uncertain circumstances such as the threat of terrorism (Gray & Ropeik, 2002; Rogers et al., 2007). Hence, the establishment or re-establishment of trust is crucial for effective risk and crisis communication (Gilles et al., 2011). When risks are not personally controllable, people want to know what the government is doing or has done to protect them. The governmental experts will communicate information about these actions to reassure citizens (ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). Clear and open communications are therefore essential initiators of trust amongst people and offer the advantage that people are more likely to comply with future messages (Quinn, Kumar, Freimuth, Kidwell, & Musa, 2009). Therefore, we expect that governmental expert efficacy enhances institutional trust. Moreover, we will also investigate the impact of the level of trust on the governmental reputation, as trust is an important influencing factor in the formation of perceptions of reputation; the more trust people have in an organization, the better the organizational reputation (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H₄: *A higher perceived governmental expert efficacy enhances institutional trust, which is in turn beneficial for the governmental reputation.*

3.4.2 The mediating role of governmental responsibility

Moreover, as with organizational crisis communication, risk communication might not only have an impact on institutional trust, but also on the amount of responsibility attributed to the government for the risk (De Vocht, 2014). Responsibility is a crucial determinant used by people to form their opinion about organizations, and more specifically their perceptions of organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). People who are confronted with an uncertain or risky situation are likely to search for underlying causes of events (Dean, 2004; Kelley, 1973). So, when a risk or potential crisis occurs, people will attribute a certain degree of responsibility to the organization or institution confronted with the crisis,

in this case the government. The more responsibility is attributed to the government, the more its reputation will suffer (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010). In this study we argue that governments might be able to decrease the level of responsibility attributed to them for the terrorism threat by communicating with expertise to the public. Moreover, we expect this level of responsibility to negatively affect the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Hence, the following hypothesis is formed:

H₅: *A higher perceived governmental expert efficacy decreases governmental responsibility, which is in turn beneficial for the governmental reputation.*

Figure 2 demonstrates the proposed conceptual model of the impact of governmental expert efficacy on the governmental reputation via governmental responsibility and institutional trust.

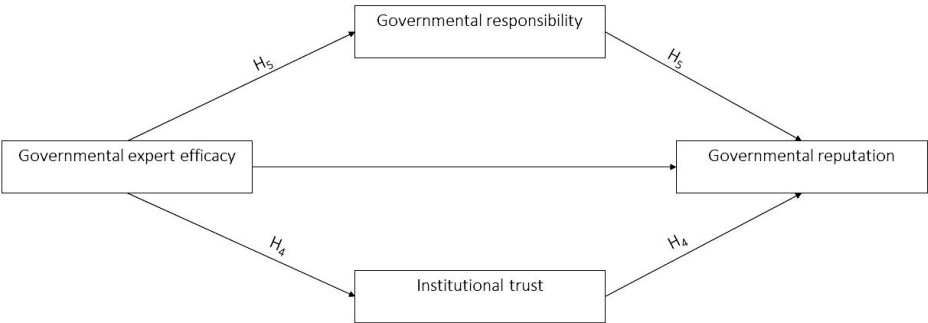


Figure 2: Proposed conceptual model of the governmental reputation.

4 Method

4.1 Participants and procedure

A national research agency sent surveys by mail to a random sample of 805 Belgian residents (467 Flemish residents, 256 residents of Wallonia, and 83 residents of Brussels). 50.4% of the respondents were female and the average age was 47 years (*SD* = 16.15), ranging between 18 and 91 years. Since quota sampling is rarely an exact representation of the target population, we weighted our data to improve its representativeness (Rubin, Brewin, Greenberg, Simpson, & Wessely, 2005).

The data collection is exhibited on the 27th of November 2015, exactly two weeks after the terrorist attacks in Paris. At the moment of the distribution of the survey, the terrorist threat level in Belgium was on the second highest level (i.e., level 3) which means that the threat is severe and a terrorist attack is possible and probable to take place. One week before the survey was conducted, on the 21st

of November 2015, the threat level was on the highest level possible (i.e., level 4), which means that the threat is very severe and a terrorist attack is very likely to take place.

4.2 Measures

A questionnaire was designed to measure each concept presented in the hypotheses and research questions. All measurements of variables of interest are fully mentioned in appendix (cf. 9.1). *Involvement* ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.42$) is measured based on the item: "How involved do you feel with the terrorism threat?". The *attitude towards mass media communication* ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.87$, $\alpha = 0.79$) was measured based on the scale of Yang (2012) with the following items: "*The mass media pay too much attention to the terrorism threat*"; "*The mass media instigate feelings of fear among the citizens*"; "*The mass media focus too strongly on sensationalism*".

Governmental expert efficacy ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.98$, $\alpha = 0.93$) was measured based on the evaluation of the communication of the Belgian federal government using a four-item semantic differential five-point scale of Mitchell and Olson (1981), the items were: not competent vs. competent; not experienced vs. experienced; not effective vs. effective; not reliable vs. reliable. Moreover, we also measured the *expert efficacy* in terms of an evaluation of the communication of the Prime Minister Charles Michel ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = 0.94$), Minister of Internal Affairs Jan Jambon ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.03$, $\alpha = 0.92$), and Minister of Justice Koen Geens ($M = 3.16$, $SE = 0.96$, $\alpha = 0.93$), via a three-item semantic differential five-point scale. These items were bad vs. good; with limited expertise vs. with sufficient expertise; dishonest vs. honest.

The cognitive assessment of the risk ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.87$, $\alpha = 0.82$) was measured using the items used by Witte (1992), namely: "*The terrorism threat is severe*"; "*The terrorism threat is risky*"; "*The likelihood of a terrorist attack to take place in Belgium in the next few weeks is high*"; "*The likelihood of being hurt myself in a terrorist attack in Belgium in the next few weeks is high*".

Negative affective responses ($M = 3$, $SD = 1.01$, $\alpha = 0.75$) were measured based on the scale of Kahlor (2010) with the items: "*I feel fear because of the terrorism threat*" and "*I feel unsafe because of the terrorism threat*".

The items to measure *information seeking behavior* ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.17$, $\alpha = 0.77$) were also inspired by the measure of Kahlor (2010): "*I search for information about the terrorism threat by watching television often*" and "*I search for information about the terrorism threat by listening to the radio often*". We adapted these items by focusing on the two most popular information sources according to our data, namely television and radio.

Behavior in public places was measured based on the scale of Nellis (2009) via the question: “To what extent do you change your behavior because of the terrorism threat in terms of: taking public transport; participating in mass events; being alert in public places; and letting your children participate in school and sports activities”. The possible categories for answers were: “I do not adapt my behavior at all”; “I feel not comfortable, but do not adapt my behavior”; “I adapt my behavior”; or “Not applicable”.

Institutional trust ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.90$, $\alpha = 0.74$) was operationalized based on the scale of ter Huurne et al. (2009) with the items: “The Belgian government is making enough efforts to ensure the safety of citizens”; “The Belgian government had a good preventive policy regarding terrorism”; “In the past, the Belgian government has appropriately dealt with the terrorism threat”.

Governmental responsibility ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.16$) is measured based on one item of the scale of Griffin, Babin, and Darden (1992): “The government is responsible for the terrorism threat”.

The governmental reputation ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = 0.95$) is measured based on a shortened version of the reputation quotient scale of Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2000): “I have a good feeling about the Belgian federal government”; “I admire and respect the Belgian federal government”; “I have trust in the Belgian federal government”.

Finally, the questionnaire also includes some socio-demographical details of the respondents such as age, gender, and area of residence (i.e., Flanders, Wallonia or Brussels).

All items, except governmental expert efficacy, the expert efficacy of the different Ministers, and behavior in public places, were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree.

5 Results

5.1 Coping strategies

RQ₁: With regard to behavioral in public places because of the terrorism threat, results in Table 1 show that the most important behavioral change is that people are more alert in public places (43%). Second, 37.9% of Belgian citizens do not participate in mass events because of the terrorism threat. Furthermore, 25% do not let their children participate in school and sports activities, and 21.4% do not travel by public transport because of the threat. Furthermore, when we look at people who feel uncomfortable but do not change their behavior, we can see that they feel the most uncomfortable about letting their children participate in sports and school activities (23.3%). Finally, the activity that people most refuse to change because of the terrorism threat is travelling by public transport (62.1%).

Behavior in public activities	Change in behavior	Feeling uncomfortable, but not changing behavior	Refusing to change behavior
Travelling by public transport	21.4 %	16.5 %	62.1 %
Participating in mass events	37.9 %	19.6 %	42.5 %
Being alert in public places	43.0 %	22.5 %	34.5 %
Letting children participate in school and sports activities	25.0 %	23.3 %	51.7 %

Table 1: Frequency table of behavior in public activities.

RQ₂: When looking at the information seeking behavior of Belgian citizens, the results show that 50% of people search for information about the terrorism threat several times a day, and 32% searches once a day for information. Table 2 shows to what extent different media channels were used in order to seek information about the terrorism threat.

To what extent do you consult the following media for information about the terrorism threat?	% (i.e., percentage of people who use this medium rather frequently or very frequently)
Websites of Belgian government	6.2 %
Websites of national newspapers	45.0 %
Other websites	15.0 %
International news sources	22.1 %
Television	65.7 %
Radio	48.3 %
Online discussion boards	3.9 %
Facebook	18.2 %
Twitter	4.8 %

Table 2: Frequencies of channels for information seeking.

The results show that the traditional media channels are the most popular source of information about the terrorism threat. People watch television the most to inform themselves, followed by listening to the radio and checking the websites of national newspapers. With regards to the social media results, while almost one fifth of the respondents check Facebook rather frequently to very frequently to find information about the terrorism threat, Twitter and online discussion boards are much less popular.

5.2 Determinants of information seeking behavior

To investigate the proposed information seeking model, structural equation modelling was conducted using AMOS 22.0 software. In the tested model, attitudes towards mass media communication, governmental expert efficacy, cognitive assessment of the risk, negative affective responses, and information seeking behavior were specified as latent variables with multiple indicators, while involvement with the terrorism threat was specified as an observed variable. The maximum likelihood estimation was used to assess missing values.

5.2.1 Model evaluation criteria

We evaluated the model fit based on the following indices: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) (CFI/TLI > 0.90), and the Root Mean Square of Approximation (RMSEA) (<0.08) (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The X goodness-of-fit statistic is reported, as well as an index of model adequacy,

where a non-significant value indicates good fit. However, because χ^2 has been shown to be sensitive to sample size (Bollen, 1989), the χ^2/df ratio is reported, where a value less than 3 indicates a good fit ($\chi^2/df = 2 (1) < 3.00$) (Kline, 1998).

5.2.2 Analysis of structural equation modelling

The proposed model was tested and interpreted in two different stages: (1) an assessment of the construct validity of the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and (2) the assessment of the structural model (see Men, 2015). The estimation of the initial measurement model indicated a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(71, N = 805) = 181.76$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.84$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05 (90% CI = [0.04, 0.06]). However, the co-variances that were added between governmental expert efficacy and involvement appear to be not significant. Hence, we decided to skip this co-variance and re-estimate the model. Results of the re-estimated model again demonstrated a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(73, N = 805) = 202.14$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.91$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05 (90% CI = [0.04, 0.06]). Moreover, the standardized factor loadings between latent variables and their indicators ranged from 0.64 to 0.92. This confirms that the proposed measurement model has good construct validity. Next, we tested the structural model, which also indicated a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(67, N = 805) = 195.21$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.81$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05 (90% CI = [0.04, 0.06]). Figure 3 gives an overview of the structural model. Moreover, in Table 3 the standardized regression weights are shown, as well as the significance level of each relationship. In the following paragraphs the examination of the different research questions and hypotheses will be explained in detail.

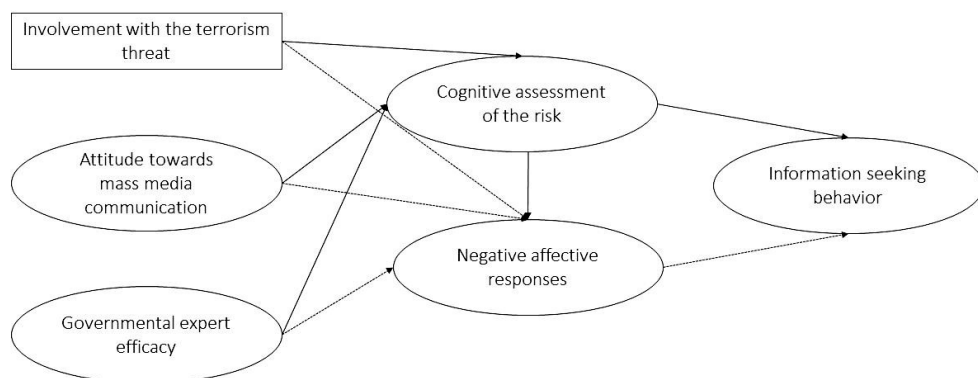


Figure 3: Structural model of risk information seeking and processing behavior.

For the sake of brevity, co-variances among exogenous variables and error terms for indicators of latent variables are omitted from the figure. Ovals represent latent variables; rectangles represent measured variables. Full lines represent a significant relationship and dotted lines signify that the relationship is not significant.

Input variable	Outcome variable	Standardized regression weight	p-value
Involvement with the terrorism threat	Cognitive assessment of the risk	0.71	< 0.001
Involvement with the terrorism threat	Negative affective responses towards the risk	-0.13	> 0.050
Attitude towards mass media communication	Cognitive assessment of the risk	-0.18	< 0.001
Attitude towards mass media communication	Negative affective responses towards the risk	-0.02	> 0.050
Governmental expert efficacy	Cognitive assessment of the risk	0.10	< 0.010
Governmental expert efficacy	Negative affective responses towards the risk	-0.07	> 0.050
Cognitive assessment of the risk	Negative responses towards the risk	0.88	< 0.001
Cognitive assessment of the risk	Information seeking behavior	0.57	< 0.001
Negative affective responses towards the risk	Information seeking behavior	-0.15	> 0.050

Table 3: Standardized regression weights of the information seeking and processing model.

5.2.3 Test of hypotheses and research questions

The third research question aimed to clarify whether a higher involvement with the terrorism threat resulted in a higher cognitive assessment of the threat. Results of the structural model indeed reveal that involvement is positively associated with the cognitive assessment of the risk ($\beta = 0.71, p < 0.001$). However, we found no significant influence of involvement on negative affective responses ($\beta = -0.13, p > 0.05$). Consequently, we can answer the third research question by stating that a higher involvement with the terrorism threat results in a higher cognitive assessment of the risk. However, we must reject H_1 , which expected a positive relationship between involvement and negative affective responses.

In the second hypothesis, we proposed that the more negative the perceptions of the communication about the terrorism threat by the mass media are, the lower the cognitive assessment of the risk (H_{2a}) and the lower the negative affective responses will be (H_{2b}). The results indeed demonstrate that when people perceive mass media communication to be too sensationalist and dramatic, their cognitive risk assessment significantly decreases ($\beta = -0.18, p < 0.001$). Nevertheless, a bad attitude towards mass media communication has no significant impact on the negative affective responses towards the risk ($\beta = -0.02, p > 0.05$). Consequently, hypothesis 2_a can be confirmed based on the results, while hypothesis 2_b must be rejected.

The fourth research question examines the impact of governmental expert efficacy on the cognitive assessment of the risk and negative affective responses towards the risk. We found a significant positive relationship between governmental expert efficacy and the cognitive assessment of the risk ($\beta = 0.10, p = 0.01$). Hence, the higher people rate the governmental expert efficacy, the higher they assess the risk of the terrorism threat cognitively. Moreover, results also show that there is no significant impact of governmental expert efficacy on negative affective responses towards the risk ($\beta = -0.07, p > 0.05$).

We also investigated, by means of multiple regression analysis, whether the expert efficacy of Prime Minister Charles Michel, Minister of Internal Affairs Jan Jambon, and Minister of Justice Koen Geens significantly predict the general expert efficacy of the Belgian federal government. As shown in Table 4, the expert efficacy of all three of the ministers significantly predicts the general expert efficacy of the Belgian Federal Government. Here, the expert efficacy of the Prime Minister is the strongest significant predictor of general efficacy ($\beta = 0.46, p < 0.001$); that of the Minister of Internal Affairs is the second highest ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$); and that of the Minister of Justice is the lowest ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.001$).

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	<i>B</i>	Std. Error	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig.
(Constant)	0.41	0.08		5.21	< 0.001
Expert efficacy of Minister of Internal Affairs (Jan Jambon)	0.21	0.03	0.22	6.16	< 0.001
Expert efficacy of Minister of Justice (Koen Geens)	0.16	0.03	0.15	4.66	< 0.001
Expert efficacy of Prime Minister (Charles Michel)	0.46	0.03	0.49	14.20	< 0.001

Table 4: Multiple regression results.

Then, in hypothesis 3_a we expected that a high cognitive assessment of the risk results in more information seeking behavior. The results indeed reveal that the higher people's cognitive assessment of the risk of the terrorism threat, the more they will seek information on the radio and television ($\beta = 0.57, p < 0.001$). Moreover, there was a strong positive significant relationship between the cognitive assessment of the risk and negative affective responses ($\beta = 0.88, p < 0.001$). However, there was no significant relationship found between negative affective responses towards risk and information seeking behavior ($\beta = -0.15, p > 0.05$). Hence, hypothesis 3_a and 3_b are confirmed, while hypothesis 3_c must be rejected.

5.3 Governmental reputation model

To investigate hypothesis 4 and 5, mediation analyses were conducted, using Preacher and Hayes' (2004) bootstrap test (i.e., model 4) to estimate indirect effects in simple mediation models. In each analysis 5000 bootstrap samples were used in order to estimate a 95% confidence interval. When zero falls outside the confidence interval this means that the indirect effect is significant and mediation is present.

5.3.1 Test of hypotheses

To analyze the fourth hypothesis governmental expert efficacy was added as an independent variable, institutional trust as a mediator, and the governmental reputation as a dependent variable. The results indicate that institutional trust mediates the relationship between governmental expert efficacy and the governmental reputation, ($B = 0.48$, $SE = 0.05$; 95% CI = [0.4025; 0.5713]). We found a positive significant relationship between governmental expert efficacy and institutional trust ($B = 0.82$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 14.36$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI = [0.8579; 1.0582]), which in turn resulted in a better governmental reputation ($B = 0.58$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 17.69$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI = [0.7890; 0.9072]). Furthermore, the direct effect of governmental expert efficacy on governmental reputation was also significant ($B = 0.71$, $SE = 0.06$; $t = 5.44$; 95% CI = [0.6021; 0.8301]). Figure 4 gives a schematic overview of the results.

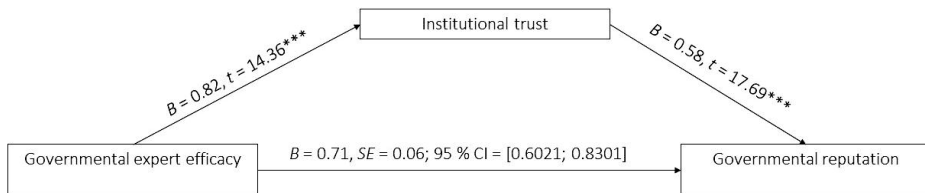


Figure 4: Model of governmental reputation mediated by institutional trust.

Reported estimates are unstandardized coefficients (see Hayes, 2013) * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In order to analyze the last hypothesis, governmental expert efficacy was again added as an independent variable, governmental responsibility as mediator, and the governmental reputation as a dependent variable. Results indicated a significant relationship between governmental expert efficacy and governmental reputation through governmental responsibility ($B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$; 95% CI = [0.0845; 0.1859]). Governmental expert efficacy lowered governmental responsibility ($B = -0.73$, $SE = .08$, $t = -9.42$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI = [-0.8873; -0.5813]), which in turn results in a better governmental reputation ($B = -0.17$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = -6.66$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI [-0.1764; -0.0991]). Furthermore, the direct effect of governmental expert efficacy on governmental reputation was also significant ($B = 0.97$, $SE = 0.06$; 95% CI = [0.8550; 1.0927]). The results are briefly summarized in Figure 5.

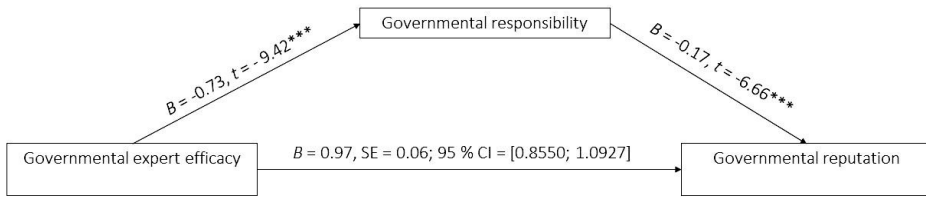


Figure 5: Model of governmental reputation mediated via governmental responsibility.

Reported estimates are unstandardized coefficients (see Hayes, 2013) * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

To conclude, Table 5 gives an overview of which hypotheses are confirmed and rejected.

Hypothesis	Results
H ₁	Rejected
H _{2a}	Confirmed
H _{2b}	Rejected
H _{3a}	Confirmed
H _{3b}	Confirmed
H _{3c}	Rejected
H ₅	Confirmed

Table 5: Overview tested hypotheses.

6 Conclusion and discussion

6.1 Key findings

The aim of the current case study was threefold. First, we wanted to investigate how Belgians try to cope with the risk of the terrorism threat. We examined this based on two different behavioral activities, namely behavior in public places and information seeking behavior. Second, we elaborated on why Belgians engage in information seeking behavior based on three determinants, namely involvement with the threat, attitude towards mass media communication, and governmental expert efficacy. Based on SEM, we analyzed how these three concepts determine the cognitive and affective assessment of the risk and subsequent information seeking behavior. Third, we investigated how perceived governmental efficacy affected governmental reputation via institutional trust and governmental responsibility.

Results demonstrate that Belgians are mostly more alert in public places because of the terrorism threat. Furthermore, almost four out of ten people no longer participates in mass events because of

the threat, and one fifth is afraid to travel by public transport. Finally, a quarter also restrict their children's to participation in school and sports activities. Moreover, results also reveal that people often engage in information seeking behavior to deal with the terrorism threat, with 50% of people searching for information several times a day. The most popular channels are traditional media channels such as television and radio, and almost one fifth make use of Facebook to search for information.

Furthermore, the proposed information seeking model showed that Belgians primarily deal with the terrorism threat on a cognitive level by assessing the severity and susceptibility of the risk which in turn influences their information seeking behavior. We found that when people's cognitive assessment of the terrorism threat is higher, they will have more negative affective responses towards it which confirms the findings of Griffin et al. (2004). Moreover, we also found that a higher cognitive assessment of the terrorism threat resulted in more information seeking behavior, as was recently found by Kievik et al. (2012). Hence, these findings are in line with previous research. However, unlike our expectations, higher negative affective responses do not result in more information seeking behavior as suggested by Griffin et al. (1999) and ter Huurne (2008). This might possibly be explained by the fact that efficacy is not integrated in the current model. Further research is necessary to clarify this finding. Nevertheless, based on the results of this study we could state that the coping process of Belgians to deal with the uncertainties initiated by the terrorism threat is primarily on a cognitive and not on an affective level. However, it is important to note that according to the EPPM, this will only be the case for people who believe that they are able to seek information about the terrorism threat (i.e., high self-efficacy) and that this information seeking is effective in reducing the fear related to the threat (i.e., high response-efficacy). When people doubt that seeking more information will help to reduce fear and/or they are not able to do so, they will be motivated to control their fear rather than their exposure to the danger of the threat. These people will engage in denial, *"I am not at risk to be affected by a terrorist attack in Belgium" "this is too scary, I am not going to think about it"* (i.e., defensive avoidance) or *"they are just trying to manipulate me, I will ignore them"* (i.e., reactance) (Witte, 1992). Hence, for future research it is important to include these variables as well.

Moreover, according to the results people make lower cognitive assessments of the terrorism threat, in terms of susceptibility and severity, when they feel low involvement with the threat, rate the expert efficacy of the government as high, and have a bad attitude towards the communication of the mass media. More specifically, the results show that a higher involvement with the terrorism threat results in a higher cognitive assessment of the risk, but not in more negative affective responses. Hence, on one hand, the fact that the terrorism threat is personally relevant to a person and his loved ones does not lead him or her to feel more frightened or unsafe, but on the other hand, does make him or her

more cognitively aware of the risk. This confirms the claim made by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), who state that highly involved people will put more effort into processing information and thereby become more aware of the risk. Nevertheless, our findings contradict ter Huurne and Gutteling's (2008) suggestion that higher involvement results in higher negative affective responses.

Interestingly, with regard to the perceptions about the communication of the terrorism threat, our model showed that when people think that the media focus too strongly on sensationalism, their cognitive assessment of the risk decreases. This result seems to provide more evidence for the fact that mass media coverage is indeed very influential (see Krewski et al., 2006). This is an important contribution to existing research, which has so far been indecisive about the impact of the beliefs of those who provide risk information (see Griffin et al., 2004). Again, data showed a significant influence on the cognitive assessment of the risk, but not on the affective assessment of the risk. Further research is necessary to clarify which are the underlying drivers of this primary cognitive appraisal.

Next, we also found that the better the perceived governmental efficacy, the higher people's cognitive assessment of the risk was. This finding sounds rather counterintuitive. One would expect that when people rate the expert efficacy of the government high that they trust the government in handling the risk properly and therefore have a lower risk perception. This finding could possibly be explained by the fact that we examined the impact of the expert efficacy of the government in general and not of the ministers who represent the government. Another possible explanation is that Belgians have trust in the experts representing the government, but their evaluation of the response-efficacy is low. However, from another perspective, this finding might also provide evidence for the fact that on the one hand, the Belgian federal government did a good job by making people aware of the risk. However, on the other hand, they were not able to significantly reduce feelings of unsafety by their communication. Hence, the difficult balance between inducing a culture of fear and creating awareness must be optimized in the future when confronted with similar uncertain events (Altheide, 2006; Mythen & Walklate, 2006). Furthermore, the results also demonstrated that the Prime Minister is the most important communicator representing the federal government. People rate the expert efficacy of the Minister of Justice the lowest. This might possibly be explained by the fact that he or she has to communicate about police and legal action, which are very delicate topics. The minister is obliged to be somehow vague about these actions in order to avoid interrupting them.

Finally, we also explored how the governmental reputation is influenced by the perceived governmental expert efficacy. When a risk is uncontrollable, people have the need to know that the government is doing as much as possible to control the threat (ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). We found that a high expert efficacy rating is indeed able to protect governmental reputation because it

enhances institutional trust which is a crucial factor of risk communication (Heath & Palenchar, 2007; Liu et al., 2016; Renn, 2006; ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). Moreover, it also decreases the level of responsibility attributed to the government for the terrorism threat, which is in turn beneficial for the governmental reputation. Hence, it is important for organizations to put time and effort in their expertise, as this is not only able to increase the level of trust but also to decrease the attributed responsibility. The results seem to provide evidence that organizations are able to protect their reputation by putting effort in to honest, clear, and open communication (Burke, 1999; Fombrun & Rindova, 1998).

6.2 Managerial implications

In sum, this study reveals several important implications for communication managers who have to deal with a highly uncertain and turbulent situation such as a terrorism threat. First of all, when confronted with a terrorism threat, people seem to engage in information seeking behavior in order to deal with the threat. Hence, it is important for communication managers to provide information to stakeholders on a regular basis in order to enhance the public's feeling of control over the risk. Moreover, it is important not to overlook traditional media as providers of information because, despite the current digital environment in which social media play a dominant role, traditional media remain very popular. Facebook is also an important information channel, while Twitter seems to be less important.

Moreover, people tend to deal with the threat primarily in a cognitive way. Hence, it is important to pay attention to how people assess the severity of the risk and the likelihood of being involved in an attack themselves. Therefore, communication managers have to try to shape this cognitive assessment by making people aware of the severity of the risk, while not creating panics and chaos by saying that the likelihood of being involved in the risk is quite low. Moreover, the study shows that it is important for communication managers to divide the public into people who have low and high involvement, based on how close they live to the affected area for example. This is because those with high involvement assess the risk to be higher than those who have low involvement. Furthermore, it is also important to pay attention to how the risk is framed in the mass media. When the mass media focus too much on sensationalism, this decreases people's risk perception. Next, through governmental communication the government is able to make people cognitively aware of the risk. The Prime Minister tends to be the most trusted expert representing the government. Hence, for governments confronted with similar events it is advisable to let him or her be the primary communicator and represent the government in general.

Finally, results also show that governments are able to protect their reputation by communicating in an adequate manner to the public. Governments have to strive for communication that reflects reliability, experience, and honesty. This is beneficial to their reputation in two ways, increasing trust and decreasing responsibility for the threat. In conclusion, this study highlights the important role that providing information via communication can play in a risk or crisis context. Hence, it is important for organizations to have competent and skilled spokespersons who are able to make the appropriate communication efforts in situations marked by high uncertainties.

7 Limitations and future research directions

Although this study provides some interesting insights, some limitations should be recognized. These limitations form valuable suggestions for further research. First, the study was conducted soon after the terrorist threat level in Belgium was raised to the highest level possible. In order to gain accurate insights into the perceptions of Belgian residents regarding the terrorism threat, we have chosen to focus on several concepts instead of integrating all possible relevant concepts into a long and extensive survey. The purpose of this study was to make a case study and not an in-depth research that takes into account all possible influencing factors. As a result, the proposed information seeking model does not give a comprehensive overview of all possible influencing factors. Consequently, further research is necessary to test a complete model that includes all the relevant variables, such as self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and interpersonal sources of risk information in the context of information seeking behavior. For example, future research might consider other sources that provide information to stakeholders about risks, such as local emergency planning committees and interpersonal sources of information (e.g., family or friends). Prior research has shown that before and during a crisis event, people prefer to have a variety of communication sources (Heath et al., 2009; Heath, Bradshaw, & Lee, 2002).

In addition, in this study expert efficacy was operationalized based on the evaluation of the communication of the experts. However, people could also evaluate the expert efficacy based on the actions instead of the words of the experts. Hence, for future research, it would be relevant to investigate the evaluation of the actions recommended by the experts as well.

Furthermore, this study was a case study and focused on a highly uncontrollable and unpredictable crisis. Further research is necessary to clarify the impact of the researched variables in other risk and crisis contexts. Finally, it could also be interesting to track the measures of this study longitudinally by following the evolution of the threat. On the 22nd of March 2016 terrorism was no longer a threat but

a reality in Belgium as terrorists committed attacks on the national airport and a metro station. It would be interesting to examine how the assessment of the risk of terrorism has evolved due to this event.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Measurement variables of interest

Variables	Item statement	Item measurement
Involvement	- How involved do you feel with the terrorism threat?	5-point Likert scale Not at all – very much
Attitude towards mass media communication	- The mass media pay too much attention to the terrorism threat - The mass media instigate feelings of fear among the citizens - The mass media focus too strongly on sensationalism	5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree
Governmental expert efficacy (i.e., attitude towards communication of the Belgian federal government)	- Not competent vs. competent - Not experienced vs. experienced - Not effective vs. effective - Unreliable vs. reliable	5-point semantic differential
Cognitive assessment of the risk	- The terrorism threat is severe - The terrorism threat is risky - The likelihood of a terrorist attack to take place in Belgium in the next few weeks is high - The likelihood of being hurt myself in a terrorist attack in Belgium	5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree

	in the next few weeks is high	
Negative affective responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I feel fear because of the terrorism threat - I feel unsafe because of the terrorism threat 	<p>5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>
Information seeking behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I search for information about the terrorism threat by watching television often - I search for information about the terrorism threat by listening to the radio often 	<p>5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>
Behavior in public places	<p>To what extent do you change your behavior because of the terrorism threat in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - taking public transport - participating in mass events - being alert in public places - letting your children participate in school and sports activities 	<p>I do not adapt my behavior at all I feel uncomfortable, but do not adapt my behavior I adapt my behavior Not applicable</p>
Institutional trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Belgian government is making enough efforts to ensure the safety of citizens 	<p>5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Belgian government has a good preventive policy regarding terrorism - In the past, the Belgian government has appropriately dealt with the terrorism threat 	
Governmental responsibility	- The government is responsible for the terrorism threat	5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree
Governmental reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I have a good feeling about the Belgian federal government - I admire and respect the Belgian federal government - I have trust in the Belgian federal government 	5-point Likert scale Totally disagree – totally agree

Table 6: Measurements variables of interest.

9.2 Media attention for results survey

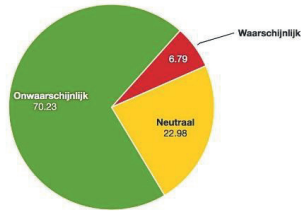


Figure 6: Article on website of national newspaper (HLN) and national commercial television station (VTM Nieuws, 2015a) (part 1).

Hoewel bijna één op twee vreest voor aanslagen in België, schatten de ondervraagden de kans dat ze betrokken raken bij een aanslag zeer onwaarschijnlijk.

Betrokken bij aanslag in België

Ik schat de kans dat ikzelf de komende weken bij een terroristische aanslag betrokken raak in België in als volgt.



Source: VTM Nieuws - UGent [Get the data](#)

Over de steekproef: een totaal van 805 respondenten vulden de vragenlijst in (50 % mannen, 50 % vrouwen). De gemiddelde leeftijd van de respondenten bedraagt 47.17, met een minimum van 18 jaar en een maximum van 91 jaar. 467 respondenten wonen in Vlaanderen, 256 in Wallonië en 83 in Brussel. De steekproef is representatief voor België op vlak van geslacht en leeftijd. De foutenmarge bedraagt 3,4%.

Figure 7: Article on website of national newspaper (HLN) and national commercial television station (VTM Nieuws, 2015a) (part 2).

TOPICS 8° TV KRANT SHOP KLANTENDIENST ABONNEER U

DeMorgen Cult Zine DM+
 Muziek, film, tv, expo Interviews, foto, lifestyle Voor abonnees

Nieuws > Binnenland > Terreure dreiging in België

DOSSIER: TERREURE DREIGING IN BELGIË

Dit denken Belgen over de terreure dreiging

27-11-15, 19.37u - SD - Bron: VTM Nieuws

De terreure dreiging laat niemand onberoerd. 62 procent van de Belgen maakt zich zorgen over de dreiging. Dat blijkt uit een enquête van VTM Nieuws en de Universiteit Gent.

62,3 procent van de Belgen maakt zich duidelijk zorgen om de verhoogde terreure dreiging in ons land. Eén op de vier Belgen (27,3 procent) blijft neutraal. In Wallonië en Brussel nemen de mensen de dreiging ernstiger dan in Vlaanderen.

0 SHARES

Terreure dreiging

Hoe schat u de terreure dreiging in?

Source: [VTM Nieuws - LIJders Get the data](#)

De vrees voor aanslagen in België ligt vrij hoog. Bijna één op twee (44,4 procent) acht de kans waarschijnlijk dat er een aanslag volgt. Vrouwen hebben blijkbaar meer angst voor een aanslag dan mannen, net als inwoners van Brussel en Wallonië.

Aanslag in België

Ik schat de kans dat er in België de komende weken een aanslag gebeurt in als volgt:

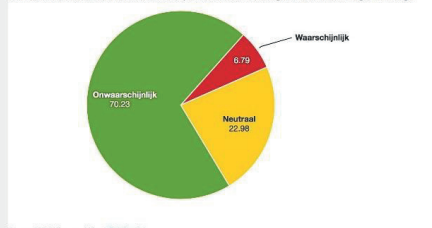
Source: [VTM Nieuws - LIJders Get the data](#)

Figure 8: Article on website of national newspaper (*De Morgen*) and national commercial television station (*VTM Nieuws*, 2015b) (part 1).

Hoewel bijna één op twee vreest voor aanslagen in België, schatten de ondervraagden de kans dat ze betrokken raken bij een aanslag zeer onwaarschijnlijk.

Betrokken bij aanslag in België

Ik schat de kans dat ikzelf de komende weken bij een terroristische aanslag betrokken raak in België in als volgt.



Source: VTM Nieuws - UGent [Get the data](#)

Over de steekproef: een totaal van 805 respondenten vulden de vragenlijst in (50 % mannen, 50 % vrouwen). De gemiddelde leeftijd van de respondenten bedraagt 47.17, met een minimum van 18 jaar en een maximum van 91 jaar. 467 respondenten wonen in Vlaanderen, 256 in Wallonië en 83 in Brussel. De steekproef is representatief voor België op vlak van geslacht en leeftijd. De foutenmarge bedraagt 3,4%.

DOSSIER TERREURDREIGING IN BELGIË

[LEES ALLE ARTIKELS](#)



Figure 9: Article on website of national newspaper (De Morgen) and national commercial television station (VTM Nieuws, 2015b) (part 2).

Nieuwsbrieven | Aanbod voor abonnees | Abonneren | Acties

Knack.be

Nieuws van 28 november 2015

57°

zone: dagelijkse duiding van Knack.be
 Knack van deze week
 Knack archief
 Knack Club voordelen

Nieuws | Economie | Beurs & Geld | Technologie | Video kanaal Z | Lifestyle | 50+ | Enten

Opinie | België | Wereld | Wetenschap | Gezondheid | Planet Earth | Auto | Mensen | Ondertussen | Boeken

Dit denken Belgen over terreurdreiging

27/11/15 om 19:29 - Bijgewerkt om 19:40

De terreur van de afgelopen weken heeft niemand onberoerd gelaten. De Universiteit van Gent heeft daarom samen met VTM NIEUWS een enquête gedaan bij 805 Belgen over hoe zij zich voelen bij de aanslagen in Parijs en de dreiging in België. Uit de resultaten wordt duidelijk dat we de dreiging zeer ernstig nemen en bijna één Belg op twee vreest voor een terroristische aanslag in ons land. Hun gedrag aanpassen, zien de meeste mensen niet zitten.

f t g+ in e

STRELO
 ERNSTIG 62,3 %
 MATIG 27,3 %
 NIET ERNSTIG 10,4 %

Dit denken Belgen over terreurdreiging

f t g+ in e

Figure 10: Article on website Belgian weekly paper (Knack, 2015).

vtm VTM NIEUWS | VTM Koken | Stadion | Het Weer | VTM Tickets | VTMKZOOM

vtm NIEUWS f t g+ ZOEK

BINNENLAND • POLITIEK • BUITENLAND • CULTUUR & MEDIA • MOET JE ZIEN • SPORT • STADION • HET WEER 4040 HERBEKIJK VIDEO

DIT DENKEN BELGEN OVER TERREURDREIGING

GOPHIN ENDEKES
 NULAS ENERGY
 BELGIE OP 1-9

Figure 11: Homepage website VTM Nieuws (2015c).



VTM NIEUWS

27 november 2015 · 🌐

Uit een enquête van VTM NIEUWS en Universiteit Gent blijkt dat 1 Belg op 2 vreest voor een aanslag in België.



Dit denken Belgen over terreurdreiging

NIEUWS.VTM.BE



Leuk



Opmerking plaatsen



Delen



██████████ en 315 anderen

Topopmerkingen ▾

33 keer gedeeld

49 opmerkingen

Schrijf een opmerking...



██████████ sta op, ga werken, geen nieuws en geen invloed van sociale media... zal nog 1 op 10 zijn met schrik ipv 1 op 2..

Leuk · Beantwoorden · 2 j



5

↳ 1 antwoord

...

██████████ We moeten deze dreiging samen tegemoet treden. IS rekruteert op basis van verdeling, "verdeel en heers". Leg de poel van rekruten droog, werk met de moslimgemeenschap samen om het crapuul er vantussen te halen maar maak nooit de fout om de vele onschul... [Meer bekijken](#)

Leuk · Beantwoorden · 2 j



5

↳ 4 antwoorden

Figure 12: Facebook post VTM Nieuws (2015d).

CHAPTER VII
USING TWITTER FOR COMMUNICATION
AFTER TERRORIST ATTACKS: INSIGHTS FROM
A QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF
TWEETS ABOUT THE ATTACKS IN BRUSSELS,
BELGIUM

CHAPTER VII

USING TWITTER FOR COMMUNICATION AFTER TERRORIST ATTACKS: INSIGHTS FROM A QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TWEETS ABOUT THE ATTACKS IN BRUSSELS, BELGIUM¹

ABSTRACT

Both practitioners and scholars highlight the importance of social media as communication channels during crises. Despite the grave threat of terrorism to modern society, crisis communication research has yet to explore how various stakeholders involved in crises engage in social media like Twitter. By means of a quantitative content analysis of tweets ($N = 1\,718$), this study examined how Twitter was used following the terrorist attacks on Brussels Airport and Maalbeek Metro Station on the 22nd of March 2016. We investigated how stakeholders communicated with their follower bases about the attacks. In particular, we examined who (i.e., which actors) tweeted what (i.e., content). The results reveal that Twitter has emerged as an important communication tool, especially for citizens during terrorist attacks. They use this platform primarily to vent their negative feelings. Although governmental agencies form important communication hubs (i.e., the highest number of retweets), these actors did not tweet frequently during the attacks. Results also indicate that emotion-related content prevails on Twitter, especially when it comes to content expressed by citizens. The most frequently-expressed emotion in the tweets was sympathy. Both governmental agencies and media mostly tweeted neutral, non-emotional information following the attacks in Belgium.

KEYWORDS

Twitter; crisis communication; terrorism

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1 Introduction

Europeans consider terrorism to be the most important challenge that the European Union is facing nowadays (Eurobarometer, 2017). Indeed, reality has shown that Europe remains vulnerable to terrorist attacks, as can be seen by incidents in Paris, London, Nice, Stockholm, Barcelona and Brussels. On the 22nd of March 2016, Belgium was confronted with two major terrorist attacks: one at its international airport, Brussels Airport, and one at the Maalbeek Metro Station. During these attacks, 35 people died and 340 were injured (Baert & Huygebaert, 2016).

In many ways, terrorism represents a very particular type of crisis. First of all, it is intentional: a group of individuals carries out calculated attacks to harm other people (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). It makes people vulnerable and has a major psychological impact (Goldstein, 2005). Furthermore, terrorist attacks initiate a fear of repetition (Gibbs van Brunshot & Sherley, 2005; Vos, 2017) and threaten the core values of society (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Because of these characteristics, terrorist attacks create more fear and anxiety than naturally-occurring crises like earthquakes and wildfires, which have similar consequences (King, 2005). Due to these distinctions, terrorist attacks are interesting crisis communication topics warranting further investigation. However, despite the societal impacts of such attacks and their threat to the European Union, few crisis communication studies have investigated terrorism (cf. chapter six).

During the terrorist attacks in Belgium, the government advised citizens to use social media instead of the telephone network because the latter was overloaded (De Redactie, 2016). This request led to social media becoming a crucial communication tool during the crisis. Reuter and Kaufhold (2018) provide an overview of 15 years of researching social media in different crises contexts. The authors clarified that previous research tended to explore crisis communication on social media during several types of crises, including nuclear calamity (e.g., Thomson et al., 2012; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013), natural disasters like hurricanes (e.g., Hughes, Denis, Palen, & Anderson, 2014; Hughes & Palen, 2009; Lachlan, Spence, Lin, & Greco, 2014), earthquakes (e.g., Mendoza, Poblete, & Castillo, 2010; Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Qu, Huang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011; Wilensky, 2014), floods (e.g., Kaufhold & Reuter, 2014; Reuter, Ludwig, Kaufhold, & Pipek, 2015; Vieweg, Hughes, Starbird, & Palen, 2010), fires (e.g., Starbird & Palen, 2010) and oil spills (e.g., Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011). Researchers also have explored man-made crises like the London riots of 2011 (Denef, Bayerl, & Kaptein, 2013).

Despite the breadth of these studies, few researchers have considered how social media could be used as communication tools during terrorist attacks. One notable exception is a study investigating how

Twitter was used to track the terrorists who committed multiple attacks in Mumbai (Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2011). This study demonstrated that the Mumbai terrorists used Twitter as a useful information source because it provided the terrorists with operationally sensitive information (Oh et al., 2011). This example demonstrates that Twitter use during terrorist attacks actually can escalate, rather than minimise, a crisis. In Belgium, authorities were aware of this fact and asked citizens not to disclose details about police activities on social media during a security lockdown of Brussels in November 2015 (Sims, 2015). Another study examined the use of Facebook after the Boston marathon bombing in 2013 (Guo, 2017). Guo (2017) conducted a qualitative examination of the public's response to the bombing, including their crisis emotions, coping methods and engagement, as expressed by a directly-involved organisation, the Boston Athletic Association. For their part, Burnap et al. (2014) conducted a study about the 2015 terrorist attacks in London, exploring factors that promote information propagation on social media following terrorist incidents. Considering the 2015 Paris attack, Wiegand and Middleton (2016) investigated the veracity and velocity of social media content regarding breaking news on Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. To our knowledge, however, there exists no research providing in-depth insights about how various actors use social media during terrorist attacks to give sense to this crisis.

Therefore, the current study investigates the use of Twitter as a communication channel by various actors during the terrorist attacks in Brussels 22nd of March 2016. Twitter can be used as a communication channel for different purposes, such as sharing information, expressing emotions, sharing media content and generating collective sense making (Brummette & Sisco, 2015; Getchell & Sellnow, 2016; Lachlan et al., 2014). By means of a quantitative content analysis, we investigate who (i.e., tweeting actors) tweeted what (i.e., content of the tweets).

Unlike traditional media, social media allow a multi-vocal approach to crisis communication, by enabling every individual or organisation to communicate about the crisis (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Therefore, we examine which actors tweeted during the crisis and to what extent. We also explore how often these actors were retweeted because these entities represent important communication hubs (Castells, 2000; David, Ong, & Legara, 2016). Furthermore, with regard to the content of the tweets, researchers have demonstrated that Twitter holds two important functions during crises: to spread information about the crisis and to express emotions about the event (David et al., 2016). The current study elaborates on these two functions of Twitter based on Qu et al.'s (2009) categorisations of information, emotion, action and opinion-related tweets. Recently, the literature has focused on emotions as an important topic in crisis communication (Guo, 2017; Jin & Pang, 2010). This study adds to this body of work by considering the emotional load of tweets through an investigation of the specific emotions contained in the tweets. Likewise, the paper contributes to

current knowledge by demonstrating who uses Twitter for communication during times of crisis resulting from one of the biggest threats to modern society, terrorist attacks.

2 Situational background of the terrorist attacks in Belgium

Belgium had its first explicit involvement with terrorism during the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015. On this day, Islamic State carried out several attacks in the city, killing 129 and severely injuring 352 people. Salah Abdeslam is the only terrorist involved in that attack who is still alive. He is a Belgian citizen with Moroccan roots who lived in the capital city of Belgium, Brussels, for most of his life. After the Parisian attacks, he fled back to Belgium (Rose & Blenkinsop, 2015). Four months later, on March 22, 2016, Brussels suffered two terrorist attacks committed by the same terrorist cell as that of the Parisian attacks. A few minutes before 8 a.m., a first bomb exploded in the departure area of Brussels Airport. Several seconds later, a second bomb exploded. A third bomb was later discovered in the airport, but luckily failed to detonate. Approximately one hour later, another attack occurred in the Maalbeek Metro Station, located in the center of Brussels. In total, 35 people died and more than 300 people were severely injured, making these bombings the deadliest act of terrorism in Belgium's history (Ponsaers & Devroe, 2017). Both attacks were claimed by Islamic State. Because of the attacks, the terrorism threat level in Belgium was raised to four, the highest level, throughout the entire country. This threat level indicates that a new terrorist attack is imminent, so the government encouraged Belgian citizens to stay inside. At the same moment, the phone network became overwhelmed, and the government advised people to use social media for communication purposes (De Redactie, 2016).

3 Literature review

3.1 Twitter use during terrorist attacks

Following the attacks in Brussels, Twitter emerged as one of the most important social platforms. Twitter is a "*microblogging social networking platform through which individuals can post or 'tweet' comments to those who subscribe or 'follow the blogger'*" (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011, p. 113). Although this medium was not conceived for use in crisis situations, individuals and organisations are increasingly using it to spread and obtain information during such events (Spiro & Butts, 2013).

To date, only a few studies have explored the use of social media during terrorist attacks, including Oh et al. (2010) who revealed the disadvantages of using Twitter as a communication channel during such attacks. For instance, terrorists could use Twitter to obtain real-time information. Another study about

Twitter use in crisis situations explored the platform's self-correcting mechanisms and echo-effects regarding the 'gunman in the newsroom crisis' (Jong & Dückers, 2016). During this crisis, an armed person was able to enter a national broadcasting newsroom after having made a bomb threat. The authors investigated the facts and rumours that were shared on Twitter six hours after the incident. This analysis showed an echo effect: the dissemination of older tweets continued, even after the same source posted new facts. The authors also revealed that rumours are sometimes based on misinterpreted humour in tweets (Jong & Dückers, 2016). Another study explored how journalists verified user-generated content (i.e., UGC) on Twitter during the terrorist attacks in Brussels, revealing that during the first hours after the attacks, journalists tended to rely on UGC (Rauchfleisch, Artho, Metag, Post, & Schäfer, 2017). The results indicated that journalists' practices during crises tend to share a commonality: they often lack consistent verification processes, a shortcoming that has major ethical implications (Rauchfleisch et al., 2017).

The framing of terrorism on Twitter has also been the subject of research, particularly in terms of distinguishing proximity effects (i.e., geographical, social and temporal proximity). One study compared two different cases: the Boston marathon bombings in 2013 and the attacks in Brussels Airport in 2016 (Kwon, Chadha, & Pellizzaro, 2017). The results indicated some similarities, but several differences also emerged between the two cases. For example, tweets during the Boston bombings tended to focus on individual-oriented storytelling and episodic frames, whereas tweets during the terrorist attacks in Brussels primarily focused on community/regional frames. It should be noted, however, that this study's sample relied primarily on U.S.-originated tweets. Proximity effects (i.e., Brussels is geographically distant from the U.S.) could therefore explain the differences that occurred. To explain this variation, the authors also suggested that the Boston marathon bombing was the first major terrorist attack in the U.S. since 9/11. By comparison, Europe had been confronted with terrorism repeatedly in the period surrounding the attacks in Brussels (e.g., the Parisian attacks took place only four months before the Belgian attacks) (Kwon et al., 2017).

These studies indicate that scholars have begun to investigate several aspects of how Twitter is used during terrorist attacks, but they tend to focus on a very particular aspect of the issue, such as the negative consequences of Twitter use by terrorists (Oh et al., 2010), self-correcting mechanisms (Jong & Dückers, 2016), differences in framing based on proximity (Kwon et al., 2017) and source verification processes (Rauchfleisch et al., 2017). Despite the fact that these studies have contributed greatly to the literature, the current study seeks to provide in-depth insights about the Twitter use by various actors during terrorist attacks.

3.2 Tweeting actors

Everyone is able to voice an opinion through social media. Crisis communication research used to have a strong sender orientation focusing on the messages sent out by the crisis communication manager (Lee, 2004). However, according to Frandsen and Johansen (2010), publics (i.e., traditional receivers of crisis messages) also can become crisis communicators. Crisis communication is evolved from one-to-many communication into many-to-many communication (Mersham, Theunissen, & Peart, 2009). Hence, the number of players in content creation during crises has risen (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Ji, Li, North, & Liu, 2017; Kim, 2016; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Zhang, Vos, Jari, Wang, & Kotkov, 2016). As a result, it is important to consider a variety of actors that might tweet about terrorist attacks rather than concentrating entirely specific parties such as governmental services and media. This observation resulted in the following research question:

R_{Q1}: *Who was tweeting about the terrorist attacks in Brussels and to what extent?*

3.2.1 Communicating hubs

Another consideration for this research are communication hubs. These are sources of information that post updates (about the crisis) and receive the most retweets (Castells, 2000; David, et al., 2016). In addition, Jong and Dückers (2016, p. 339) argue that communication hubs are “*senders with a certain level of authority and trust who play an important role in the sharing of social media messages*”. David et al. (2016) investigated tweets about the Haiyan typhoon and found that celebrities and media channels constitute important communication hubs. In the current study, we investigate which actors received the most retweets, thus serving as communication hubs on Twitter during the terrorist attacks in Brussels:

R_{Q2}: *Which actors were retweeted most?*

We also examine whether or not there are differences in various actors' numbers of retweets. For example, research has shown that when risks are not personally controllable (i.e., terrorist attacks), people want to know how the government is responding and acting to protect them (Ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). Citizens, however, are not always considered to be the most reliable source of information during crises (Alexander, 2014). Rumours easily can be posted and re-posted, especially during the early stages of crises when information from authorities is scarce (Zhao, Yin, & Song, 2016). We therefore expect that governmental agencies will receive more retweets than ordinary citizens, thus making them important communication hubs during terrorist attacks.

H₁: *Governmental agencies will receive more retweets than ordinary citizens.*

3.3 Content of the tweets

3.3.1 Type of content

In addition to who is tweeting, this research also seeks out insights into the content of tweets. Qu et al. (2009) distinguished four types of content: information, emotion, action and opinion-related information. Other studies also have used this classification, including a study analysing tweets sent out during a violent crisis in Seattle-Tacoma (e.g., Heverin & Zach, 2010).

Information-related content refers to material that contains factual information about the crisis (e.g., tweets with questions about information and tweets with advice about the crisis). Emotion-related content refers to posts that contain emotional information such as expressions of sympathy for the victims of the crisis. Action-related content contains messages seeking help or information about how to help victims. Opinion-related tweets contain a clear view or perspective on the crisis. Such opinions can be both critical and constructive (e.g., commentary on how the government and security services handled the crisis) (Qu et al., 2009). To gain insights into what kinds of content were shared on Twitter during and after the attacks in Brussels, we formulate this research question:

RQ₃: *To what extent was each type of content (i.e., information, emotion, action and opinion) mentioned in tweets about the terrorist attacks in Brussels?*

Research has shown that information-related content often dominates in tweets related to natural disasters, such as in the context of typhoons (David et al., 2016) or earthquakes (Qu, Huang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011). However, as mentioned in the introduction section of this paper (cf. part 1), terrorist attacks are likely to initiate more emotional responses than naturally-occurring crises. Such attacks provoke greater fear and anxiety than typhoons or earthquakes for example (King, 2005). Therefore, we expect that emotion-related content prevailed over information-related content on Twitter following the terrorist attacks. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

H₂: *Tweets about the terrorist attacks in Brussels will contain more emotion-related content than information-related content.*

3.3.2 Emotions in tweets

In the last decade, research has begun to explore the importance of emotions in crisis communication (Guo, 2017; Jin & Pang, 2010; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013). By investigating emotions, we are able to “get a deeper understanding of the context in which the reactions are expressed and the specific functions that users’ emotional states may reflect” (Gaspar, Pedro, Panagiotopoulos, & Seibt, 2016 p. 179). Analyzing emotions in text-based communication helps to understand how people communicate

during crises, with both positive and negative emotions being important to consider (Gaspar et al., 2016). The negative emotions that people could experience during crises include anger, fright, anxiety, guilt, shame and sadness (Lazarus, 1991). Alongside negative emotions, people might also experience positive emotions during crises, such as hope (Jin, Park, & Len-Rios, 2010), relief (Choi & Lin, 2009) and sympathy (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). According to Guo (2017), the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) Model faces a shortcoming in that it does not integrate positive emotions (Jing, Pang, & Cameron, 2012). Instead, this model distinguishes four negative types of emotions and places them into four different quadrants (i.e., fear, anxiety, sadness and anger). Terrorism would be located in the third quadrant where fright and sadness dominate. However, according to Guo (2017), it is important to add positive emotions to the quadrants. In order to reveal which positive and negative emotions arose in tweets about the terrorist attacks, we posit the following research question:

RQ₄: *Which positive and negative emotions are expressed in tweets about the terrorist attacks in Brussels?*

Based on the findings of previous research, we expect that actors will differ in the type of emotions that they disseminate in their tweets. For example, some authors suggest that mass media are convenient providers of information in the context of terrorism-related events because of their accessibility and availability (Wray, Kreuter, Jacobsen, Clements, & Evans, 2004). However, media have been criticised for focusing too much on sensationalism when reporting such events (Kasperson & Kasperson, 1996; Wray et al., 2004). This idea was confirmed by several case studies, including Iqbal's (2015) study, which investigated how British news TV channels reported the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The study found that the media primarily focused on images of terror and violence when covering the Mumbai attacks. In particular, the results demonstrated that the channels prioritised images of death and injury while propagating chaos and confusion in Mumbai. Unlike the media, governmental agencies have to play a calmer, more neutral role when crises hit (Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009). They are expected to communicate information that reassures citizens (Ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). Based on these findings, we present the following hypotheses:

H₃: *Media will more focus on negative emotions than governmental agencies.*

H₄: *Governmental agencies will focus more on non-emotional content than media.*

4 Method

4.1 Sampling

In this study, we analyze tweets about the terrorist attacks in Brussels. Twitter was chosen as a communication channel because tweets provide particularly useful data during unexpected and stressful events like terrorist attacks (Gaspar et al., 2016). In addition, Twitter was widely used following the terrorist attacks in Brussels. To conduct this exploration, we utilised a quantitative content analysis which is an ideal method for observing people's responses to crises in a non-reactive manner (Schwarz, 2012). Though Twitter was not originally conceived for use during crises, it increasingly serves the purpose of sharing information and emotions for the general public and for organisations. Twitter also features a number of characteristics that are especially interesting during crises, such as the ability to post real-time, short-burst messages, to add multimedia or hyperlinks. In addition, posts are presented in reverse chronological order and easily retweeted or forwarded to other followers (David et al., 2016; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013).

Data were gathered through the Twitter REST Application Programming Interface (API) and included the sender of the tweets, the content, hashtags and the number of retweets. The data were comprised of tweets that contained one or more of the following hashtags: #zaventem, #brusselsattack, #brussels, #brussel, #Maalbeek and #Maelbeek. These hashtags were selected following an exploratory analysis of tweets disseminated during and after the attacks in Brussels. These hashtags seemed to appear most frequently. Our data included tweets with one or more of these hashtags during the period of March 22 (i.e., the day of the attacks) to March 29, 2016 (i.e., one week after the attacks).

In total, 2 070 372 tweets were gathered. We applied a number of selection criteria to these tweets in order to reduce the sample size. First, we omitted retweets and considered only original tweets, replies and mentions. Because retweets are duplicates of original tweets shared by another user with his or her own network, this omission will not affect the results. After skipping these retweets, 388 349 tweets remained. Second, we scanned the remaining tweets for language use. Only Dutch tweets were selected for use in this study because it is the native language of the coder. There were a total of 6 933 unique Dutch tweets in the sample. We then selected three random samples of approximately 550 tweets each. We chose more than one random sample in order to increase the reliability of the coding process and analyses (cf. Takahashi, Tandor, & Carmichael, 2015). Finally, the three random samples were combined and a sample of 1 718 tweets remained. This sample size is similar to other studies investigating tweets sent out during crises (e.g., Takahashi et al., 2015).

4.2 Coding instrument

By means of a quantitative content analysis, the sampled tweets were coded based on the theoretical considerations described above (cf. appendices²). First, the actor posting the tweet was coded into one of the following categories (e.g., Takahashi. et al., 2015): citizen, national media channel, international media channel, Belgian journalist, foreign journalist, politician/political party, government service, expert organisation, celebrity, commercial company, non-governmental organization and other. Then, these actors were regrouped into four categories in order to make analyses more comprehensive: citizens, the media (i.e., national media channels, international media channels, Belgian journalists and foreign journalists), governmental agencies (i.e., politicians/political parties and government services) and others (i.e., expert organisations, celebrities, non-governmental organizations, commercial companies and others). We next indicated the number of retweets before coding the type of content in the tweet (i.e., information, emotion, action or opinion) (Qu et al., 2009). For content type, the coder had to indicate if the content was present or absent in the tweet. Table 1 provides an example of each content type. Information-related content was used for tweets that shared information about the attacks (e.g., mentioning who was arrested). Emotion-related content included tweets expressing a poster's emotions and feelings. These tweets were emotionally loaded and conveyed a certain feeling (e.g., *"Let's pray for the people who are affected by these attacks"*). Action-related content refers to tweets that encourage a certain action (e.g., organising a charity event for victims of the attacks) or ask official organisations, such as the government, to take action. Opinion-related content indicates tweets that express a certain opinion or critique about aspects related to the crisis (e.g., *"The mayor of Brussels needs to be fired!"*).

² The appendices contain the full coding instrument that was used in the coding process. In the method section of this chapter, we only discuss the variables of interest that were coded in order to answer the research questions and hypotheses. The coding process was conducted by a Dutch coder. Therefore, the coding guide is presented in Dutch.

Content type	Example
Information	@ladh: Najim Laachraoui, man with jacket and wearing a hat, and suspect of the attacks in #Zaventem arrested in #Schaarbeek
Emotion	Let's be quiet now. For all the people who are not here anymore. Let's be gentle for all the people who are still here #Brussels #Prayfor the world
Action	Time for a big clean-up of the city #brusselsattack #taketherightinyourownhands
Opinion	The mayor and those who blindly followed his order need to be fired IMMEDIATELY! IDIOTS!#brusselsattack

Table 1: Examples of different content types.

Next, we coded the general sentiment of the tweets (i.e., positive, negative or neutral). Furthermore, specific emotions mentioned in the tweets were also coded based on the emotions identified in previous crisis communication research (e.g., Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Jin & Pang, 2010; Jin et al., 2012; Mazer et al., 2015). Table 2 provides an overview of the various positive and negative emotions. We also coded a category called 'other emotions' if the tweet implied a feeling outside the scope of the coding scheme. In such cases, the coder had to describe the emotion that most applied to the tweet.

Emotions	Example
Thankfulness	Special thanks to the police, soldiers and medical services #brusselsattack
Relief	Glad I did not take the metro today #lucky #zaventem #Brusselse
Humor	All Finnish people are heading to Starbucks apparently #zaventem
Optimism	Belgians are very brave people, IS can hurt us but never win #brusselsattack #proudtobebelgian
Sympathy	I pray for all the victims, my thoughts are with them #prayforbelgium #zaventem
Distrust	Government services have failed again, which politician will take responsibility and quit? #brusselsattack
Anxiety	Terrorism is coming very close ☹️ #brussels
Anger	Politicians are liars and hypocrites #brussel #zaventem
Sadness	I cried today #brusselsattack

Shock	What happened today? No words could describe this #zaventem #brussels #brusselsattacks #brusselsairport #jesuisBelge
Frustration	Attacks in Brussels/Europe, when is it going to stop? #zaventem
Sarcasm	1 bag that did not explode, probably the ouffit for the virgins that wait for the attackers who died #brusselsattack
Disbelief	If I close my eyes, could I act like nothing happened? #brusselsattack

Table 2: Emotions in tweets.

4.3 Intra-coder reliability

One coder coded all variables. In order to ensure reliability in the coding process, 180 random tweets were re-coded two weeks after the initial coding process that took place in March 2017 and intra-coder reliability was calculated between the two instances (Krippendorff, 2004). Cohen's Kappa was measured for nominal variables and an the intra-class-correlation coefficient was used for the metric variable (i.e., number of retweets). As illustrated in Table 3, Kappa values ranged between 0.70 and 1, indicating that variable coding was reliable or very reliable (cf. Krippendorff, 2004). Furthermore, the intra-class-correlation coefficient was 1 for the number of retweets, which is the highest score possible.

Variable	Cohen's Kappa (K)
Tweeting actor	1
Information-related content	0.86
Emotion-related content	0.70
Action-related content	0.80
Opinion-related content	0.70
Type of emotion	0.76

Table 3: Intra-coder reliability.

5 Results

5.1 Tweeting actors

Analyses of who was tweeting during the terrorist attacks and to what extent (RQ₁) revealed that citizens dominated Twitter coverage of the attacks (i.e., 78.20 %, $n = 1\,344$). Meanwhile, the media represented 11.50 % ($n = 198$) of the tweets, and governmental agencies demonstrated very little tweeting activity (i.e., 1.80 %, $n = 31$). Other sources, such as commercial companies and expert organisations, represented 8.40 % ($n = 145$) of the tweets.

5.1.1 Communication hubs

We next examined which actors received the most retweets (RQ₂). We conducted a Kruskal-Wallis test (i.e., nonparametric one-way analysis of variance) in order to compare the number of retweets for various actors. We employed this nonparametric test due to unequal population variances and a non-normal distribution of data (cf. Kwon, Chadha, & Pellizaro, 2017). Results showed a significant difference in the number of retweets for various actors, $\chi^2(2) = 146.58$, $p < 0.001$, $r = 39.66$. Governmental agencies received the highest number of retweets, with a mean rank of 1 169.03; the media placed second with a mean rank of 1 047.73 and citizens' tweets received the lowest number of retweets with a mean rank of 739.78. We conducted a post-hoc pairwise comparison in order to test whether or not the tweets of governmental agencies were retweeted significantly more often than those of citizens (cf. H₁). The results demonstrated a significant difference in mean rank ($p < 0.001$), confirming the first hypothesis.

5.2 Content of the tweets

5.2.1 Type of content

We next considered the type of content mentioned in the tweets (cf. RQ₃). The results showed that more than half of the tweets contained emotional content (i.e., 61.80 %, $n = 1\,061$). The second-most common content was information-related (i.e., 47.50 %, $n = 816$), followed by opinion-related tweets at 25.10 % ($n = 431$). This category mostly included critiques of politicians, media and Islam. 5.80 % of the tweets ($n = 99$) included action-related content. These findings support the second hypothesis which stated that tweets about the terrorist attacks would contain more emotion-related content than information-related content.

5.2.2 Emotions in tweets

When we investigated which emotions were expressed in the tweets (RQ₄), we found that more than half of all tweets contained a specific negative or positive emotion (i.e., 61.70 %, $n = 1\ 060$). Most of the tweets (i.e., 36.30 %, $n = 625$) expressed negative emotions, 19.20 % ($n = 331$) of the tweets described positive emotions and 6.10 % ($n = 104$) involved other emotions. In terms of specific negative emotions, anger was the most often expressed negative emotion in the tweets (i.e., 9.40 %, $n = 162$). Frustration represented the second most expressed emotion (i.e., 7.30 %, $n = 125$), and sadness the third most (6.60 %, $n = 114$). The most common positive emotions that appeared in the tweets were sympathy (i.e., 9.90 %, $n = 170$), optimism (i.e., 3.40 %, $n = 59$), thankfulness (i.e., 2.40 %, $n = 42$) and humor (i.e., 2 %, $n = 34$). Figure 1 provides an overview of the frequency of negative emotions expressed in the tweets, while Figure 2 shows the frequency of positive emotions expressed in the tweets.

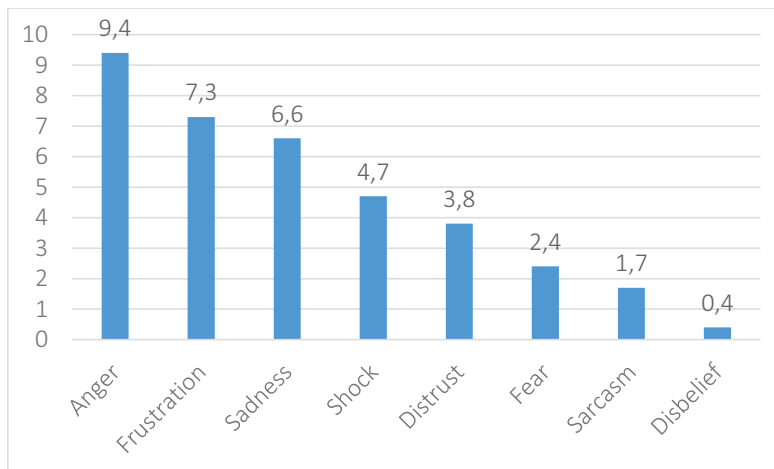


Figure 1: Negative emotions expressed in tweets (% of tweets containing this type of emotion).

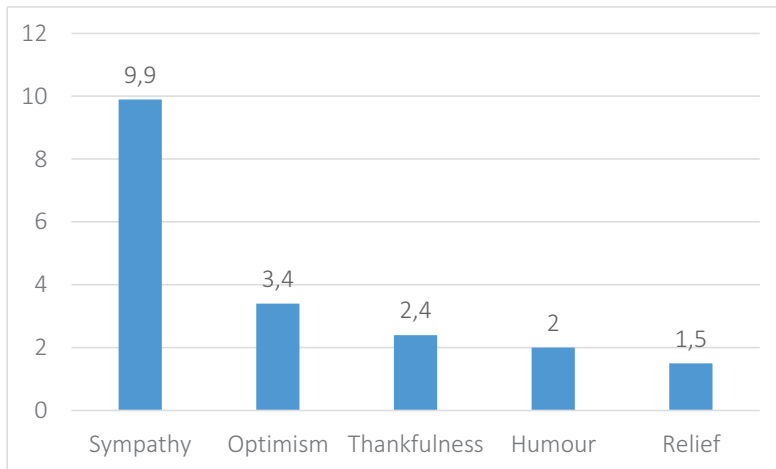


Figure 2: Positive emotions expressed in tweets (% of tweets containing this type of emotion).

Next, in order to test whether or not media focused more on negative emotions than governmental agencies, we conducted a crosstab analysis, which showed that there was a significant relationship between the different actors and the type of emotions they tweeted $\chi^2(28) = 243.96, p < 0.001, r = 0.39$. However, media channels did not focus significantly more on negative emotions than governmental agency sources, $z = 0.80, p > 0.05$. Therefore, the third hypothesis has to be rejected. Furthermore, when we look at the type of emotional information given by various actors (cf. Figure 3), we see that negative emotions prevailed only for citizens (i.e., 43.20 %, $n = 580$). For media and governmental agencies, tweets containing information without emotions dominated. The media (i.e., 83.30 %, $n = 165$) and governmental agencies (i.e., 51.60 %, $n = 16$) reported mostly without emotions. The results also revealed that media tweeted significantly more non-emotional information than governmental agencies, $z = 3.10, p < 0.01$, which is the opposite to what we expected in the fourth hypothesis. Therefore, this hypothesis also has to be rejected.

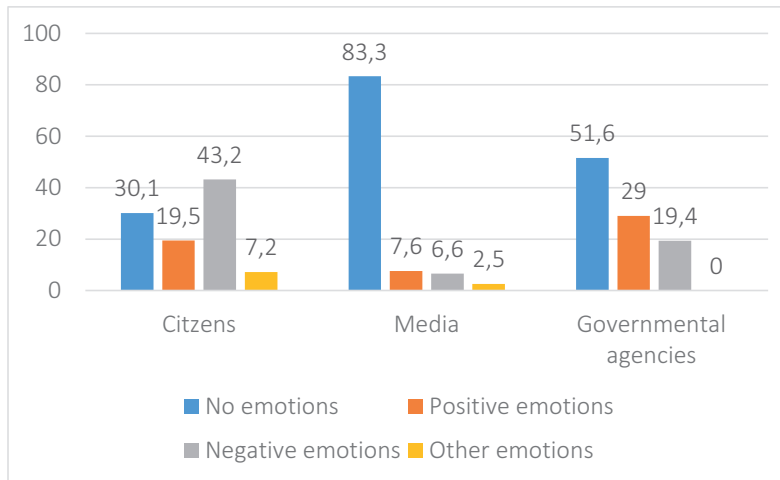


Figure 3: Emotions in tweets per actor (% of tweets containing this type of emotion).

6 Conclusion and discussion

6.1 Key findings

The current study aimed to explore which actors use Twitter make sense of the terrorist attacks in Brussels on the 22nd of March 2016 and how they do so. Results indicate that citizens are extensively using Twitter to make sense of the terrorist attacks. This finding provides evidence for the stream of research that is arguing that crisis communication today must be considered using a multi-vocal approach. The organisation in crisis is no longer the only communicator, other stakeholders also can engage in crisis communication through social media (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho et al., 2013; Vos et al., 2014; Zhao, 2017). However, for this study, it is important to pay attention to the relative chances of including a citizen versus a governmental agency in the sample of tweets. The chances of including citizens are much greater than the chances to include governmental agencies. Nevertheless, results clearly show that citizens used Twitter as a tool to vent their thoughts and feelings about the attacks. Media outlets were the second most active tweeters during the attacks, indicating that they also played an important role as crisis communicators. Moreover, despite the central coordinating role of Belgian governmental agencies during the attacks, their tweeting activity was minimal, a finding that is in line with previous research. While authorities agree that social media tools are helpful during crises, only a few use these tools for communication during crises (Reuter, Ludwig, Kaufhold, & Spielhofer, 2016; Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018). Possible explanations for this lack of use include a lack of staff (San et al., 2013), questions about reliability and credibility (Reuter et al., 2016) and a dearth of formal policies about

how to use social media (Plotnick, Hiltz, Kushma, & Tapia, 2015). In the future, these official sources should become more aware of the fact that citizens use Twitter to communicate during such crises, and therefore, it is important to update social media channels with information about crises (Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018).

The results also provide additional evidence for the importance of governmental agencies to become more active on Twitter during terrorist attacks. These agencies are retweeted the most and thus function as important communication hubs. This result reflects the fact that people tend to rely on these official sources when they are unable to control the risk themselves. In such situations, they want to know what the government is doing to protect them (Ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). Interestingly, Helsloot and Groenendaal (2013) found that governmental agencies' tweets about the large-scale fire in Moerdijk, the Netherlands, were not retweeted much. However, the authors argue that this finding could be attributed to the fact that governmental tweets can be overlooked too easily when there is an avalanche of messages. Nonetheless, the current study demonstrated that despite the lack of Twitter activity from Belgian governmental agencies, their tweets were highly retweeted. Another reason for the difference that was found between both studies might be the involved crisis type. The study of Helsloot and Groenendaal (2003) focused on a fire. This type of crisis has different characteristics than terrorist attacks that create a fear of repetition (Gibbs van Brunshot & Sherley, 2005). Hence, for the latter, people might want more information from the government than for a fire. Therefore, for future research it could be interesting to compare the communication via Twitter for different crisis types. Based on the results of the current study, we could argue that it is important for governmental agencies to play an active role on Twitter during such incidents. In that matter is the challenge especially that citizens expect very quick responses of authorities (Reuter & Speilhofer, 2016). Hence, governmental agencies have to find a right balance between posting content on social media and responding to citizens' inquiries. Citizens' tweets are not retweeted frequently, which also aligns with our expectations because citizen tweets could include rumours. What people want in uncertain situations like terrorist attacks is factual information (Zhao et al., 2016; cf. chapter four).

Next, our results revealed that emotion-related content prevailed. However, Twitter also was used often to spread information. Previous research has found that information-related content tended to dominate (e.g., David et al., 2016; Heverin & Zach, 2010; Qu et al., 2011). However, these studies were established in other crisis contexts, such as typhoons (David et al., 2016), violence (Heverin & Zach, 2010) and earthquakes (Qu et al., 2011). The current study therefore confirms that, during terrorist attacks, emotions prevail (e.g., King, 2005). This result supports another study which found that more emotional tweets occurred during the Brussels attacked compared to the German wings incident (Stieglitz, Bunker, Mirbabaie, & Ehnis, 2017).

When taking a closer look at the emotions mentioned in the tweets, we note that our results indicate that sympathy is the most expressed emotion in the tweets. As a result, the current study confirms Guo's (2017) suggestion that the ICM model (Jin et al., 2012) should include both positive and negative emotions. According to Jin et al. (2012), the dominant emotions experienced during terrorism are fright and sadness, but in the current study, the negative emotions expressed most in tweets were anger and frustration. This difference might be explained by the fact that Jin et al. (2012) used the Virginia Tech shooting case as an example of terrorism. We could argue that the attacks in Brussels differ from this shooting incident because it was one of many attacks in a row. There were terrorist attacks in Paris that were organised from Belgium and then this attack took place in Belgium. It seems arguable that people experienced anger and frustration because they were unsettled by the fact that the Parisian attacks had been organised within Belgium and then Belgium itself was targeted. Another explanation could be that there might be a difference between what people actually feel and what they choose to express on social media.

Interestingly, we saw that citizens tweeted more emotionally than media. This result counters critics on mass media that suggests that they report in a selective and biased way, emphasising conflict, drama and sensationalism (Kasperson & Kasperson, 1996; Wray et al., 2004). Unlike during the terrorist attacks in Mumbai for which coverage of negative emotions prevailed (Iqbal, 2015), media tweets about the terrorist attacks in Brussels were non-emotional and neutral. This finding is important because research has shown that when media focus too much on drama and sensationalism, citizens' perceptions of risk decline, which in turn lowers information seeking behavior (cf. chapter six). Furthermore, media are crucial information providers for the public during terrorist attacks (Wray et al., 2004), as confirmed by the current study. Media had the second most number of retweets in the sample.

Finally, we found that governmental agencies primarily focused on non-emotional information in their tweets, which is important because people expect them to play a neutral role when crises occur (Heath et al., 2009). We thus could argue that the Belgian government performed well in terms of the content of their tweets. However, they were fairly inactive on Twitter. For future crises, it is important that these agencies capitalise on their reassuring influence by communicating through social media such as Twitter.

The current study represents a starting point to achieve a deeper understanding of the communication processes that occur originating from different voices in the arena, during a particular type of crisis: terrorist attacks. In chapter six, it was shown that when confronted with a terrorism threat, people engage in information seeking behavior. Therefore, it is important to share information through a

variety of media channels. In particular, according to the current study, on social media such as Twitter it is important to provide information that recognizes the negative feelings of citizens since this is the most expressed content. Furthermore, especially the government is a crucial communicator in the context of terrorism because their tweets receive the most retweets. This will not only satisfy receivers' needs, but governmental agencies could also benefit from crisis communication during such events. In particular, chapter six has shown that when the government communicates reliable, experienced and honest information in the context of terrorism, it gains public trust which is likely to benefit the governmental reputation.

6.2 Managerial implications

Taken together, this study reveals several important implications for communicators who are confronted with complex crises such as terrorist attacks. First of all, it is important that communicators become aware of the fact that citizens are active on Twitter, expressing their thoughts and feelings about terrorist attacks. Therefore, for the involved organisations, it is crucial that they extend their crisis communication beyond traditional media means, such as press conferences for example. According to the results, it is advisable to spread information that is shared via traditional media, through social media channels like Twitter as well. In particular, it is important that governmental agencies make an effort to communicate through social media during terrorist attacks because their tweets are retweeted most. This finding could indicate that governmental agencies are considered to be trusted sources. The large amount of retweets ensures that information is spread quickly to the broad public. Furthermore, based on the results, we could also argue that it is important for the organisations involved in the crisis (e.g., the Brussels Airport and the Belgian government) to frame their tweets appropriately. Citizens seem to use Twitter mostly to express negative emotions such as anger, frustration and sadness in response to terrorist attacks. Therefore, involved organizations should address these feelings appropriately by making use of human framing (i.e., conversational human voice, CHV) (Kelleher, 2009) instead of an institutional, formal and standardised tone (cf. chapter three). CHV is *"an engaging and natural style of organisational communication as perceived by consumers of an organisation based on the interaction between individuals in the organisation and individuals in publics"* (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177). Finally, the results also indicate that the media are important allies of governmental agencies when communicating about terrorist attacks. Despite their 'bad reputation' of focusing too much on sensationalism (Iqbal, 2015; Kasperson & Kasperson, 1996; Wray et al., 2004), the current study demonstrates that media mainly tweet non-emotional information. Accordingly, governmental agencies and media could work together in order to maximize their communication efforts on social media. This aspect is important because research has shown that

during the terrorism threat in Belgium, citizens searched for information about the threat several times a day, mostly via radio and television (cf. chapter six). Although chapter six has shown that traditional media formed the most important tools for information seeking about the terrorism threat, the current study clearly shows that citizens also use social media extensively to share their thoughts and feelings. Interestingly, traditional media remain important sources of information even in the digital environment.

7 Limitations and future research directions

Despite the contributions of the current study, there are several limitations that have to be recognized. First of all, the study examined tweets in the Dutch language. However, French and German are also official languages of Belgium. Nevertheless, approximately 60 % of Belgians speak Dutch, and the coder was Dutch-speaking. For this reason, we have chosen to only code Dutch tweets.

In addition, tweets were gathered based on a fixed list of hashtags that seemed to appear most often during the attacks. However, there were also other hashtags that could have been used during the attacks and not all people use hashtags. Furthermore, as noted by Van Zoonen, Verhoeven and Vliegenthart (2016) not all actors use social media in an active way. A considerable amount of social media use is passive. For example, people might read updates about the terrorist attacks on Twitter without tweeting themselves. It is important to note that this behavior is not included in the current analyses.

Finally, it has to be said that this research is a case study, meaning that the results are not generalizable. However, it is also important to recognise that generalizability is not the purpose of this type of research (Fowler, 2016). Finally, the current study aimed to provide an overview of who used Twitter and how during terrorist attacks. However, future research could consider the effectiveness of using Twitter for specific purposes during crises. For example, future studies could examine the impact of governmental agencies communicating regularly during terrorist attacks through Twitter. For example, could such involvement increase citizens' satisfaction with government or make them feel more secure and reassured? By moving in this direction, the literature could provide even more practical insights into Twitter use during crises.

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9 Appendix

9.1 Coding guide used for content analysis

Omschrijving		Codering in SPSS
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Tweet_ID	We noteren hier de unieke code die we aan de tweet toekennen. Iedere code zal bestaan uit 5 karakters opdat iedere tweet gemakkelijk kan worden geïdentificeerd. Bijv. T0001	String variable
Tweeter_name (@username)	Hier noteren we de username van het twitterprofiel. We verwijzen hier dus niet naar de officiële naam, maar naar de @username die gebruikt wordt om een bericht of boodschap aan een gebruiker te tweeten.	String variable (username)
Voorbeelden:	MaiteHolvoet, johnhonda1, NinaDortu, BeaDejonge	
		
Datum_tweet (nominaal)	We noteren hier de datum waarop de tweet door een gebruiker werd gepost. Voor het aanduiden van de datum werken we met dagen waarbij 22/03/16 als dag 1 wordt beschouwd enzovoort.	1 = 22 maart 2016 2 = 23 maart 2016 3 = 24 maart 2016 4 = 25 maart 2016



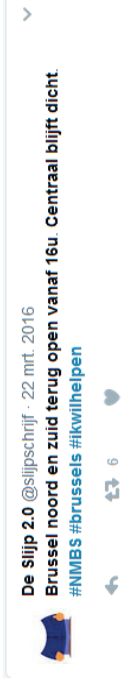
Tijdstip_berichtgeving
(metrisch)

We noteren hier het tijdstip waarop een tweet door een gebruiker werd gepost. Het tijdstip schrijven we in duizendtallen.

Type_tweet
(nominaal)

We noteren hier hoe we het type tweet kunnen categoriseren:

Originele tweet: we kunnen deze tweets met andere woorden omschrijven als normale berichten zonder referenties naar andere tweets van derde partijen. Ze bevatten ook geen replies of mentions.



Reply: dit is een tweet die wordt gepost als antwoord op een andere tweet. Meestal kan een reply worden herkend aan het @-teken in het begin van de tweet. Indien het een reply is, zal er moeten worden nagegaan op wie er gereplied wordt. Ter controle zou de variabele in_reply_to_screen_name niet leeg mogen zijn.

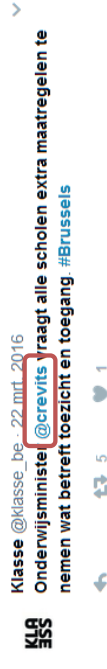
- 5 = 26 maart 2016
- 6 = 27 maart 2016
- 7 = 28 maart 2016
- 8 = 29 maart 2016

Numeriek

- 1 = Originale tweets
- 3 = Reply
- 4 = Mention



Mention: dit type tweets lijkt erg op replies. Het zijn echter tweets waarbij er midden in de tweet een andere twitteraar wordt vermeld (dus niet aan het begin van de tweet). Men kan ze eveneens herkennen aan het @-teken. Indien het om een mention gaat, dient er worden nagegaan wie er wordt gementioneed.



HT_zaventem
(nominaal)

Gebruik van #zaventem. Het is belangrijk dat de schrijfwijze 1 = Ja correct is, het maakt echter niet uit of het in hoofdletters of in kleine letters is geschreven. 0 = Neen



HT_brusselsattack
(nominaal)

Gebruik van #brusselsattack. Het is belangrijk dat de schrijfwijze correct is, het maakt echter niet uit of het in hoofdletters of in kleine letters is geschreven. 1 = Ja 0 = Neen



HT_brussels
(nominaal)

Gebruik van #brussels. Het is belangrijk dat de schrijfwijze correct is, het maakt echter niet uit of het in hoofdletters of in kleine letters is geschreven. 1 = Ja 0 = Neen



HT_brussel
(nominaal)

Gebruik van #brussel. Het is belangrijk dat de schrijfwijze correct is, het maakt echter niet uit of het in hoofdletters of in kleine letters is geschreven. 1 = Ja 0 = Neen



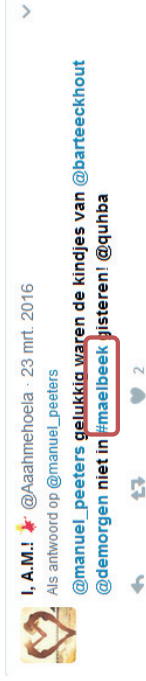
HT_maalbeek
(nominaal)

Gebruik van #maalbeek. Het is belangrijk dat de schrijfwijze 1 = Ja
correct is, het maakt echter niet uit of het in hoofdletters of in 0 = Neen
kleine letters is geschreven.



HT_maalbeek
(nominaal)

Gebruik van #maelbeek. Het is belangrijk dat de schrijfwijze 1 = Ja
correct is, het maakt echter niet uit of het in hoofdletters of in 0 = Neen
kleine letters is geschreven.



HT_andere

Vaak bevatten de tweets meer dan één hashtag. Deze hashtags String variable
mogen als string variable worden genoteerd.

Voorbeelden: #vluchtelingen, #Abdeslam, #IS, #JeSuisBruxelles

Retweet_count
(metrisch)

Hier noteren we het aantal **retweets** van die boodschap. Numeriek

Relevantie_tweet
(nominaal)

We noteren hier of de tweet relevant is in het kader van het onderzoek. Als de tweet gerelateerd is aan berichtgeving over de aanslagen op 22 maart 2016 beschouwen we de tweet als relevant. Is dit niet het geval, beschouwen we de tweet als irrelevant (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010). De data werden namelijk verzameld aan de hand van diverse hashtags (#maalbeek, #maelbeek, #brussels, #brussel, #brusselsattack en #zaventem). Dit wil echter nog niet per se zeggen dat er over de aanslagen werd getweet. Ook wanneer er codetaal in de tweet staat die dus niet leesbaar is, wordt er aangegeven dat de tweet niet relevant is (0). Als de tweet als irrelevant kan worden beschouwd, zetten we deze volledige rij in een rode kleur. De rest van de variabelen moeten niet verder worden aangevuld.

1 = Relevant
0 = Irrelevant

Type_gebruiker
(nominaal)

We noteren hier de actor die de tweet heeft geplaatst: Hierbij is het belangrijk om steeds via twitter.com de @username te gaan opzoeken om niets aan het toeval over te laten. Er is steeds maar één optie mogelijk.

1 = Burger
2 = Nationaal mediakanaal
3 = Internationaal mediakanaal
4 = Politicus/politieke partij
5 = Overheidsdienst
6 = Expertorganisatie
7 = Ngo
8 = Bekend persoon, BV
9 = Andere

Individu/burger: een actor die kan worden gezien als Jan met de pet. Deze persoon in kwestie is een willekeurige burger. Deze categorie verwijst m.a.w. naar private profielen van mensen.



Loes Matthys @loesmatthys · 22 mrt. 2016
Waar is onze koning eigenlijk? #zaventem #Brussels #JeSuisBruxelles
#tousensemble

Nationale mediakanalen: verwijst naar accounts van traditionele nationale mediakanalen in België. Hiermee bedoelen we onder meer kranten, tv-zenders, nieuwsagentschappen etc. Vaak zit de

naam van de krant e.d. eveneens vervat in de @username van het account.

 **VRT redactie.be** @vrtredactie · 22 mrt. 2016
Michel: "Extra aanwezigheid militairen en versterking grenscontroles"
#vrtnieuws #brusselsattack

Internationale mediakanalen: verwijst naar accounts van traditionele nationale mediakanalen buiten België. Hiermee bedoelen we onder meer kranten, tv-zenders, nieuwsagentschappen etc. Vaak zit de naam van de krant e.d. eveneens vervat in de @username van het account.

 **BN DeStem Boz** @BNDeStemBOZ · 22 mrt. 2016
Foto van de mogelijke verdachten van de aanslag in #Brussel
opgedoken bndestem.nl/algemeen/buile... #zaventem

Politici/politieke partijen: verwijst naar accounts van politici of politieke partijen. Dit kunnen zowel politici uit binnen- als buitenland zijn.

 **Annie Maes** @anniemmaes46 · 22 mrt. 2016
Reacties in het centrum van Brussel #aanslagen #zaventem #belgium
instagram.com/p/BDQa1Tahff...

↩️ ↪️ ❤️

Overheidsdiensten: deze categorie omvat een wijde range aan verschillende federale en programmatische overheidsdiensten, zowel in binnen- als buitenland.

 **24/7 BZ** @247BZ · 22 mrt. 2016
@MinBZ is altijd bereikbaar via +31 247 247 247. Vragen over naasten
via @BrusselsAirport_bel +32 2.753.73.00 #Zaventem #Brussel

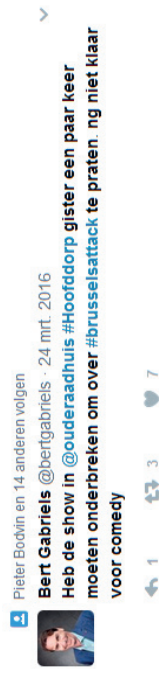
↩️ 2 ↪️ 44 ❤️ 5

Expertorganisaties: verwijst naar onderzoeksinstituten, universiteiten, hogescholen en expertgroepen.



Ngo's: elke niet-gouvernementele organisatie die dus onafhankelijk is van de overheid en zich op een of andere manier richt op een verondersteld maatschappelijk belang.

Bekende personen: verwijst naar accounts van bekende personen/celebrities. Dit kunnen zowel bekende Vlamingen (BV's) zijn als mensen die internationale bekendheid genieten.



Anderen: wanneer het niet mogelijk is om een gebruiker/profiel onder te brengen in één van bovengenoemde categorieën, brengen we deze tweet onder in deze categorie.


RSScockpit.com @RSScockpit · 22 mrt. 2016
 Nederlander onder gewonden bij aanslagen Zaventem (NOS.nl) bit.ly
 /1RWZlgd #lichtgewonde #ministerievانبuitenlandsezaken #zaventem

Journalisten (B): verwijst naar accounts van journalisten in België. We willen deze mensen niet over één kam scheren met mediakanalen en daarom plaatsen we deze onder een aparte categorie. Ook verslaggevers en nieuwsankers vallen bij het coderen onder deze categorie.


Inge Vrancken @vrancki · 22 mrt. 2016
 IS lijkt #brusselsaattack op te eisen #vrtnieuws

Journalisten (buitenland): verwijst naar accounts van journalisten in het buitenland. We willen deze mensen niet over één kam scheren met mediakanalen en daarom plaatsen we deze onder een aparte categorie. Ook verslaggevers en nieuwsankers vallen bij het coderen onder deze categorie.


Tom van 't Einde 1V @tomvanteinde · 22 mrt. 2016
 laatste officiële cijfers:
 - 31 doden
 - 180 gewonden
 - 3 explosies (luchthaven en metro)
 #Zaventem @seenvandaag

Commerciële bedrijven: verwijst naar accounts van commerciële bedrijven in binnen- en buitenland.

 **TravelBird België** @TravelBirdBE · 22 mrt. 2016
#prayforbrussels #Brussels Reizigers met vragen kunnen ons
contacteren via @travelbirdBE. Check eerst onze FAQ: bit.ly/1UBuOVb

Soort_berichtgeving
(nominaal)

Informatie-gereleerde tweets: hiertoe behoren alle tweets die
betrekking hebben tot het delen van informatie over de
gebeurtenis. In vele gevallen zal dit relatief neutrale berichtgeving
zijn over de gebeurtenissen, een loutere representatie van de
situatie. Ook het stellen van een vraag, waarbij de actor in kwestie
op zoek is naar informatie, valt hieronder.

 **Maarten Den** @MaartenDen · 23 mrt. 2016
@ladih: **Najim Laachraoui, man in witte jas en hoed, en verdachte van de
aanslag in #Zaventem opgepakt in #Schaarbeek**

Let op: tweets die gebeurtenissen in vraag stellen, eerder een
frustrerende ondertoon vertonen en dus niet per se het bekomen
van informatie tot doel hebben, vallen hier niet onder.

 **Elina** @elina_geuens · 22 mrt. 2016
Is dit nog een wereld? #aanslagen #zaventem #brusselsairport

Soort_berichtgeving
(nominaal)

Emotie-gereleerde tweets: hiertoe behoren alle tweets die
betrekking hebben tot het uiten van emoties en gevoelens. Deze
tweets zijn emotioneel geladen en dragen een bepaald gevoel
met zich mee.

 **Jolijn** @JolijnMuffinDead · 22 mrt. 2016
**Laten we nu stil zijn. Voor de mensen die er niet meer zijn. Laten we nu
lief zijn, voor iedereen die er is. #Brussels #PrayForTheWorld**

Soort_berichtgeving
(nominaal)

Actie-gerelateerde tweets: hiertoe behoren alle tweets die betrekking hebben tot het opzetten van acties om bijvoorbeeld vrienden en familie van slachtoffers, maar ook elkaar te helpen en te steunen. Anderzijds kunnen dit soort tweets ook verwijzen naar mensen die in hun tweet een oproep doen tot actie naar andere partijen zoals de overheid, politici etc. Deze tweets kunnen dus ook aangeven dat er actie moet worden ondernomen.

0 = Neen
1 = Ja



Jeroen Van Sande @JeroenVansande · 22 mrt. 2016

Tijd voor grote kuis! #brusselsattack #rechtineigenhandennemen

Soort_berichtgeving
(nominaal)

Opinie-gerelateerde tweets: hiertoe behoren alle tweets die betrekking hebben tot het uiten van een bepaalde mening of kritiek naar een zekere partij (politici, autoriteiten, politieke partijen, overheid, gemeenschapsgroepen, aanhangers van een bepaald geloof etc.). Deze tweets bevatten dus meningen, opinies over een bepaalde bovengenoemde partij.

0 = Neen
1 = Ja



Raymond Doetjes @rdoetjes · 22 mrt. 2016

Deze Burgemeester en Agenten die zijn orders blind opvolgde moet KEIHARD ontslagen worden! IDIOTEN!
#brusselsattack

Sentiment_tweet
(nominaal)

Beschrijft het algemeen gevoel van de tweet:

- 1 = Negatief
- 2 = Neutraal
- 3 = Positief

Negatief: het sentiment van de tweet is negatief als de toon van de berichtgeving negatief is. Er is bijvoorbeeld sprake van boosheid, verdriet, angst, frustratie etc.



Kristof S @dakrikke · 22 mrt. 2016

Daar ik ratten noch laffe honden wil beledigen, heb ik geen vergelijking voor deze terroristen! #GeenWoorden #brusselsattack #F*ckThisShit



Neutraal: het sentiment van de tweet is neutraal wanneer de toon van de berichtgeving neutraal is en er geen elementen aanwezig zijn die duiden op een negatieve of positieve toon.



BRUZZ @BRUZZbe · 22 mrt. 2016

Federale procureur. 'Actief op zoek naar verdachte' brusselnieuws.be /nl/nieuws/fede... #Brussel #BrusselsAttacks #Zaventem



1

Positief: het sentiment van de tweet is positief wanneer de toon van de berichtgeving positief is. Er is bijvoorbeeld sprake van optimisme, hoop, humor etc.



RotaractLeuven @RotaractLeuven · 22 mrt. 2016

Een paar van onze mensen gingen helpen in de @Brabanthallen ... Respect!! #wijwillenhelpen #brusselsattack

Type_emotie
(nominaal)

Beschrijft het gevoel van de tweet (specifiek – positief en negatief), er wordt steeds de emotie gekozen die het meest dominant aanwezig is. Er is dus maar één optie mogelijk:

- 0 = Geen emotie
- 1 = Dankbaarheid/respect
- 2 = Opluchting/blijheid
- 3 = Humor

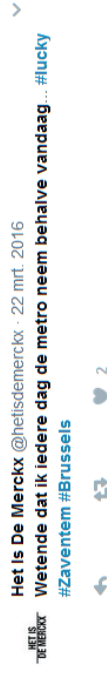
Geen emotie: indien de tweet geen emotie bevat, wordt dit op deze manier gerapporteerd. Dit kan bijvoorbeeld het geval zijn wanneer de tweet puur informatieve berichtgeving bevat.

Dankbaarheid: hieronder classificeren we tweets die uitingen van dankbaarheid, respect en vertrouwen in de overheid, politici, hulpverleners en andere autoriteiten weerspiegelen. Gratie naar onder meer hulpverleners worden geuit, het werk van de hulpverlenende partijen wordt gerespecteerd en geloofd.



Erwin Voets @voetser · 22 mrt. 2016
Bedank voor de mensen van de politie, defensie, brandweer, ambulance. #brusselsattack

Blijheid/opluchting: hieronder classificeren we tweets die enige opluchting uitdrukken omwille van het feit dat ze zelf niet betrokken waren bij de gebeurtenissen. Emoticons kunnen ook een indicatie geven van blijheid: :), :-), =)



Het is De Merckx @heitsdemerckx · 22 mrt. 2016
Wetende dat ik iedere dag de metro neem behalve vandaag ... #lucky #Zaventem #Brussels

Humor: hieronder classificeren we humoristische berichtgeving omtrent de gebeurtenissen in Brussel en Maalbeek op 22 maart 2016.



Sympathie: hieronder verstaan we bijvoorbeeld het betuigen van medeleven en steun ten opzichte van de nabestaanden, familieleden, vrienden, kennissen etc. Empathie betekent inlevingsvermogen, de kunde of vaardigheid om zich in te leven in de situatie en gevoelens van anderen. Wanneer iemand zijn medeleven met de slachtoffers of betrokkenen betuigt, wil dit echter niet zeggen dat bij de vorige variabele (sentiment_tweet) automatisch positief moet worden aangeduid. De ondertoon van de tweet kan namelijk nog steeds negatief of neutraal zijn. Ook #PrayFor- impliceert het medeleven met de betrokkenen en slachtoffers van een crisis (Lin & Margolin, 2014).



Optimisme: het geloven in een goede afloop. De positieve kant van het verhaal bekijken. Dit kan ook worden uitgedrukt aan de hand van uitdrukkingen zoals 'Tous ensemble!' of 'L'Union fait la force!'



Wantrouwen: hieronder classificeren we tweets die wantrouwen ten opzichte van de autoriteiten, politici, de overheid, de medemens impliceren. Ook tweets die bekritisieren wat de autoriteiten zouden moeten doen, vallen hieronder.



Angst: hieronder classificeren we posts waarin duidelijk gevoelens van angst, schrik, bezorgdheid naar voren komen, bijvoorbeeld m.b.t. de eigen veiligheid. Sleutelwoorden gedefinieerd door Cheong en Lee (2011) zijn de volgende: *anxious, catastrophic, concern, disaster, emergency, fear, insecure, panic, scared, terror, threat, trouble, warning, worry*. Emoticons kunnen ook een indicatie geven van angst: 8-[



Boosheid: hieronder classificeren we posts waarin duidelijk gevoelens van boosheid of woede naar voren komen. Emoticons kunnen ook een indicatie geven van boosheid: :-@, >:-{, >:(, >:C, }B, }-B, >-<, >>:~<<, ~:~< etc.



Verdriet: hieronder classificeren we posts waarin duidelijk gevoelens van verdriet naar voren komen. Emoticons kunnen ook een indicatie geven van verdriet: :-), :(, =(, :(, :(, :(, :(




Gechoqueerd zijn: hieronder classificeren we posts waarin duidelijk gevoelens naar voor komen die aantonen dat mensen gechoqueerd zijn door de gebeurtenissen. Sleutelwoorden gedefinieerd door Cheong en Lee (2011) zijn de volgende: *onthutst, omg, wtf, with, god zegene, shock, verbijsterd*. Emoticons kunnen ook een indicatie geven van gechoqueerd zijn: o_O, D;, 8-o,



Frustratie: hieronder classificeren we tweets waarbij er duidelijk gevoelens van frustratie naar voren komen. Het feit dat er in korte tijdsperiodes steeds meer terreuraanslagen plaatsvinden, leidt tot veel frustratie bij burgers. Frustratie kan echter zeer ruim worden bekeken. Mensen kunnen zich ook gefrustreerd voelen omwille van berichtgeving van anderen, omwille van het feit dat de autoriteiten/politici niets ondernemen etc. Dit kan dus vanuit een zeer ruime invalshoek worden bekeken.

 **Robinn - Robiq** @Roephin · 22 mrt. 2016
Die aanslagen in Brussel / Europa houd het dan nooit op ? #zaventem

Sarcasme: hieronder classificeren we tweets die sarcastische en negatieve commentaren bevatten omtrent de gebeurtenissen.

 **Bea Dejonge** @BeaDejonge · 23 mrt. 2016
Die 5 koffers? Waarschijnlijk garderobe voor de wachtende maagden!
#brusselsattack

Ongeloof: hieronder classificeren we tweets waarbij er duidelijk emoties van ongelooft de bovenhand nemen. De tweeter kan niet vatten wat er gebeurd is en dit komt naar boven in zijn tweet. Hij/zij wil of kan het niet geloven.

 **Bram Meissen** @moevels · 22 mrt. 2016
Als je de vingers in je oren stopt, je ogen dicht doet en heel hard nee schudt.... Is het dan niet gebeurd. #brusselsattack

Andere: indien de tweet niet kan worden ondergebracht onder één van bovenvermelde categorieën, maar wel een andere emotie bevat, kan deze hieronder worden geclassificeerd.

CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS
AND FUTURE RESEARCH

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

1 Introduction

When practicing corporate communication, organizations have to take into consideration different aspects of the current digital environment such as the interactive nature of social media and the active role of stakeholders. This can be illustrated with the case of the Dieseltgate in which Volkswagen got involved. On the 18th of September 2015, The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed that the automobile brand Volkswagen was superficially hiding gas performances of its cars in order to circumvent gas emission tests. This revelation had a major impact on the company. Within one week, the CEO of Volkswagen, Martin Winterkorn, resigned and Volkswagen lost 35 percent of its market value (Lambret & Barki, 2017). The reputation of Volkswagen was also heavily threatened by the scandal because of this fraud (Gatzert, 2015).

Because of the abovementioned major impact of the incident, Volkswagen had no choice as to communicate about the crisis. As shown in Figure 1, Volkswagen Belgium posted a corporate crisis message on Facebook. In the post, Volkswagen said “*Dear fans, we would like to respond to the recent events regarding the Volkswagen Group*”.



Figure 1: Crisis Facebook post of Volkswagen Belgium regarding the Dieseltgate crisis. (Facebook, 2015)

This post did not remain unnoticed and different voices arose in addition to the one of Volkswagen itself (i.e., the initial sender of the crisis message). People were engaging with the post by liking it, sharing it and commenting on it. For example, the reaction underneath the crisis post in Figure 1 says *“I don’t need an explanation. You have revealed the scandal and others probably remain silent about it. For me, there is only one reliable car brand and that is Volkswagen”*. However, while a large number of people showed that they keep on having trust in Volkswagen, some people also posted negative comments on the Facebook post of Volkswagen such as *“Lying and cheating is typical for these times! A simple sorry is way too easy!”* (Facebook, 2015). Besides on Facebook, stakeholders were also engaging on Twitter. For example, research has shown that 53 000 tweets were posted about the revelation of Volkswagen on the 18th of September. 1.3 million more tweets followed in the next week, with an average of 8 000 tweets per hour compared to the usual 10 000 Volkswagen-related tweets per day (Lambret & Barki, 2017).

The abovementioned example clearly illustrates that in the current digital environment organizations do not only have to pay attention to the message that they deliver to stakeholders but also to the interactive nature of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media allow active sense-making processes of stakeholders and engagement, such as commenting on a corporate crisis message post, tweeting, etc. (Ji, Li, North, & Liu, 2017). This illustrates a shift from one-way communication, where organizations simply send their message to stakeholders without feedback (i.e., public information model) (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), to two-way communication, where organizations interact with stakeholders in a mutual beneficial way and steer the conversation (i.e., two-way symmetrical model) (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) (e.g., Samsup & Yungwook, 2003; Wright, 2005). Therefore, in this social media environment, relationship building with stakeholders should get a central focus (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

Within this relationship building process, it is especially important to pay attention to the multiple voices that could arise when a crisis occurs and their active sense-making processes (i.e., stakeholder engagement). Accordingly, by adopting a multi-vocal (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Luoma-aho, Tirkkonen, & Vos, 2013; Vos, Schoemaker, & Luoma-aho, 2014; Zhao, 2017) and stakeholder engagement (e.g., Ji et al., 2017; Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng, Liu, & Davidson, 2018) approach, the main aim of this dissertation was to investigate how the characteristics of the current digital environment (i.e., the interactive nature of social media and the active role of multiple stakeholders) influence corporate communication and crisis communication in particular.

The six different studies reported in this dissertation provide empirical support for the importance of adopting a multi-vocal approach, both for researchers and scholars. In particular, results clearly demonstrate that it is important to take into consideration the active sense-making processes of different stakeholders. Previous research was rather organization-centered (e.g., Ji et al., 2017; Luomahaaho, 2010; Watkins, 2017) by focusing on what the sender has to say (e.g., image repair theory of Benoit, 1995) or which crisis response strategy organizations in crisis have to use in order to minimize reputational damage (e.g., Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) of Coombs 2007). This dissertation, however, revealed that multiple voices besides the organization itself have to be taken into consideration when practicing corporate communication and that stakeholders are crucial partners of the sense-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016; Ji et al., 2017).

The current chapter provides a discussion of the empirical results of the dissertation. Next, it offers several managerial implications of the results which could be used by practitioners as guidelines to practice corporate communication nowadays. We divided the discussion of empirical results and managerial implications in three subheadings. The first subheading discusses the overall research question in the context of business as usual (cf. chapter two) or in other words: when organizations are not confronted with a crisis. In the second subheading the conclusions of three empirical chapters will be discussed that examine the role of different forms of sense-making processes of stakeholders during corporate crises (cf. chapters three, four and five). Finally, in the third part, we discuss the results regarding two studies established in the context of extreme turbulence, more specifically: terrorism (cf. chapters six and seven). These studies all have in common that they focus on how social media and/or the active role of different stakeholders (i.e., stakeholder engagement and sense-making) have reshaped the practice of corporate communication.

After discussing the results and managerial implications of this dissertation, we provide some ethical reflections one should make when interpreting the study results and translating them into practical guidelines. Finally, we offer a discussion of the limitations of this dissertation and provide several interesting suggestions for future research.

2 Discussion and managerial implications of empirical studies

2.1 Business as usual

In chapter two, corporate communication was analyzed when business was as usual (i.e., no crisis). We conducted a quantitative content analysis to examine how Facebook is used as a corporate

communication tool by reputed Belgian companies (RQ₁). First, the content of the Facebook posts of the companies was examined in order to determine whether Belgian companies use Facebook rather as a marketing communication or as a public relations tool. Furthermore, we examined if companies capitalize on the dialogic nature that distinguishes social media from traditional media (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Unlike traditional media that are characterized by one-way communication, social media enable two-way symmetrical communication (Saxton & Waters, 2014; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). The latter is essential to build relationships with stakeholders (Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Findings of this study illustrated that Facebook was used more often to post public relations than marketing communication content. The former is also more often shared than the latter. However, the latter created more engagement in terms of reactions of companies on reactions from users. Furthermore, the semi two-way communication model was practiced most, which means that Facebook users were reacting on a post, but the companies did not answer these comments. However, in one third of the posts, companies did react to the comments of Facebook users. Hence, in this context, two-way symmetrical communication was established. Posts in which two-way symmetrical communication was practiced were also significantly more liked than public information posts. In addition, two-way symmetrical communication was practiced significantly more in public relations posts than in marketing communication posts.

2.1.1 Discussion of empirical results

The current study adds to previous literature by being, to our knowledge, the first study that examined if Facebook is used by organizations rather as a marketing communication or public relations tool. When Facebook posts focus on marketing communication, they contain content that supports the sales of products, services and brands (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007) and this content is mostly directed at the stakeholder group of consumers (McKie & Willis, 2012). Public relations content, however, represents content that is directed to all types of stakeholders and that wants to provide a beneficial view on the organization as a whole (Argenti, 1996).

Based on the results of this study, we could argue that, when business is as usual, companies use Facebook primary as a public relations tool or in other words: to post content that aims to reach all types of stakeholders with information that improves the reputation of the organization as a whole (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). This content seemed to be shared more with family or friends than marketing related content. However, marketing related posts created more stakeholder engagement in terms of responses of companies on comments of Facebook users on the posts. Hence, whilst public relations related content stimulated engagement in terms of shares, marketing communication content did in terms of generating comments.

Furthermore, regarding the use of the dialogic potential of Facebook, we found that in approximately one third of the posts, the company responded to the comments of Facebook users. Hence, unlike previous research that repeatedly found that organizations are not capitalizing on the dialogic nature of Facebook (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011), this study provided some initial evidence that companies started to invest efforts to capitalize on this potential. Furthermore, when companies responded to comments of Facebook users on their posts (i.e., two-way communication), they did it more in a symmetrical than an asymmetrical manner. This is positive, because this model is labelled as the most ideal model of communication since there is an exchange of information between two parties who aim to build mutual beneficial long-term relationships (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

However, despite a significant trend towards dialogic communication, the most practiced communication model in our study was the semi two-way communication model in which Facebook users are commenting on a post, but the organization is not replying to these comments. The introduction of this model is an important theoretical contribution to previous research. While the traditional models of public relations only distinguish two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), we suggested that on Facebook there is also the possibility that Facebook users react on posts of companies, but the company does not react to the comments of these users. The semi two-way model is different from the two-way asymmetrical model because in the latter, the company is engaging in dialogue, but primarily for their own benefits (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Wilcox & Cameron, 2006) while in the semi two-way model the dialogue between Facebook users and companies is lacking.

The semi two-way model of communication can be linked to the concept of 'functional interactivity' (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). In this view, interactivity is considered as something that is functionally enabled by the medium that is used for communication (Sundar et al., 2003). Hence, in our study, Facebook is a medium that enables companies to post content and in turn provides users with the opportunity to comment on these posts. This is what is happening in the semi two-way model of communication. Hence, in this model functional interactivity is created. However, 'contingency interactivity' goes beyond 'functional interactivity' and means that messages in an interactive process of communication are contingent upon previous messages (Kelleher, 2009; Sunder et al., 2003). This is the case when the Belgian companies are responding to the comments of users in a symmetrical way (i.e., two-way symmetrical model). Likewise, they go beyond the functionalities of Facebook and engage in dialogue in a mutual beneficial way. Therefore, based on the abovementioned findings, we argue that for future research it is important to distinguish several types of two-way communication, based on the specific interactive possibilities that the medium offers.

Furthermore, the study also revealed that two-way symmetrical posts were significantly more liked than public information posts. Hence, this finding provides empirical evidence for the fact that it is important for organizations to invest time and resources in a webcare team that responds to the feedback of stakeholders on social media. Hereby, we also provide additional insights that complement the findings of Cho, Schweickart and Haase (2014) who investigated stakeholder engagement with nonprofit organizations on Facebook. These authors revealed that two-way symmetrical communication posts generated significantly more comments of users than public information posts. However, we found in our study that the former did not generate more comments than the latter, only more likes. Hence, while both studies concluded that two-way symmetrical posts resulted in higher engagement than public-information posts, there was a difference in the level of engagement¹ generated by the posts. Commenting requires a higher level of engagement than liking which requires a rather low or moderate level of engagement (Cho et al., 2014). Based on these findings, we argue that besides taking into consideration the level of engagement, it might also be important to pay attention to the type of organization that is examined (i.e., companies or for-profit organizations versus nonprofit organizations). It could be argued that people who like nonprofit organizations' Facebook pages are more engaged and committed than people who like companies' Facebook pages because nonprofit organizations have different relationships with their stakeholders than for-profit organizations (Sisco, Pressgrove, & Collins, 2013; Sisson, 2017). The former organizations are concerned with societal issues such as animal welfare, poverty and homelessness while the main concern of the latter is making profit and establish growth (Boris & Steuerle, 2006). Therefore, we could expect that stakeholders are more likely to establish high levels of engagement (i.e., commenting on posts) on nonprofit organizations' Facebook pages, as found by Cho et al. (2014), and lower levels of engagement (i.e., liking) on Facebook pages of for-profit organizations as found by our study.

Next, we also investigated if reputation score was able to predict how active companies were on Facebook. Findings demonstrated that reputation score was not able to predict the number of posts that Belgian companies posted on Facebook. Hence, this is an indication of the fact that having a good reputation as a company does not necessarily mean that this company is highly active on social media. Findings of a more recent study of Ji et al. (2017) demonstrated that the opposite is also true: how frequently companies post content on Facebook is not able to predict how the organizational reputation is perceived. Hence, these findings provide additional empirical evidence for the fact that there seems to be no direct link between the activity of social media use (i.e., how frequently do

¹ In order to be able to correctly compare the results of our study with the one of Cho et al. (2014), we excluded the 'semi' two-way communication model in these analyses because this model was not included in Cho et al.'s (2014) study. Results showed no difference between the four traditional models of public relations regarding the comments of users, $F(3, 505) = 1.11, p > 0.05$.

organizations post content) and how stakeholders perceive the organizational reputation. We further added to these findings by demonstrating that reputation score is neither able to predict which type of corporate communication prevails (i.e., marketing related or public relations related content) nor which of the four models of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) is mostly applied by the organizations.

2.1.2 Managerial implications

When comparing the results of the first study to previous research (e.g., Cho et al., 20104), we could advise that it is important for practitioners to reflect on whether they are practicing communication for for-profit organizations or for nonprofit organizations. Each type of organization has a different main target stakeholder group on Facebook and it is important to keep this target group in mind while determining an appropriate communication strategy on social media. In particular, these target groups might differ in the level of their engagement on social media (i.e., low, moderate or high): fans of nonprofit organizations seem to express higher levels of engagement than fans of for-profit organizations. Therefore, it is important for practitioners to post content that aligns with or increases the engagement of their fans. For example, for nonprofit organizations it could be interesting to post polls on Facebook because in this way, the target group has the feeling that their opinion is important which recognizes their feeling of engagement with the organization. For for-profit organizations it could be interesting to try to increase the level of engagement of their fans, for example by involving them in the choice of the design for a new product.

Moreover, with regard to the interaction between content and engagement, results demonstrated that marketing communication content resulted in higher levels of engagement than public relations content because companies tend to comment more reactions of Facebook users with the former than with the latter. Hence, for marketing communication content, Belgian companies seem to invest more time and efforts in relationship building than for public relations content. This could increase the impact of marketing related content because traditional reactance with regard to advertising content can be avoided. In addition, results revealed that it is important to invest efforts in engaging in dialogue with stakeholders in a mutually beneficially way (i.e., two-way symmetrical model). These kind of posts tended to generate more likes than posts that could be classified in the public information model and may lead to relationship building. Hence, engaging in dialogue with stakeholders in a symmetrical way offers the additional advantage of gaining a higher visibility of the post by generating a higher amount of positive affective evaluations (i.e., likes are a signal of agreement).

Finally, with regard to the content of posts, results suggested that practitioners should use Facebook as a tool to effectively spread public relations content because this type of content was shared more than marketing communication content. Although it is important to note that the reputation of companies was not able to predict the Facebook activity of companies, posting public relations content may be very effective for companies to manage their reputation. In particular, because this content is shared most, it is able to generate a larger reach compared to marketing communication content. Likewise, more people are likely to see the reputation building post of the companies on their timeline. Furthermore, by addressing issues on social media in an appropriate way (i.e., issue management), companies may avoid that these issues turn into crises that threaten the organizational reputation.

2.2 Corporate crises

In chapters three, four and five we examined different aspects of corporate communication when business as usual is disrupted because the company is confronted with a crisis. In times of crisis, it is important to thoughtfully consider the sense-making processes of stakeholders in order to fully understand the complex nature of crisis communication (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Therefore, in the following three studies, we adopted an active stakeholder engagement approach that starts from the idea that stakeholders are not the passive receivers of the crisis message anymore. Instead, they might actively make sense of a crisis in different ways and thereby influence the perceptions of the organization in crisis (Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018) (cf. RQ₂).

In this regard, organizations must be willing to commit to engage in dialogue with their stakeholders. Engaging in dialogue has repeatedly been recognized as an important feature of communication through social media (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Kelleher, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). However, so far, it remains unclear which response style organizations should adopt when engaging in dialogue with stakeholders during a crisis. Furthermore, it has been neglected in research that the desirability of a certain response style might depend on the valence of the comments of consumers (which could be positive or negative). Therefore in chapter three, we examined how a personalized response to a consumer comment affected perceptions of the organizational reputation and whether the desirability of this response depended on the valence of the consumers' comments (cf. RQ_{2.1}). Results showed that based on the valence of the consumers' comments on a corporate crisis message post, a personalized organizational response was desirable or not. Hence, this study clearly demonstrated that organizations really have to look at what consumers are saying (i.e., commenting on a crisis message post as a form of engagement) and based on this, they have to choose the appropriate response style. Only when consumers' comments are negative, a personalized response is advisable because in this case, it enhances perceived

conversational human voice (CHV) (Kelleher, 2009), which in turn beneficially influences the organizational reputation. However, when consumers' comments are positive, a personalized response is detrimental for the organizational reputation because it enhances consumer skepticism.

Furthermore, besides providing a tool for engaging in dialogue, social media also created the expectations amongst stakeholders that organizations in crisis have to communicate quickly and frequently (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016). However, this might imply that they have to communicate information that is not yet confirmed (e.g., Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016). Therefore, in chapter four, we examined how consumers' perceptions of uncertainties communicated by the organization in crisis influenced the organizational reputation and when organizations were allowed to communicate such uncertainties (cf. RQ_{2.2}). Results demonstrated that overall, communication of uncertainties was detrimental to the organizational reputation because it lowered organizational trust. Nevertheless, communicating uncertainties could also generate a positive impact on the organizational reputation, but only when the affected organization self-disclosed the crisis. In this context, the uncertain statements lowered perceived organizational responsibility, which, in turn, improved the organizational reputation. When a third party disclosed the crisis, however, uncertain statements communicated by the organization in crisis lowered organizational trust and, subsequently, organizational reputation.

Next, in chapter five, we investigated a third sense-making process that consumers could establish: the identification of stakeholders with the organizational spokesperson based on a similar gender. In particular, we examined how and when gender similarity with the spokesperson influenced perceptions of the organizational reputation (cf. RQ_{2.3}). In particular, we examined the interaction between the nonverbal aspect of gender similarity with the spokesperson and the verbal aspect of the crisis response strategy. Results of this chapter revealed that identification of stakeholders with the organizational spokesperson based on a similar gender beneficially influenced perceptions of the organizational reputation through higher feelings of empathy towards the spokesperson. However, this effect was only found when the appropriate crisis response strategy according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007) was used in which apologies are offered in the context of a preventable crisis. Taken together, the results of these three crisis communication studies provided several important contributions to existing literature.

2.2.1 Discussion of empirical results

In the three chapters, we addressed an important shortcoming of current research: how to protect the organizational reputation during crises while taking into account the sense-making processes of stakeholders or in other words: their engagement (e.g., Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018).

More importantly, we also explored how organizations can deal with these processes. All of the studies provided empirical evidence for the fact that it is indeed important to actively consider the sense-making processes of consumers or their stakeholder engagement, as recently suggested by several authors (e.g., Cho et al., 2014; Johnston, 2014; Ji et al., 2017; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Across these three studies, we identified different sense-making processes of consumers which all affect perceptions of the organizational reputation. Hence, these results underscore the need for crisis communication research to step away from the transmission and interaction paradigm as suggested by Frandsen and Johansen (2010) because the studies similarly showed that what consumers are doing or saying effectively has an impact on the perceptions of the organizational reputation. Therefore, it is important for future research to explore a variety of sense-making processes that stakeholders use to give sense to a crisis and even more important: to provide insights to organizations in crisis about how they could optimally deal with these processes in order to protect the organizational reputation. Consequently, we argue that future crisis communication research has to adopt a different approach to reputation management than before. Previous research largely focused on what (i.e., content) and when (i.e., timing: self-disclosure or third-party disclosure) organizations in crisis have to communicate in order to protect the organizational reputation (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). However, as suggested by the multi-vocal approach (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Ji et al., 2017; Kim, 2016; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Zhang, Vos, Jari, Wang, & Kotkov, 2016), for current crisis communication research it is especially important to take into consideration different voices that might arise during a crisis, besides the one of the organization itself (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The studies illustrated the importance of considering the 'voice' of consumers because they have shown that consumers' sense-making processes and engagement (i.e., commenting on a crisis message post, dealing with uncertainties and identifying with the spokesperson) are important drivers of how the organizational reputation is perceived. Hence, not only what the organization in crisis is doing determines perceptions of the organizational reputation, other voices are also able to do so.

Moreover, social media diminish the control that organizations have over communication processes (Cornelissen, 2017; Effing & Spil, 2016). Yet, three chapters provided empirically based evidence on several aspects that organizations are able to manage, even in an uncontrolled environment characterized by active stakeholders. In chapter three, it was shown that organizations in crisis could beneficially affect the organizational reputation by choosing the appropriate response style depending on the valence of the consumers' comments. Furthermore, chapter four has shown that if organizations are forced to communicate uncertainties, they have to self-disclose the crisis in order to protect the organizational reputation. Finally, chapter five illustrated that in order to generate a beneficial impact of gender similarity between stakeholders and the spokesperson on organizational

reputation, the appropriate crisis response strategy according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007) has to be selected. While the organization in crisis is completely in control of choosing the response strategy, creating gender similarity might be more difficult to manage. The only thing organizations could take into consideration here is, when the crisis is gender-related, to choose a spokesperson who has the same gender as the majority of the main target stakeholders. Taken together, we could argue that the chapters illustrated how organizations could manage the uncontrolled sense-making processes of stakeholder: they have to adapt the organizational strategy to the specific forms of consumers' engagement (i.e., providing positive or negative feedback; dealing with uncertainties; identifying with the spokesperson).

Besides the above-mentioned general contributions, each chapter also provided several specific important contributions to existing literature. In chapter three, we found empirical proof for the fact that a personalized response is likely to induce CHV (Kelleher, 2009). Likewise, we identified a response style that is likely to engender CHV. This is an important contribution to existing knowledge, because creating CHV is of crucial importance in the social media environment that is characterized by informal, human interactions (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Furthermore, we also provided additional insights into the advantages that CHV might have for organizations in crisis. In particular, we found that a higher perceived CHV resulted in better perceptions of the organizational reputation. Consequently, we reveal that it is interesting for companies to adopt this response style because likewise they are able to protect the organizational reputation which is threatened by crises (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Jahng & Hong, 2017). Hence, while previous research already identified several beneficial outcomes of CHV such as relational trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality (Kelleher, 2009, Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007), we added to these findings that a very important asset for organizations, the organizational reputation (Ji et al., 2017; Wang, Yu, & Chiang, 2016), could also be positively affected by this response style. Accordingly, in this chapter we identified CHV as an important precursor of beneficial perceptions of the organizational reputation.

Nevertheless, we could not conclude that personalization of the response is always a good idea if organizations want to protect their reputation. In particular, we found that a personalized response to positive consumer comments on an organizational crisis message post enhanced consumer skepticism which in turn negatively influenced the organizational reputation. Hence, personalization could protect the organizational reputation, but only in response to a negative consumer comment. Otherwise, personalization is likely to function as a trigger of a persuasive intent of the company in crisis. This brings us to another important theoretical contribution of chapter three. Previously, crisis communication research tended to focus on the positive consequences of certain crisis communication strategies such as the initiation of trust (e.g., Beldad, van Laar, & Hegner, 2017). Only, recently,

researchers started to pay attention to the potential negative consequences of certain crisis communication strategies. For example, Lee (2016) showed that stealing thunder (i.e., releasing potential damaging information as organization in crisis before third parties are able to do so, Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993) is only effective when consumers are not specifically aware of the persuasive intent of stealing thunder. Otherwise, consumers are likely to have a lower brand attitude (Lee, 2016). Hence, this study was one of the first attempts to consider the identification of persuasive intents in crisis communication research and thereby revealing the negative consequences of crisis communication strategies. Unlike crisis communication research, marketing communication research already extensively investigated the recognition of persuasive intents by consumers and the negative perceptions that could arise because of the application of certain marketing strategies. For example, by investigating the effects of sponsorship disclosure duration on consumer skepticism (e.g., Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012) or children's advertising literacy (e.g., De Jans, Hudders, & Cauberghe, 2017; Nelson, 2016). The current study demonstrated that the initiation of persuasive intents might be relevant to consider in a crisis context as well. Hence, for future research, it is important to use theoretical insights that pay attention to the awareness of consumers of a potential persuasive intent as a driver of negative perceptions among consumers (e.g., Persuasion Knowledge Model, Friestad & Wright, 1994). We found empirical evidence for the fact that the inclusion of such models in crisis communication research could provide interesting insights in how perceptions of the organizational reputation could be influenced by the persuasion knowledge of consumers.

An important goal of crisis communication is to manage the organizational reputation by means of communication (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Sturges, 1994). However, we argue that it is important to recognize that reputation management could also be considered as a persuasive attempt. In particular, the organization in crisis tries to beneficially position the organization in the heads of the stakeholders (Jones, Temperley, & Lima, 2009). When people become aware of this persuasive intent (i.e., by cues that trigger the activation of persuasion knowledge such as a personalized response to a positive consumer comment), this might have a backfire effect on the organizational reputation. Therefore, it is of crucial importance for future research to not only investigate which positive effects certain reputation management strategies could generate, but also to reveal the negative effects initiated by the recognition of the persuasive intent by stakeholders.

Hence, as already discussed above, personalization is an effective response style depending on the valence of the consumer comments to which the organization in crisis is responding. This is also an important contribution to previous research. So far, crisis research did not consider the input of consumers during crises (Lambret & Barki, 2017; Zheng et al., 2018). Particularly, it has been neglected what consumers are saying on social media (e.g., if they are positive or negative) and how

organizations in crises have to deal with it. Chapter three clearly revealed that in order to enhance the organizational reputation by engaging in dialogue with consumers, the valence of the consumer comments have to be considered. The idea of considering the valence of consumer comments was already introduced by Rim and Song (2016) in corporate social responsibility research on social media. However, it is also important to consider consumer comment valence in the context of crises because depending on the valence, a personalized response style is appropriate or not. Furthermore, this study illustrated the importance for crisis communication research to not only focus on negatively predetermined stakeholders. Previous research on webcare tended to focus on negative feedback of consumers (e.g., Lee & Song, 2010; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). However, as shown in the introduction of this chapter, for example during the Volkswagen Dieseltgate crisis, people could also express their continued support despite the crisis in which the organization is involved, referred to in literature as faith-holders (Luoma-aho, 2010). This study is, to our knowledge, the first study that empirically investigated how faith-holders have to be appropriately addressed (i.e., by providing them a corporate response) in order to keep them satisfied, instead of risking to possibly turn them into hate-holders (i.e., by providing them a personalized response).

When we look at the specific contributions of chapter four, we could argue that in this chapter, we provided a first attempt to investigate how consumers deal with uncertainties communicated during a crisis and how organizations in crisis can best respond to this sense-making process of consumers. Despite the fact that uncertainties and ambiguity are key characteristics of crises (Ulmer & Selnow, 1997), so far, crisis communication research did not explore the impact of communicating uncertainties on perceptions of the organization in crisis (Liu et al., 2016). Findings demonstrated that in the initial phases of crises, communicating uncertainties is not a problem, on the important condition that the crisis is self-disclosed by the organization in crisis. However, if self-disclosure is not an option, organizations have to be aware that when a third party first discloses the crisis, uncertainties in crisis communication are not tolerated by consumers. Hence, besides contributing to the knowledge about the communication of uncertainties during crises, this chapter also illustrated the importance of a multi-vocal approach in crisis communication: the organization in crisis does not only have to pay attention to their own communication, but also to how consumers deal with uncertainties and the revelation of the crisis by third parties because this could also influence the organizational reputation.

To conclude, chapter five demonstrated that it is also important for crisis communication research to look beyond the content and to pay attention to nonverbal aspects of crisis communication such as gender similarity between stakeholders and the organizational spokesperson. As previous research largely focused on the content of crisis communication (Avery, Lariscy, Kim & Hocke, 2010), this study confirmed that nonverbal aspects are important as well. These results are in line with recent findings

of few other studies that investigated the importance of nonverbal cues in crisis communication such as voice pitch (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014), speech rate (De Waele, Claeys, & Cauberghe, 2017), ethnical similarity (Arpan, 2002) and babyfaces (Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008). However, the current study adds to these findings by investigating the interaction between verbal and nonverbal aspects in crisis communication. Additional research in crisis communication is necessary to explore different ways in how both verbal and nonverbal aspects could interact with each other and could possibly amplify or downgrade each other's impact.

2.2.2 Managerial implications

Based on the above-mentioned findings, we could conclude that it is important for communication practitioners to pay attention to with whom they are interacting during a crisis (i.e., positive or negative consumers, male or female consumers). Based on these characteristics, the organizational strategy (which the organization in crisis could manage itself) has to be determined. Hence, the adjustment of aspects that organizations in crisis are able to manage (i.e., response style, self-disclosure of the crisis, selection of crisis response strategy) to aspects they cannot manage themselves (i.e., the sense-making processes of consumers) is crucial. Thus, consumer engagement should get focal attention when determining the organizational crisis communication strategy.

Next, it is important for practitioners to not only pay attention to negatively predetermined consumers because they might possibly let the crisis escalate. Positively determined consumers are also important to be addressed in an appropriate way (i.e., by means of a corporate response) in order to protect the organizational reputation. Additionally, besides with whom practitioners are communicating, we also provided interesting insights about the content that practitioners could communicate during a crisis. A personalized response is advisable to a negative consumer comment, while a corporate response is advisable to a positive consumer comment. We also revealed that that it is no problem for organizations to communicate uncertainties on one condition: the crisis has to be self-disclosed by the organization in crisis. Additionally, the appropriate crisis response strategy according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007) together with gender similarity between the spokesperson and stakeholders amplify each other's beneficial impact on the organizational reputation through higher empathy towards the spokesperson.

Finally, similarly to the reluctance of practitioners to communicate uncertainties (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016), research has also shown that practitioners are often not eager to express empathy in crisis communication because this might signal unprofessionalism (Seeger, 2006). Nonetheless, chapter five demonstrated that empathy could not only be created by a verbal strategy

(which is explicit) but also by nonverbal cues such as gender similarity with the spokesperson which is more implicit.

2.3 Terrorism

While the previous three chapters focused on corporate crises, in chapters six and seven, we examined corporate communication in extremely turbulent times: in the context of terrorism. Europeans consider terrorism as the most important threat for the internal security of the European Union (Eurobarometer, 2017). Recently, Belgium got closely confronted with terrorism: first during the raised terrorism threat (i.e., as a consequence of the terrorist attacks in Paris) and afterwards with the terrorist attacks in Brussels on the 22nd of March 2016. In chapter six, by means of a national survey, we analyzed how Belgian citizens deal with the terrorism threat in terms of their behavior (cf. RQ_{3.1}) as well as if and how governmental communication about the threat is able to influence the governmental reputation (cf. RQ_{3.2}). Results showed that the terrorism threat made citizens more alert in public places and that they participated less in mass events. Moreover, one fifth stopped traveling by public transport. In terms of information seeking behavior, it was found that Belgian citizens searched for information several times a day, mostly via traditional media such as television and radio. Consequently, Belgians make sense of the terrorism threat by adapting their behavior and seeking information about it. The information seeking process was determined by the cognitive risk assessment which was in turn influenced by several other factors (i.e., involvement with the threat, attitude towards mass media communication and perceived governmental expert efficacy). In addition, results showed that adequate governmental communication was able to increase trust and decrease the level of governmental responsibility, which was in turn beneficial for the governmental reputation.

Next, in chapter seven, based on a quantitative content analysis of tweets sent out during and after the terrorist attacks in Brussels, we provided answers to which actors communicated on Twitter and what kind of content they mentioned (cf. RQ₄). Results revealed that Twitter was an important communication tool for citizens during and after the attacks. In particular, they used this platform primarily to vent their negative feelings. Although governmental agencies formed important communication hubs (i.e., the highest number of retweets), these actors did not tweet frequently. Results also indicated that emotion-related content prevailed on Twitter, especially when it came to content expressed by citizens. The most frequently expressed emotion in the tweets was sympathy. Both governmental agencies and media mostly tweeted neutral, non-emotional information. In what follows, we discuss the empirical results and managerial implications of the last two chapters of this dissertation.

2.3.1 Discussion of empirical results

Chapters six and seven provide a first attempt to reveal in-depth insights into the sense-making processes of different stakeholders in the context of terrorism. Reuter and Kaufhold (2018) made an overview of 15 years of researching social media in different crisis contexts. According to their analysis, previous studies mainly focused on natural disasters such as hurricanes (e.g., Hughes, Denis, Palen, & Anderson, 2014; Lachlan, Spence, Lin, & Greco, 2014) and earthquakes (e.g., Mendoza, Poblete, & Castillo, 2010; Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Qu, Huang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011; Wilensky, 2014). Nonetheless, so far, there are only few studies that explored the use of social media in the context of terrorism. This is important because terrorism has some unique characteristics that distinguishes it from other types of crises (e.g., major psychologic impact, Goldstein, 2005; initiate a fear of reputation, Gibbs van Brunshot & Sherley, 2005; Vos, 2017; and threaten core values of society, Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Only recently, crisis communication research started to explore the topic of terrorism. For example, the study of Stieglitz, Bunker, Mirbabaie and Ehnis (2017) compared crisis communication on Twitter during three different events based on structure (e.g., ratio of tweets, ratio of retweets, etc.), sentiment (i.e., emotions expressed in the tweets) and visualization of the communication patterns. Chapters six and seven add to these findings by adopting a multi-vocal approach in order to identify different voices that could arise in the context of terrorism (e.g., citizens, media, government) as well as by providing insights into a variety of sense-making processes of these different voices (e.g., information seeking behavior of citizens, communication of the government).

When terrorism strikes, different voices could enter the arena, such as from governments, citizens, the media, etc. The relevance of recognizing each voice and its impact was clearly demonstrated in both chapters. For example, both studies clearly indicated the important role of the government in the context of terrorism. Chapter six demonstrated that the better stakeholders perceive the efficacy of the government, the higher they cognitively assessed the risk of the terrorism threat. Hence, it is very important for governments to determine the ideal balance between avoiding to induce a culture of fear and creating awareness about the threat (Altheide, 2006; Mythen & Walklate, 2006). Furthermore, in chapter six, it was also demonstrated that the government is able to beneficially influence the governmental reputation because a high governmental expert efficacy resulted in higher institutional trust and lower responsibility ratings. Chapter seven also confirmed the influential role of the government by showing that tweets of governmental agencies were retweeted most or in other words: the government was an important communication hub during the Brussels' attacks. Hence, we could conclude that in the context of terrorism the government represents an important voice that certainly has to be considered when researching this topic.

Besides the voice of the government, the media are also important voices that should get focal attention in the context of terrorism. In particular, in chapter six, we found that the media represented an influential voice in the context of the terrorism threat. In particular, results showed that if the media focused too much on sensationalism, this decreased the cognitive risk perception. This is an important theoretical contribution to existing research that was, so far, indecisive about the impact of the beliefs of those who provide the information such as the media (Griffin et al., 2004). Finally, both chapters also demonstrated that citizens represent an important voice that has to be recognized in the context of terrorism because they make sense of terrorism in several ways.

Consequently, similar to the previous three chapters, these two chapters also indicated the importance for crisis communication research to step away from organization-centered thinking and instead to pay attention to sense-making processes of stakeholders (e.g., Ji et al., 2017; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Stieglitz et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2018). Chapters six and seven revealed that stakeholders make sense of crises in different ways, through different platforms. On the one hand, chapter six, demonstrated that citizens make sense of the terrorism threat by searching for information several times a day, mostly on television and radio. On the other hand, chapter seven showed that during and after the terrorist attacks in Belgium, citizens tried to make sense of this crisis by tweeting their negative feelings. Hence, these findings provide additional support for the fact that stakeholder-centered thinking and bi-lateral stakeholder management is indeed important, especially in the current environment, next to organization-centered and unilateral relationship management (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Hence, for future research it is of major importance to actively consider how different stakeholders are dealing with terrorism and to have attention for the fact that different media could be used for different purposes.

The fact that different media seemed to be used by stakeholders for different purposes is another important contribution of both chapters. In particular, they revealed the need to recognize the complementarity of both social and traditional media. Chapter six demonstrated that with regard to information seeking behavior, traditional media (i.e., radio and television) were the most important consulted media. Regarding social media use, results demonstrated that one fifth of the people used Facebook to search for information about the terrorism threat. However, the third most consulted information source were websites of national newspapers. It is likely that a great amount of visitors of these websites were directed to them through posts of traditional media on social media. Hence, this also illustrates the importance of acknowledging the complementarity of both media. Furthermore, according to chapter seven, social media such as Twitter seemed to be an important tool for citizens to vent feelings, especially negative ones, in the context of terrorism. Hence, instead of stressing the importance of social media in the current digital environment which has been done by numerous

studies (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Watkins, 2017), it is important to recognize that both media, traditional and social, could fulfill their own functions in the current environment. This also illustrates the suggestion of the issue arena theory (e.g., Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) and the rhetorical arena theory (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2017) which both argue that besides the recognition of different voices, it is also important to recognize different places of interaction (i.e., different arenas) that each serve their own purposes (Vos et al., 2014).

The results of these chapters also complement previous research findings that compared the use of traditional and social media in crisis communication. For example, one study showed that Twitter users were more likely to share newspaper articles, than blog posts or tweets. Hence, traditional media seemed to be considered as more reliable sources of information than social media (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). Furthermore, another study explored how audiences seek information from social and traditional media and what factors affect their media use during crises (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012), based on the Social Mediated Crisis Communication model (SMCC) (Jin & Liu, 2010). Just like we have found in chapter six, results of this study (Austin et al., 2012) also demonstrated that traditional media were primarily used for information needs. This because these media were considered as more credible than social media. In addition, similar to the findings of chapter seven, previous research also found that social media fulfill their own functions in the context of crises. For example, Austin et al. (2012) found that people tended to use social media primarily to share and obtain insider information or to verify with family or friends. Furthermore, another study that investigated how Twitter was used during the terrorist attacks in Brussels also revealed that Twitter users mostly used this medium to share their negative emotions (Stieglitz et al., 2018). Consequently, taken together, we could argue that chapters six and seven provide additional evidence for the importance of recognizing the distinct functions of both traditional and social media in the current environment in which corporate communication takes place. In particular, the current studies add to these findings by demonstrating that not only in the context of corporate crises (i.e., Schultz et al., 2011) and incidents on universities (i.e., bomb threat, riots, blizzard, disease outbreak, embezzlement and excessive partying) (Austin et al., 2012), but also in the extreme turbulent context of terrorism traditional and social media seemed to fulfill their own functions in the sense-making process of stakeholders.

Moreover, besides the aforementioned general contributions of both chapters, they also each provide some specific contributions. For example, chapter six demonstrated that the better people perceived the governmental expert efficacy, the higher they cognitively assessed the risk of the terrorism threat. This is to our knowledge the first study that has shed a light on how the government is able to influence cognitive assessments of risks by means of their communication. Furthermore, we also demonstrated

in this chapter that if government communication was perceived as adequate, this positively influenced the governmental reputation. These are important insights for authorities because previous research has shown that they tend to struggle with how to adequately address citizens in turbulent times (e.g., Helsloot & Ruitenber, 2004). Chapter seven also provided evidence for the fact that it is important for governments to play an active communication role during terrorism, also in the context of social media, because their tweets are retweeted most.

Furthermore, the last chapter also revealed that similar to the context of corporate crises (cf. chapter three), it is also important in the context of terrorism to pay attention to positive emotions that people might experience in extreme turbulent times such as terrorism. The most expressed emotion on Twitter in the communication about the terrorist attacks was sympathy. Hereby, we provided empirical evidence for the fact that it is important for theoretical models regarding emotions in crisis communication, such as the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model (Jing, Pang, & Cameron, 2012), to not only incorporate negative, but also positive emotions, as recently suggested by Guo (2017).

2.3.2 Managerial implications

First of all, we advise communication practitioners confronted with a terrorism-related crisis to use both social and traditional media, each for their own purpose. In chapter six it was found that citizens mostly used traditional media such as radio and television to seek information about the terrorism threat. Hence, for practitioners, it is important to provide these traditional media with sufficient information in order to enhance stakeholders' sense of control over the risk. However, as shown in chapter seven, social media such as Twitter are primarily used by citizens to vent their negative feelings. Hence, on Twitter, it is important for practitioners to provide content that recognizes the feelings of citizens and lets them know that their feelings are heard and understood.

Also, both chapters showed the crucial role of the government in the context of terrorism. Therefore, it is important for governmental communication practitioners to invest time and efforts in communicating via social and traditional media. Previously, it has been argued that in turbulent times, people want to know what the government is doing in order to protect them (ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008). Both chapters indeed provide proof for the importance of an active governmental communication policy. For example, on Twitter, their tweets were shared most (cf. chapter seven), however, the government had a very low tweeting activity. This is a missed opportunity because by the high amount of retweets that their tweets received, they could have reached a very broad public. Furthermore, another reason why governments have to play an active role on social media such as Twitter is that their main target audience (i.e., citizens) is highly active here.

In addition, based on the results of chapter six, we could also argue that is important for practitioners to frequently communicate about how the situation is evolving, especially via traditional media (i.e., television and radio), because these media are used the most to search for information. Furthermore, it seems to be important according to chapter six to pay attention to how citizens are cognitively dealing with terrorism. Hence, practitioners should particularly provide information, for example about how susceptible people are to the crisis, by stressing that the likelihood that someone got involved in a terrorist attack is extremely low. Additionally, results in this chapter also demonstrated that it is important to distinguish different stakeholders based on their involvement with the risk because the ones with high risk involvement also cognitively assessed the risk higher. Therefore, in this context, for practitioners it is especially important to detect the stakeholders that are highly involved, for example because they live in the affected area, in order to target them with adequate communication that is able to reassure them.

It was also argued that it is important to monitor what the media are communicating about the terrorism threat because if they were perceived to focus too much on sensationalism, this decreased the cognitive risk perception. Therefore, it is important that the media are conscious of their influential role in such turbulent times. Another reason why it is important to monitor what the media are saying about the crisis is that tweets of the media are second most retweeted according to the results of chapter seven. Finally, it could be argued that practitioners need to consider the media as partners in the communication process, instead of rivals. This is important because especially traditional media seemed to be important sources of information in the context of terrorism (cf. chapter six). However, unlike what has been argued in several studies (e.g., Iqbal, 2015; Kaspersen & Kaspersen, 1996; Wray, Kreuter, Jacobsen, Clements, & Evans, 2004) (i.e., the media would focus too much on sensationalism), practice shows that this was not the case during the terrorist attacks in Brussels. In particular, chapter seven has demonstrated that media mostly tweeted non-emotional, neutral information. Hence, they seemed to be aware of their influential role by objectively reporting about the crisis. Therefore, for practitioners, it could be interesting to combine forces with the media in order to reach a maximal impact of their communication.

2.4 Ethical reflections regarding the study implications

The focus of this dissertation is on how social media and/or the active role of multiple stakeholders have changed corporate communication and crisis communication in particular. However, it is important for both scholars and practitioners to take some ethical considerations into regard when interpreting the results of these studies. This is especially important for the chapters three, four and

five that explore how the sense-making processes of consumers and how organizations in crisis are dealing with them might influence perceptions of the organizational reputation.

It has been argued by several authors that ethics should get a central focus within crisis communication (e.g., Linsley & Slack, 2013; Simola, 2003; Xu & Li, 2013). By adopting an ethical approach to crisis communication, the organization is able to signal that it is committed to ethical and responsible practices (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Snyder, Hall, Robertson, Jasinski, & Miller, 2006). In particular, we suggest that the results of the current dissertation have to be viewed in an ethics of care approach. How to ethically behave in a context of relationships between different stakeholders is a central focus of this approach (Bauman, 2011; Gilligan, 1995; Simola, 2003; Tao & Kim, 2017). We argue that this approach is especially relevant in the current environment characterized by the interactive nature of social media and the active role of stakeholders. As repeatedly argued throughout this dissertation, stakeholders and their engagement and sense-making process should get focal attention here. In the ethics of care approach, organizations in crisis have to be sensitive and responsive to the emotional feelings and needs of stakeholders (Tao & Kim, 2017). The consideration of the feelings of stakeholders and how certain actions or inactions could impact the feelings of stakeholders or the relationship with stakeholders is critical in this matter (Simola, 2003).

Hence, in this approach, it is important that the organization in crisis makes efforts to fulfill the emotional and interpersonal needs of different stakeholders by tailoring their decisions, actions, and communication based upon the needs and emotions of these stakeholders (Bauman, 2011; Simola, 2003; Tao & Kim, 2017). In this view, stakeholders are not seen as means to reach a certain end, but rather as ends themselves. In the current environment, organizations are now assumed to be the means to ensure the interests of stakeholders (i.e., ends) (Xu & Li, 2013). Important to note is that the caring relationship is reciprocal, which means that it aims to reward both parties in the relationship (Sevenhuijzen, 2003; Linsley & Slack, 2013). This could be linked to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations that also aims to build mutual-beneficial relationships between organizations and stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Furthermore, dialogic communication has also been related to the practice of ethical communication. Engaging in dialogue is *"considered as 'more ethical' because it is based on the principles of honesty, trust and positive regard for the other rather than simply a conception of the public as means to end"* (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 33). However, it has to be recognized that dialogue does not guarantee ethical outcomes of corporate communication. However, a dialogic communication orientation increases the likelihood that stakeholders and organizations will better understand each other and will have built a firm base for communication processes (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogue could be used for both moral

and immoral ends. An ethical dialogue requires the acknowledgement of the other (i.e., the stakeholders with whom organizations are engaging) (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

We argue that the results of the studies mentioned in chapters three, four and five have to be seen in light of the ethics of care approach. For example, in chapter three, we investigated how organizations in crisis could engage in dialogue while taking into account the needs of the stakeholders (i.e., who are satisfied or dissatisfied). Furthermore, the ethical approach of care also stresses that trust is an essential component of relationships between organizations and stakeholders, because parties need to trust each other, in order to be able to respond to each other's needs (Held, 2006). In chapter four, we provide insights into how the communication of uncertainties is likely to affect stakeholders' trust in the organization. Furthermore, emotions such as empathy are also an important component of an ethics of care approach (Held, 2006; Linsley & Slack, 2013). In chapter five, we have shown that gender similarity between stakeholders and the organizational spokesperson is likely to generate empathy towards the spokesperson, but only when he or she uses the appropriate crisis response strategy according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007). Hence, these three chapters have in common that they want to reveal insights into how organizations could communicate with stakeholders in an ethical way by taking into consideration their needs. The goal of these chapters, however, is not to provide insights into how organizations in crisis can 'control' stakeholders.

3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

3.1 Key limitations

Despite the contributions of the current dissertation for both theory and practice, there are some limitations that have to be recognized. In the following paragraphs, limitations of different chapters are discussed. In addition, we also provide suggestions for future research.

A first limitation that has to be recognized is that this dissertation contains studies that are established in different organizational contexts (i.e., business as usual, corporate crises and terrorism). In this regard, it is important to note that results of a study conducted in one context could not always be transferred to another context. For example, in chapter four we found that communicating uncertainties is tolerated by consumers when the organization in crisis self-discloses the crisis. However, in a context of business as usual, consumers probably would not tolerate uncertainties communicated by organizations because in this context, the organization has the time to check and validate information before they communicate it. Another example: in chapter six we found that 50 percent of the Belgians engage in information seeking behavior several times a day because of the

terrorism threat. As mentioned before, terrorism is a very specific type of crisis because of its major psychological impact, it creates a fear of repetition and threatens core values of society (Gibbs van Brunshot & Sherley, 2005; Goldstein, 2005; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Therefore, it is much less likely that in the context of corporate crises, 50 percent of the respondents will also search for information about the crisis. In this context, probably the ones who will do that, are the people who are directly involved in the crisis (e.g., they have a baby and a piece of glass was found in baby food).

A second limitation involves the crisis types of the studies dealing with corporate crises (cf. chapters three, four and five). In all these studies, a preventable crisis was chosen because this implies that the organization is considered highly responsible for the event and as such, this type of crisis poses the highest threat to the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). It is important to note that the results of these three chapters cannot simply be generalized to other crisis types such as accidental (i.e., weak attributions of crisis responsibility) and victim crises (i.e., low attributions of crisis responsibility) (Coombs, 2007). In these contexts, other processes might possibly occur because when confronted with accidental or victim crises, the organizational reputation is less threatened. Previous research has shown that there was no significant difference in organizational reputation between victim and accidental crises (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010). Hence, it is reasonable to argue that the results of chapters three, four and five would not occur when conducted in the context of accidental or victim crises.

Furthermore, in chapters four and five, fictitious organizations were used in order to avoid confounded effects of pre-crisis reputation (Laufer & Jung, 2010). In chapter three, we have chosen an existing organization (i.e., Mercedes) in order to raise the realness of the scenario. It has to be recognized, however, that the use of either a fictitious or a real organization might influence the results of the studies. Therefore, for future research it could be interesting to replicate the findings in the context of fictitious (i.e., for chapter three) or real organizations (i.e., for chapters four and five).

Another limitation that has to be recognized is that while the current dissertation adopts a multi-vocal approach by examining the voices of different stakeholders (i.e., consumers, citizens, government, media), there are still lots of other voices that are important to consider when practicing corporate communication. For example, the ones of employees. Research has shown that they are actively communicating during a crisis situation (Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012). In addition, authors argue that employee voices could form a source of competitive advantage, but could also be a time bomb that is waiting to explode (e.g., Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2004; Miles & Mangold, 2014). For example, when employees demonstrate their continued support to the organization they work for that is involved in a crisis, this might help to protect the organizational

reputation. However, the opposite might also be true. When employees are not able to ventilate their grievances inside the organization, social media might provide a venue to share them. The collateral damage of this might be devastating for the organization in crisis (Miles & Mangold, 2014). Several aspects have been identified to influence employee voice behavior, especially determinants linked to the organizational context: knowledge of desired brand image and the psychological contract. This means that employees who know and understand the brand image that the organization wants to represent and who feel psychologically safe are likely to voice their opinions that are consistent with the organization's guidelines (Mangold & Miles, 2007; Miles & Mangold, 2014). Hence, for future research it could be interesting to examine how the employee voice is able to positively or negatively influence perceptions of the organization in crisis such as the organizational reputation and how organizations could best deal with these sense-making processes in order to obtain engaged employees (Welch, 2011; Ruck, Welch, & Menara, 2017) who are likely to express their support towards the organization in crisis. Internal communication has shown to play a determining role in the creation of employee engagement (Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2015; Verčič & Vokić, 2017). Nonetheless, so far, this is an under-explored topic in crisis communication research.

Furthermore, another voice that has currently been overlooked in crisis communication research is the one from pressure groups. Pressure groups could be considered as latent stakeholders because they do not have a direct relationship with the organization nor have a real stake as definitive stakeholders (Fassin, 2009). However, they are especially important to consider because their actions might also have a major negative impact on organizations (Xu & Li, 2013). Especially social media provide these groups with an accessible venue to raise their voices (Luoma-Aho & Vos, 2009). For example, recently, in Belgium, an organization for animal rights (i.e., Animal Rights) filmed cruel scenes in different Belgian slaughterhouses. They formulated an official complaint for the Flemish Inspection of Animal Welfare and demanded the immediate closure of the slaughterhouse (Verbeke & Van Den Eynde, 2017). Hence, how organizations have to deal with the voice of such pressure groups is an interesting topic that needs to be explored in detail in future research.

Another limitation of this dissertation is that it did not examine the long-term effects of the sense-making processes of stakeholders. For example, in chapter three, we showed that answering in a personalized way to a negative consumer comment enhances perceived CHV and in turn the organizational reputation. However, it is unclear what the long-term effects are of investing time and efforts in webcare during a crisis. Therefore, for future research, it could be interesting to investigate the effects of webcare in the long term, for example by examining if webcare actually results in stronger relationships with stakeholders (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002), even after a crisis occurred. An example of long-term research is the study of Ji et al (2017) which examined, by means of 5-year

longitudinal social media data, how stakeholder engagement influenced the organizational reputation. Similar research is necessary in crises contexts, to explore the long-term effects of the findings provided in this dissertation.

In addition, throughout this dissertation, it was repeatedly argued that corporate communication has to step away from the organization-centered approach and dedicate a central role to stakeholders (e.g., Lambret & Barki, 2017; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Zheng et al., 2018). We did this by examining how different stakeholders give sense to crises. However, especially in chapters three, four and five, while the sense-making processes of stakeholders were taken into consideration, the dependent variable for all these studies was the organizational reputation. This perception is, however, organization-centered. Therefore, for future research it could also be interesting to investigate the impact of stakeholders' sense-making processes on other voices within the arena. For example, it would be relevant to look at how employees' commitment to the organization they work for is influenced by reading positive or negative feedback on social media about this organization. Furthermore, feedback posted on social media could be read by thousands of other people (e.g., Brummette & Sisco, 2015). However, so far, it remains unclear how expressions of people about an organization in crisis influence readers' perceptions of the organization in crisis. Therefore, we argue that this is also an interesting topic for future research.

Moreover, this dissertation has shown that social media and traditional media have to be considered as complementary communication channels for corporate communication in turbulent times. However, additional research is necessary to exactly determine how both media could be optimally used at the same time in order to amplify each other's impact. For example, the study of Schultz et al. (2011) demonstrated that traditional media are considered as more reliable sources of information than social media. This was also confirmed by another study (Austin et al., 2012) which has found that primarily traditional media are used for information needs. In contrast, social media were found to be ideal tools to vent feelings or connect with friends and family (Austin et al., 2012; Stieglitz et al., 2018). These findings were also confirmed by findings in this dissertation as mentioned in chapters six and seven. However, this dissertation did not contain a chapter in which both traditional and social media are compared at the same time, for example to examine the level of stakeholders' information sufficiency level or the extent to which they feel understood by the organization in crisis. Hence, for future research, it could be interesting to combine both media at the same time in one study in order to get a deeper understanding of stakeholders' sense-making processes in this context.

Furthermore, in chapters two and seven, quantitative content analyses were used as a method to investigate the topic. Due to restricted resources, only one coder was able to code the content.

Therefore, we could not compute inter-coder reliability (i.e., the extent to which different coders apply the same coding guide and registration form to the same dataset and agree in their interpretation of the variables) (Wester & Van Selm, 2006). However, intra-coder reliability (i.e., the extent to which one coder applies the coding guide and registration form consistently on different times) was calculated in order to check the reliability of the results. This is also an established reliability check according to different researchers (Lauf, 2001; Wester & Van Selm, 2006). Additionally, the method itself (i.e., quantitative content analysis) also has some limitations that have to be recognized. Due to the coding guide, reality has to be divided into fixed categories. As a result, latent content and context are not taken into consideration in this method (Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2002). Hence, for future studies on this topic, it would be interesting to combine both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to get a deeper understanding of the topic of investigation.

Next, we want to remark that results of the current dissertation have to be considered within a cultural perspective. For example, cultures might differ in the extent to which they avoid uncertainties (Hofstede, 2001). Belgians score extremely high on the uncertainty avoidance dimension (Taylor, 2000). This means that Belgians are anxious for the unexpected, low in risk taking and concerned about security, safety and explicit rules (Hofstede, 2001). Hence, it is important to interpret the results of the current dissertation in this light. The high score of uncertainty avoidance of Belgians might possibly have influenced the results. For example, in chapter six, we found that Belgians changed their behavior because of the terrorism threat. Being more alert in public places was the most frequently established behavioral change. This might be explained based on Belgians likelihood to avoid uncertain situations. Furthermore, in chapter six, we also found that 50% of the Belgians seek for information about the threat several times a day (i.e., avoiding uncertainties by searching for information). In addition, in chapter four, we found that the communication of uncertainties by organizations in crisis lowered organizational trust which was in turn detrimental for the organizational reputation. This might also be explained by the high scores on uncertainty avoidance of Belgians. Therefore, for future research, it would be interesting to test these findings in other cultures, for example the ones that score low on uncertainty avoidance such as the United States (Taylor, 2000), India or United Kingdom (Kang & Mastin, 2008).

Finally, we have to recognize that all studies in this dissertation are single-study papers. While this enabled us to investigate a variety of sense-making processes of stakeholders, we are aware of the fact that multiple studies are advisable to establish the effects and confirm the results in a more robust way.

3.2 Suggestions for future research

Besides the limitations and corresponding suggestions for future research following the empirical chapters, we now suggest some interesting future research paths that could guide the study of corporate communication in the current and future environment.

To start, it is very important to recognize that the environment in which corporate communication takes place is quickly evolving. Therefore, for future research it is of crucial importance to adequately follow the changes of the digital environment. We suggest several evolutions that deserve special attention in the future. For example, videos form a crucial component of content on social media nowadays and it is expected that the importance of videos will only grow in the future (De Clerck, 2017). For example, in 2016, Facebook counted 100 million hours of daily video watch time (Constine, 2016). Another related tool that is expected to gain importance in the future is livestreaming (De Clerck, 2017). For example, during crises, livestreaming on social media could be used by organizations in crisis to provide up-to-date information about the crisis to social media users. Furthermore, in livestreaming videos, organizations could also address frequently asked questions (i.e., FAQ's) of stakeholders. Likewise, the organization is able to signal to their stakeholders that they pay attention to their needs and concerns (cf. ethics of care approach). The abovementioned examples illustrate that videos and livestreaming will be crucial tools for corporate communication practitioners in the future to deliver their messages to stakeholders. For future research in corporate communication, it would therefore be interesting to unravel the differences between corporate communication messages delivered on social media by means of a post that has either the form of a text, a video or a livestream. Especially in the contexts of videos and livestreaming, the impact of nonverbal cues such as gender similarity, speech rate, facial expressions, voice pitch, etc. is very relevant to consider (e.g., Jakob, Roessing, & Petersen, 2011).

Next, another important trend that organizations will have to deal with in the future are chatbots. These are "*machine conversation system(s) (that) interact with human users via natural conversational language*" (Shawar & Atwell, 2005, p. 489). In 2017, the amount of chatbots on websites has spectacularly risen and is expected to continue to grow in the next years (De Clerck, 2017). According to Maoz (2017), in 2022, approximately 72% of the interactions between organizations and stakeholders will be handled by robots. Chatbots in particular could be an interesting tool for corporate communication practitioners, for example to handle FAQ's of people during a crisis. Chatbots are able to identify questions that are frequently asked and hence provide people with a 'personal' answer without organizations having to lose much time and staff for answering the same questions repeatedly (e.g., Cassauwers, 2017). As artificial intelligence (i.e., AI) is evolving rapidly, human-to-chatbot

conversations are becoming more and more similar to human-to-human conversations (e.g., Hill, Ford, & Farreras, 2015). Therefore, we argue that for future research it would be interesting to compare the impact of human-to-human conversations to human-to-chatbot conversations during crises, for example on information satisfaction. However, it is important to note that these chatbots are only able to perform actions for which they have been programmed by people. Hence, in this regard, an important responsibility of corporate communication practitioners remains to program these chatbots in an appropriate way depending on the specific context, for example by letting them answer by means of a particular tone of voice (Kruis, 2017).

As described above, the toolkit of corporate communication practitioners nowadays is very broad. They can use a variety of tools to communicate with stakeholders. This brings us to the next direction for future research: the need to explore integrated communication across different channels. Today, and in the future, it will become more important than ever to adequately manage all communication channels that organizations are using in order to determine a consistent strategy that delivers a coherent communication style to all stakeholders (Wismans, 2016). Therefore, for future research it would be very interesting to investigate how integrated communication could be organized in order to obtain the most beneficial effects for both the organizations and stakeholders.

Very important actors in this process of alignment and integration of communication are employees. They represent the organization and their actions and words determine how the organization is perceived by other stakeholders. However, as already mentioned above, the role that employees could play in the context of corporate communication is still under-researched (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018; Ruck et al., 2017). It is especially interesting for future research to provide insights into how employee engagement could be created. Employee engagement could be defined as *“a dynamic, changeable psychological state, which links employees to their organizations, manifest in organization member role performances expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally, and influenced by organization-level internal communication”* (Welch, 2011, p. 337). We could derive from this definition that internal communication plays a major role in the creation of employee engagement. Other researchers also consider internal communication as the catalyst of employee engagement (e.g., Jiang & Men, 2015; Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, & Lings, 2014). For example, internal communication that motivates employees to share their thoughts and suggestions results in higher employee engagement, especially when prompted by the direct supervisor of an employee (Karanges et al., 2015). Consequently, for future research it is of major importance to focus on how internal communication could be optimally organized in order to create engaged employees. Furthermore, it is important to identify the drivers of employee engagement in order to create engaged employees who express their loyalty to organizations on social media. Besides identifying these drivers, it could also be interesting for future

research to investigate the impact of expressions of employee engagement on social media on perceptions of the organization. This is especially interesting to examine in the context of crises because employees could then function as faith-holders (Luoma-aho, 2010) and protect the organization from major harm. Additionally, it is not only important for future research to reveal insights into the role of employee engagement in corporate communication, but also of employee disengagement. This means that employees do simply what is required from them and do not go beyond their job responsibilities (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). It is also very important to determine what drives employee disengagement in order to avoid that these employees express their grievances on social media and thereby possibly create an issue or let the crisis escalate.

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