Past Meets Present: Examining The Interplay Between CSR History and Crisis Communication Strategies

Bachelor Thesis

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Abstract

Background: Stakeholders are becoming increasingly critical of organisations' CSR efforts. During times of crisis, organisational CSR history shapes stakeholders' opinion of the organisation, but the relationship between crisis management strategies and CSR history is an understudied topic.

Aim: The objective of this qualitative experimental study is to determine the interrelatedness between organisational CSR history and crisis management strategies. The insights deduced from this study aim to assist crisis managers to make more effective decisions in their future crisis management endeavours.

Method: Four fictive crisis scenarios were used to create a qualitative experimental study design. Corporate communication professionals were interviewed (n = 12) to determine their decision-making process when faced with four different types of crises. A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants. Using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches, a codebook containing eight codes was created and used to analyse the interview transcripts.

Results: CSR history is most effectively used when the organisation had a favourable background and no control over the occurrence of the crisis. In any other case, using the organisation's CSR history - whether short or long - in the crisis communication strategy might raise scepticism in stakeholders who will begin to question the organisation's genuine commitment to CSR efforts.

Conclusion: Crisis managers should consider the type of crisis at hand and the organisation's background before deciding on a crisis management strategy. In some cases, communication can

only fix so much before it becomes redundant. In those cases, the root cause of the problem is internal and/ or operational.

Future research: The two crisis types used current study pertained only to the victim and preventable crisis clusters. Future research into the interrelatedness between CSR history and crisis communication strategies should include a crisis pertaining to the accidental cluster as well. Additionally, the interviewed professionals often discussed the importance of time in issuing effective responses to stakeholders. Thus, future research should consider the impact of time on crisis communication strategies, perhaps even constituting it as a reputational threat during a crisis.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, organisations are expected to conform to sustainability expectations. As an example, in their 2022 sustainability report, Coca Cola stated that they are aiming for their packaging to be 100% recyclable by 2025 (Coca Cola, 2022). McDonald's impact report released in the same year highlights their commitment to environmental sustainability by deploying wooden cutlery, paper straws and reusable packaging to several of its branches across the globe (McDonald's, 2022). Organisations come under heavy scrutiny when their alleged dedication to social and environmental sustainability is not followed up with meaningful action. Greenpeace's aggressive response to Nestlé's ambiguous and lacklustre commitments to use 100% recyclable packaging by 2025, Coca Cola's refusal to give up on plastic bottles, among other examples (Robinson, 2022), suggest that genuine commitment to socially and environmentally responsible efforts is displayed through concrete organisational action rather than through corporate communication endeavours. If an organisation fails to meet sustainability demands, a crisis potentially ensues, threatening to harm the organisation's reputational assets (Coombs, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Effective communication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts leads to an improved corporate reputation, with the organisation's history of CSR efforts shaping stakeholders' opinions during a crisis (Ham & Kim, 2020).

A reputational threat during a crisis is composed of three factors: initial crisis responsibility, prior relational reputation and crisis history (Coombs, 2007). Stakeholders attribute blame for the crisis to organisations depending on how much influence the organisation had over the occurrence of the crisis, with prior relational reputation and crisis history acting as intensifying factors for the attributed blame. The organisation's history of CSR efforts also comes under scrutiny during a crisis, especially with the ever-growing demands for organisations to act more in

line with standards of social and environmental responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Ham & Kim, 2017). An example of a long CSR history acting as a reputational buffer during a crisis is that of the ice cream company Ben & Jerry's. In 2016, their parent company, Unilever, wanted to sell one of its subsidiaries to a company that operated in Israeli settlements. Ben & Jerry's opposed the sale, highlighting their strong commitments to social justice and peace amidst the Israel-Palestine conflict. The credibility and authenticity of Ben & Jerry's long-winded history of CSR efforts built a strong case for itself, protecting its reputation despite public backlash towards its parent company (Neate, 2022).

Studies in the CSR communication and crisis communication spheres have focused on the perceptions that consumers have on organisational reputation in conjunction with CSR efforts (Gálvez-Sánchez, Molina-Prados, Molina-Moreno, Moral-Cuadra, 2024; Kim, 2017). Research has also been conducted on the decision-making processes that corporate communication professionals go through when faced with a crisis (Eweje & Sakaki, 2015; Tworzydło et. al, 2020). Lastly, quantitative experimental studies sought to determine the effect that CSR history has on corporate reputation and consumer perception (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Despite the expansive literature on each of these focus areas, little is known about the interrelatedness of CSR history and the decision-making processes that organisations go through when faced with a crisis. As Coombs (2007) argues, for crisis communication strategies to be effective, they must be based on evidence-based scientific research "rather than personal preference and unscientific experience" (p. 163).

This qualitative experimental study aimed to determine the interrelatedness between CSR history and crisis communication strategies. To do this, an exploratory study was conducted where professionals who work in the corporate communication field were interviewed. The professionals were presented with four fictive scenarios. Assuming the role of a spokesperson for a fictive

company undergoing a crisis, the professionals were tasked with discussing their step-by-step

thought process and subsequent plan for managing the crises. Results and limitations are discussed

before drawing conclusions about implications for future research. The aim of this study was to

determine the interrelatedness between CSR history and crisis communication strategies. The

insights deduced from this research aim to help crisis managers make more effective decisions in

their future crisis communication strategies. This study sought to answer the research question:

"What is the interrelatedness between CSR history and crisis communication strategies?"

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Organisational crisis and crisis management

Due to the unpredictable and potentially devastating effects of a crisis, it is imperative for organisations to have a communication plan ready to be deployed at any point. Heath in Coombs and Holladay (2010, p. 3) describes crisis as a "risk manifested", arguing that organisations should always have a crisis management plan ready for when a crisis emerges. Given their prolific presence and knowledge in crisis management academia, the definition from Coombs and Holladay (2015) will be used as part of the theoretical groundwork for this paper. They define crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 146). This definition encompasses the vital nuances of a crisis – an unpredictable threat due to a mismatch in value congruence between stakeholders and the organisation, leading to operational and reputational damage.

The crisis communication discipline revolves around the prospect of protecting reputational assets in times of crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Crisis communication "can be defined broadly as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 20). Crisis communication is encompassed by a larger discipline, that of crisis management. The aim of crisis management is to shield the organisation and its stakeholders from harm as much as possible during a crisis. Crisis management can be separated into three stages: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis, in which "pre-crisis involves efforts to prevent crises and to prepare for crisis management. Crisis is the response to an actual event. Post-crisis are efforts to learn from the crisis event" (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). From a crisis

communication perspective, the pre-crisis stage consists of gathering information about potential crisis risks, followed by proactive measures and efforts to prevent these risks from taking shape into a crisis. The crisis stage is defined by the multitude of response initiatives to an active crisis, such as a press release. Lastly, in the post-crisis stage, organisations reflect on the crisis in order to learn how to prevent and/ or better manage the crisis in the future.

2.2 Connection between CSR and crisis communication

In conjunction with crisis communication endeavours, CSR communication plays a significant role in swaying stakeholders' opinions in the three crisis stages previously discussed. Extant literature discusses the importance of CSR communication before, during and after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). If stakeholders are displeased with an organisation's socially responsible behaviour, they will invoke a challenge crisis, demanding the organisation to change its way of conducting operations in order to meet external demands by aligning moral and social values with stakeholder expectations (Coombs, 2010). If the organisation fails to adequately respond to the challenge crisis, the demands will be brought into the public light, inflicting reputational damage. Once the crisis becomes active, stakeholders will consider the organisation's past CSR efforts, where a short CSR history leads to higher stakeholder scepticism and a long CSR history might serve as a reputational buffer, resulting in a halo effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Moreover, using past CSR efforts to excuse the organisation's misdoings in the present is a risk because, as Coombs (2010, p. 12) states, "any value or issue used to build a reputation can be used to attack that same reputation." This is exemplified in Sohn and Lariscy's (2015) experiment. Their findings suggest that, during a crisis, an organisation's alleged commitments to CSR can potentially damage reputational assets rather than protect them, referring to this phenomenon as a "boomerang effect" (p. 2). As such, organisations must consider the

possible positive and negative ramifications and outcomes of undergoing CSR efforts, while simultaneously managing effective CSR communication.

2.3 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Due to the multitude of factors that can lead to the formation of a crisis, this inherently means that there is a multitude of ways to approach and manage a crisis as well. With roots in Weiner's Attribution Theory (1986), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) posits that the effectiveness of a crisis response is shaped and determined by the nature of the reputational threat. Coombs (2007) discerns three main factors that form a reputational threat: initial crisis responsibility, prior relational reputation, and crisis history. Additionally, Table 1 presents eight guidelines for crisis response strategies. The guidelines differ depending on the cluster the crisis pertains to, as well as the valence of the organisation's background.

Table 1

SCCT crisis response strategy guidelines

1. Informing and adjusting information alone can be enough when crises have minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises), no history of similar crises and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
2. Victimage can be used as part of the response for workplace violence, product tampering, natural disasters and rumors.
3. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises) coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
4. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), which have no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
5. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
6. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility (preventable crises) regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation.
7. The deny posture crisis response strategies should be used for rumor and challenge crises, when possible.
8. Maintain consistency in crisis response strategies. Mixing deny crisis

response strategies with either the diminish or rebuild strategies will erode
the effectiveness of the overall response.

Stakeholders attribute responsibility based on the preventability of the crisis. The more preventable the crisis, the more responsibility stakeholders attribute to the organisation, and vice versa. Furthermore, crisis types can be categorised into three clusters (Coombs, 2007). Firstly, the victim cluster is defined by events outside of the organisation's control, such as a natural disaster, where even the organisation itself may be a potential victim. In the case of such a crisis occurring, little responsibility is attributed to the organisation due to the lack of control the organisation has over factors outside of its sphere of influence. Secondly, the accidental cluster is composed of crises related to, for instance, technical errors and accidents. While the accident may have been prevented, the event was most likely unintended by the organisation. Lastly, the intentional or purposeful cluster represents the most preventable type of crisis. Events under this cluster include human-error misdeeds, such as a product being recalled due to poor quality, or mismanagement of employees. Given the preventability of this type of event, stakeholders attribute the most responsibility to events pertaining to this cluster.

The prior relational reputation and crisis history factors fall under the same umbrella. Coombs (2007) describes them as intensifying factors, with both factors displaying "a direct effect on the reputational threat that is separate from crisis responsibility" (p. 167). Prior relational reputation relates to the organisation's reputation with its stakeholders prior to the crisis emerging. If the relationship is unfavourable prior to the crisis, the organisation could potentially face additional challenges. Conversely, a favourable prior relational reputation tends to act as a buffer to the organisation's reputation in times of crisis. Organisational crisis history refers to whether the organisation has faced a similar crisis in the past. If it has, this suggests that the organisation has been dealing with an ongoing, unresolved issue for a certain amount of time.

2.4 CSR history constituting a reputational threat in a crisis

Alongside the three variables that shape a reputational threat discussed by Coombs (2007), literature suggests that CSR history can potentially affect reputational assets as well. Due to the prominence of CSR in organisational endeavours, it can be expected that CSR history constitutes another factor that might threaten organisational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Ham & Kim, 2017), where a long CSR history can shield the organisation from reputational harm and a short CSR history might cause scepticism among stakeholders. Although the relationship between CSR efforts and organisational crises has been explored (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009), the focus was primarily placed on how external stakeholders, such as the public, perceived the organisation during or after a crisis.

A gap in knowledge is highlighted by the lack of empirical research conducted from the perspective of the organisation, specifically about the crisis communication strategies when CSR history also plays a role in the decision-making processes of the organisation. This study aims to fill this gap by determining how organisational CSR history is used in crisis communication strategies. For this, corporate communication professionals were interviewed to determine their approach to four fictive crisis scenarios.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and procedure

To learn how CSR efforts and crisis communication strategies are interrelated, a qualitative experimental design was used. Studies in the CSR communication niche have focused on consumers in the pursuit of determining optimal CSR communication approaches (Gálvez-Sánchez et. al, 2024; Kim, 2017; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009), or interviewed communication professionals to determine their perspectives on CSR communication efforts and crisis management (Eweje & Sakaki, 2015; Tworzydło et. al, 2020). In this study, corporate communication professionals were interviewed (n = 12) to determine their approach to four fictive crisis scenarios where organisational CSR history plays an integral role in the crisis communication strategy. Interviews were chosen as the data collection method because the level of depth required for understanding the decisions behind the crisis communication strategies could not have been adequately explored in other forms.

After signing an informed consent form, participants were presented with four documents which contained general information about the organisation, the crisis, and three pieces of information displayed in bullet points. The three bullet points presented the organisation's prior relational reputation, crisis history and CSR history. Participants were tasked to assume the role of a spokesperson for a fictive foreign multinational organisation that operates in the textile manufacturing industry. The same organisation with the same background information was presented across all scenarios. The reason behind using a fictive organisation was to eliminate any prior bias or knowledge that participants may have had about a real organisation or a real crisis that occurred in the past. The four variables the crisis scenarios were based on are initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, prior relational reputation, and CSR history. Fictive crisis scenarios

were used because crisis communication strategies are more effective when they are based on scientific evidence (Coombs, 2007). Although the scenarios are fictive, the information they contain, such as the company background and the variables, were created using real and/ or scientific evidence in order to make the scenarios as credible as possible. Additionally, using fictive scenarios makes it possible to determine how the SCCT crisis response strategy guidelines (see Table 1) intertwine with the crisis communication strategies discussed by participants.

After each individual scenario, participants were asked to share their thoughts and approaches to conducting damage control and to reason their answers. Due to the open nature of interpreting the scenarios, no topic list was used. Instead¸ the interviewer asked the participant to elaborate on their answers until all relevant topics were sufficiently elaborated upon. Once the scenarios were sufficiently discussed, participants were asked about how long they have been working in the field of corporate communication, as well as what their current or most recent job position is. After the interview, participants were thanked for their time and contribution and were asked if they had any additional remarks or questions.

3.2 The four scenarios

In the first two scenarios (see Appendices A and B) the crisis consisted of an earthquake striking several of the organisation's facilities, leading to them halting operations in the region while the facilities were being reinstated. This crisis type represents the initial crisis responsibility variable, more specifically the victim cluster discussed in literature; in other words, the organisation could not have prevented or otherwise influenced the crisis (Coombs, 2007). In the other two scenarios (see Appendices C and D), the crisis pertains to the intentional cluster, where the organisation is under scrutiny after a news article makes allegations about abuse of workers' rights at several of their manufacturing plants. The choice of using the two clusters was made in

order to determine the effect that initial crisis responsibility has on the crisis communication approach. Although the accidental cluster is also discussed in literature (Coombs, 2007), the decision not to include it in this study was due to the fear that participants might feel overloaded with information. Additionally, the duration of the interviews might have deterred participants from taking part in the study.

The organisation had a background of positive performance in the first and third scenarios, and a background of negative performance in the second and fourth scenarios. As Coombs (2007) discusses, prior relational reputation and crisis history are factors that intensify the reputational threat an organisation faces during a crisis. In the first and third scenarios, the prior relational reputation with stakeholders was positive, while in the second and fourth scenarios it was negative. Similarly, the organisation faced no similar crises in the past in the first and third scenarios, while there occurred a similar crisis in both the second and fourth scenarios. In the second scenario, a flood occurred in a region different from the one the recent earthquake occurred in and, in the fourth scenario, the organisation was put under scrutiny because other organisations in the same domain were accused of mistreating their employees. Following the allegations in the fourth scenario, the fictive organisation published a video of one of their manufacturing plants, where workers were portrayed as being happy. Lastly, CSR history was expressed in the first and third scenarios as the organisation having made several donations to farmers, having started and continuously working on a housing project for impoverished families for the past 13 years, and releasing transparency reports for the past 20 years. In the second and fourth scenarios, the organisation had only made one donation, the housing project had only started three years prior, and the organisation had been releasing transparency reports only for the past five years. In their scenario-based study, Vanhamme and Grobben (2009) expressed a short CSR history using a history of one year and a long history of 10 years. This study uses greater values because, over

time, stakeholders have placed more emphasis on CSR efforts, especially before and during crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Kim, 2017; Janssen et al., 2015), thus a longer history of socially responsible efforts is likely required for this factor to affect crisis communication strategies and become a potential reputational threat in times of crisis.

Figures 1 and 2 showcase the first and fourth scenarios, respectively. The company's description – the first paragraph - was kept consistent across all four scenarios. The text describing the crisis was kept consistent across the scenarios, with the first and third scenarios containing the same text. The same notion applied to the second and fourth scenarios. Lastly, the bullet points describing the reputational threats were the same in the first and third scenarios, displaying a favourable background, whereas the second and fourth scenarios displayed an unfavourable background. All scenarios can be found in the appendix section.

Figure 1

The first scenario

PRISC Crisis case

PRISC was founded in 1993 in France and operates in the textile manufacturing industry. PRISC processes raw materials, such as cotton and polyester, and sells the processed materials to businesses who operate in industries such as fashion and furniture, among others. Its corporate values include integrity, transparency, community, quality and sustainability. PRISC's mission is to build strong partnerships with its clients by developing high quality and sustainable fabrics.

Over time, PRISC has opened manufacturing plants across East Asia and South America, offering promising job opportunities to locals. Currently, PRISC cooperates with over 40 clients worldwide.

In 2024, an earthquake struck and damaged several of PRISC's manufacturing facilities in East Asia. PRISC has released a public statement in which they highlight the halting of operations in the region due to the earthquake rendering the facilities unusable for some time, and that the earthquake struck outside of work hours, so no physical harm was done to anyone. Stakeholders have various stances: the public turns to social media to extend its support for PRISC; PRISC's clients remain patient while PRISC reinstates its facilities; activists remain passive.

Prior to the earthquake…

- … PRISC has upheld **good** relationships with its stakeholders. Clients are **happy** with how PRISC manages its operations. Activists viewed PRISC in a **positive** light, based on the company's commitments to socially responsible efforts. Based on their social media presence, the public perceived PRISC, broadly speaking, **positively**.

- … PRISC **has not** faced crises similar to this in the past.

- … PRISC has made **several** donations – in forms of equipment and/ or money - to farmers who work on the plantations PRISC buys raw materials from. Additionally, starting from **2011**, PRISC has been working on housing projects for impoverished families in the areas in which its manufacturing plants are located. PRISC has been releasing yearly transparency reports for the past **20** years, where they discuss and detail their commitment to long-term goals for

social and environmental responsibility and making quality products, highlighting

the importance of the company's cooperation with its clients and compliance to

governmental regulations and laws.

You take over the role of a spokesperson for PRISC. Based on the presented information,

how do you tackle this situation in order to best protect PRISC's reputation?

Figure 2

The fourth scenario

PRISC Crisis case

PRISC was founded in 1993 in France and operates in the textile manufacturing industry.

PRISC processes raw materials, such as cotton and polyester, and sells the processed materials to

businesses who operate in industries such as fashion and furniture, among others. Its corporate

values include integrity, transparency, community, quality and sustainability. PRISC's mission is

to build strong partnerships with its clients by developing high quality and sustainable fabrics.

Over time, PRISC has opened manufacturing plants across East Asia and South America,

offering promising job opportunities to locals. Currently, PRISC cooperates with over 40 clients

worldwide.

In 2024, PRISC faced backlash over alleged abuse of worker's rights at five of their

manufacturing plants. In an article, journalists have reported people working in "awful

conditions, usually without proper training, for long hours and little compensation".

Stakeholders have various stances: the public turns to social media to express its distaste for PRISC; PRISC's clients are debating whether maintaining relationships with PRISC can lead to reputational damage for their own company; activists are calling for PRISC boycotts; the government of PRISC's country of origin questions the legality of the company's operations and demands a report for the past five years of the company's operation.

Prior to the allegations…

- … PRISC has upheld **bad** relationships with its stakeholders. Clients are **unhappy** with how PRISC manages its operations. Activists viewed PRISC in a **negative** light, based on the company's commitments to socially responsible efforts. Based on their social media presence, the public perceived PRISC, broadly speaking, **negatively**.

- … PRISC **has** faced crises similar to this in the past. Seven years ago, other companies in the same industry faced public outburst over unethical labour conditions. Naturally, PRISC was called into question as well. PRISC published a video of one of their manufacturing plants to show that their workers are content, assuring stakeholders that it does not partake in unethical labour practices.

- … PRISC has made **one** donation – in forms of equipment and money - to farmers who work on the plantations PRISC buys raw materials from. Additionally, starting from **2021**, PRISC has been working on housing projects for impoverished families in the areas in which its manufacturing plants are located. PRISC has been releasing yearly transparency reports for the past **5** years, where they discuss and detail their commitment to long-term goals for

social and environmental responsibility and making quality products, highlighting

the importance of the company's cooperation with its clients and compliance to

governmental regulations and laws.

You take over the role of a spokesperson for PRISC. Based on the presented information,

how do you tackle this situation in order to best protect PRISC's reputation?

3.3 Sampling

Using a purposive sampling approach, participants were recruited through the social media platform LinkedIn which, due to the platform's affordances, made it possible to determine the past professional experience of the participants. Any potential participant with at least six months of experience in the field of corporate communication was reached out to with an invitation via the platform's built-in chat system. Corporate communication professionals were deemed to be the most adequate units of observation because of their expertise and because the purpose of this study was to determine how communication strategies might change when reputational threat factors also change.

During the recruiting process, participants were assured that they would not have to speak on behalf of their employer(s), nor discuss anything about their past and/ or current work experience unless they felt comfortable doing so. In either case, any personally identifiable information was anonymised. Additionally, two of the 12 interviews were held in Romanian. Both the researcher and the two participants in question are native Romanians and, although given the option to choose between speaking English and Romanian during the interview, the participants preferred to speak Romanian. This may affect the interpretation of results due to the language barrier. The other 10 interviews were held in English.

Table 2

Participant overview

Participant	Years of experience	Current/ most recent job position
Participant 1	3	Online communication advisor
Participant 2	5.5	External communication officer
Participant 3	10	Head of media relations
Participant 4	30	Senior of communications
Participant 5	4	Reputation manager
Participant 6	4.5	Spokesperson to the executive board
Participant 7	5.5	Strategic communications consultant
Participant 8	3.5	Marketing communications specialist
Participant 9	34	Global head of communications
Participant 10	15	Deputy head of communications
Participant 11	22	Spokesperson
Participant 12	5	Communication advisor

3.4 Analysis

To analyse the transcripts, a codebook containing eight codes was created (see Table 3). The codebook contained two codes for each variable used in the scenarios, with each variable either shielding or harming the organisation's reputation. In other words, four codes represented contexts in which the variable would shield the organisation from reputational damage, while the other four codes represented contexts in which the variable might harm the organisation's reputation. The frequency of the codes was used to discern themes and patterns in the data.

A combination of deductive and inductive approaches was used to create the codebook.

Extant literature on crisis communication (Coombs, 2007) and CSR communication during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Janssen et al., 2015; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015) was examined to determine how reputational threats can affect organisational reputation during a crisis. Once the interviews were transcribed, codes were concretely defined using the raw data. This method for creating the codes was used because, at least to the knowledge of the researcher, qualitative experimental studies of this type have not been done in the past, at least not in the crisis communication niche.

To ensure intercoder reliability, a second coder was tasked with also coding two of the interview transcripts. A substantial agreement resulted, with a Cohen's Kappa value of 0.62 (Landis & Koch, 1977). Given the openness of the data collection procedure and the lack of a topic list, the researcher deems this value to be sufficient and the codebook to be reliable for the analysis.

Table 3

Codebook

Reputational threat	*Code*	*Code definition*	*Example quotes*
Initial crisis responsibility	**1** - Crisis responsibility shields from reputational harm	Reputation remains unharmed due to circumstances of crisis occurrence	"It's an earthquake so they're not at fault."
	2 - Crisis responsibility damages reputation	Reputation gets harmed due to circumstances of crisis occurrence	"You also have to understand who to blame for those things that usually you're trying not to blame yourself, but you try to externalize the blame."

Prior relational reputation	**3** - Prior relational reputation shields from reputational harm	Reputation remains unharmed due to favourable stakeholder reputation	".. if you have a good reputation, you can take a hit."
	4 - Prior relational reputation damages reputation	Reputation gets harmed due to unfavourable stakeholder reputation	"The only issue is that when you have negative coverage already or a negative brand image, it means that you're going to have much more negative coverage to begin with."
Crisis history	**5** - Crisis history shields from reputational harm	Reputation remains unharmed due to no similar crises in the past	"Anyone can be in a situation where something went wrong in the past and we all know we all make mistakes. But it's all about how we learn from our mistakes and how do we correct them properly."
	6 - Crisis history damages reputation	Reputation gets harmed due to a similar crisis in the past	"I think that's the only thing, people wouldn't believe you if you said it's just an incident or it's not credible because it happened in the past as the people know."
CSR history	**7** - CSR history shields from reputational harm	Reputation remains unharmed due to long CSR history	"You do refer to your transparency records. You say that you're gonna be even more thorough in your next reports…"
	8 - CSR history damages reputation	Reputation gets harmed due to short CSR history	"So this is why I said that the donation was not really important because, well, it's not really important. It's about wasting your money because it's not going to affect your reputation in a positive way."

4. Results

4.1 Results of the first scenario

In the first scenario, the organisation faced an earthquake at some of their facilities, had a positive prior relational reputation, faced no similar crisis in the past and had a long CSR history. Participants 1, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 9 were quick to point out that the earthquake was outside of the organisation's control, thus the organisation should not be held accountable for the occurrence of the crisis. This aspect would be used in proactive external communication, such as keeping stakeholders informed of how operations are being reinstated in the area affected by the earthquake. However, participants 6, 8, 9 and 10 brought up the fact that the buildings might not have been earthquake-proof, which might lead to a higher blame attribution of the organisation. Participant 8, who was the only participant to claim to have a technical work background, stated that "…it depends if you have also technical like background. It's not the first thing to come up." This participant argued that the crisis communication strategy should account for deflecting blame in case stakeholders blame the organization for not earthquake-proofing their facilities. This implies that the non-communication background expertise of the crisis manager can also influence the crisis communication strategy.

Generally, participants stated that they would take a proactive yet relaxed approach, arguing that the company's favourable background, and especially positive relational reputation prior to the crisis, will act as a buffer for the organisation's reputation. This is exemplified by code 1 being present 15 times across the first scenario, with the second most frequent code being code 3 (see Table 4). As Participant 7 states:

> I think what makes a difference here, I guess, is that they are building on a very good reputation already or a solid reputation. If their reputation was very fragile, they would

have maybe had to take a more extensive strategy.

Participants 3 and 4 argued that there is not even a crisis at all, only a temporary halting in operations that has little to no chance of affecting reputation, again due to the low crisis attribution. CSR history was briefly touched upon by Participant 2 who stated that they would use the organisation's CSR history in their public messaging to highlight the organisation's ongoing record of transparency and social responsibility. Other than that, participants did not emphasise the organisation's CSR history as an influential factor in the crisis communication process.

Table 4

Code frequency per scenario

Code	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
1 - Crisis responsibility shields from reputational harm	15	18	17	13
2 - Crisis responsibility damages reputation	3	5	5	3
3 - Prior relational reputation shields from reputational harm	6	12	13	19
4 - Prior relational reputation damages reputation	0	7	0	13
5 - Crisis history shields from reputational harm	1	9	2	4
6 - Crisis history damages	0	5	1	3

reputation				
7 - CSR history shields from reputational harm	6	9	7	9
8 - CSR history damages reputation	0	4	2	7

4.2 Results of the second scenario

In the second scenario, the organisation faced an earthquake at some of their facilities, had a negative prior relational reputation, faced a similar crisis in the past and had a short CSR history. Same as in the previous scenario, participants quickly drew attention to the fact that the cause of the crisis was outside of the organisation's control, an aspect that should deflect blame away from the organisation. Differently from the first scenario, prior relational reputation was discussed a lot more. While in the previous scenario, the positive prior relation reputation acted as a shield for the organisation's reputation, participants argued that the credibility of the company deteriorated as a result of the negative reputational history. Participant 5 expresses this sentiment as such:

> But if your basis is not good like you have a bad reputation, any other crisis that comes along, it's much more difficult to get out of that… I think in this case when you don't have good reputation or a good relationship with your stakeholders, you don't have a lot of credibility.

Participants argued that they would use more proactive and calculated approaches than in the first scenario, framing it as a turning point for the organisation's reputation. This would be done through, for instance, conducting internal investigations of the damaged facilities and being publicly transparent about the process and findings of the investigations. Participant 10 emphasised the importance of being proactive no matter what the results of the investigation are: "it's best that

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if there's any negative information about the company, it's best to bring it out yourself because then you have control over the messaging even though it's not positive about yourself."

Although the CSR history was short in this scenario, participants 1 and 9 aimed to use this as an opportunity to revitalise the organisation's reputation by stating it will commit to more meaningful CSR efforts in the future. Participant 9 would "really focus on the fact that we're sorry that we haven't done more in the past", and participant 1 stated: "So as I see it, as bad as this is, I think here there is also an opportunity for PRISC to turn this event for the good by stepping up." On the other hand, fearing stakeholder scepticism about the organisation's true commitments to CSR, Participant 8 stated:

> Because in these times, the more things happen, the more social resonance they have, and the more people have a memory for what happened and how the companies reacted. So the fact that they did one donation is not enough, it's not going to stand. It's almost irrelevant for this case.

Despite these different views on utilising CSR history in the crisis communication strategy, participants 1, 8 and 9 agreed that transparency reports are important, and that the next transparency report should contain information about how the company will ensure the health and safety of its workers. Regarding the amount of time the organisation has been releasing transparency reports for, participant 3 argued that the "difference between five and 20 years is miniscule.", later stating that CSR efforts are expected of any organisation no matter what.

The similar crisis from the past would be used in the crisis communication strategy when it was being framed in a positive light. This is exemplified in Participant 4's statement: "I would mention clearly that we had this crisis seven years ago. But we managed then to start operations after a short while, and we hope that we will be able to do it this time again." Interestingly, because

of the similar crisis in the past, participant 10 argued that issuing a quick response is beneficial, stating that there is little time to conduct internal investigations:

> In this case I would imagine that the public outrage after the incident is much higher because media will conclude 'look, this is the second time this has happened. This is a lousy company.' And you can already imagine the headlines. So, the strategy will be much more of a swift response. Instead of taking your time to do your internal checks, you probably don't have the time for it, because the external world will expect an explanation. The later you do so, the more damaging it will be.

4.3 Results of the third scenario

In the third scenario, the organisation faced allegations of abuse of workers' rights at some of their facilities, had a positive prior relational reputation, faced no similar crisis in the past and had a long CSR history. Despite the organisation's favourable background, participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10 were quick to suggest an internal investigation because, they argued, the allegations must be debunked before issuing a public response. The investigation would also provide the organisation more time to draft an adequate public statement, as Participant 6 argued: "By showing that you are willing to investigate, you also buy yourself some time. Because an immediate response is not always the best solution from a communication perspective." Additionally, participants 5 and 10 argued that the organisation should communicate openly about the investigation's results so that the narrative can be controlled more easily.

Participants 8 and 9 argued that apologising for the situation should be the first step in the response strategy. As Participant 9 stated: "Accept the guilt, not with those words, but say OK, we're sorry that there seems to be situations where we haven't handled situations properly." This response likely stems from the fact that the organisation is responsible for the crisis, thus

increasing the blame attribution of the organisation.

More so than the first scenario, here the positive prior relational reputation acted as a reputational buffer, which resulted in a halo effect. As such, most participants stated that they would frame this event as atypical, and that they will keep being transparent with stakeholders about the internal investigations that are occurring. A quote from Participant 5 encapsulates this sentiment:

> And if you just have prior good reputation, it's likely that people will give you the benefit of the doubts at first… And I think if you had a good reputation before all this happens, which is the case. You can survive these kinds of allegations. You have some credibility.

A point of disagreement came from whether to highlight the organisation's CSR history in the response strategy or not. On the one hand, participants 2, 7, 9 and 11 argued that it might be beneficial to showcase that the organisation has been socially responsible in the past, thus framing the allegations as improbable or untrue. Participant 9 argues to "put the spotlight more on the good things done in the past, which are clearly already outlined, and which should be mentioned again." On the other hand, participants 3 and 8 feared that the organisation's true commitment to CSR efforts might come under scrutiny by stakeholders, as exemplified in participant 8's quote: "Because if we're saying that they have been releasing transparency reports for the past 20 years, in this case there was no transparency." In either case, participants preferred to communicate ambiguously, providing surface-level details on the ongoing internal investigations. This would be done because participants do not want to reveal information that is either untrue or damaging to the organisation without knowing all the details beforehand.

4.4 Results of the fourth scenario

In the fourth scenario, the organisation faced allegations of abuse of workers' rights at

some of their facilities, had a negative prior relational reputation, faced a similar crisis in the past and had a short CSR history. Similarly to the second scenario, participants would take a more calculated approach to stakeholder engagement. Due to the negative prior relational reputation, each individual stakeholder group will receive more attention than they would in the scenarios where the prior relational reputation was positive.

Although most participants stated that this is the worst scenario possible due to the unfavourable background and high crisis responsibility, with Participant 1 stating:" we cannot really make it that much worse than it already is.", Participant 8 argued that the third scenario was, in fact, more damaging to the organisation's reputation than the fourth:

> This case (the third) is very hard because it creates contradiction. It creates distraction in the narrative that has been going on. So, this is why I perceive this (the third) as the worst case scenario in the kind of frame that we have been talking about.

Furthermore, regarding the fourth scenario, Participant 8 argued that "you need to understand that the clients' resentment is not gonna affect them on a personal way, but rather on a business way. It's not even more about crisis communication. It's about business itself. It's about selling or not." This implies that, although the company is generally perceived negatively and has an unfavourable background, the public backlash due to the allegations is more severe in the scenario where the organisation had a favourable background.

Participants stated that being transparent to both internal and external stakeholders was a priority, arguing that the prior relational reputation was the most significant factor in determining their crisis communication strategy. The attributed crisis responsibility was high, prompting Participant 3 to state:

> If the reputation was already bad, clients that were already not very happy with the
>
> company might use this as an opportunity to do PR for themselves and say, we quit. We
>
> don't work with PRISC anymore because we're very good people, and they're not.

The similar crisis that happened in the past further harmed the organisation's reputation. Participant 10 argued that this is an internal problem which cannot be solved only through external communication:

> This is really a moment to emphasize the significance of the situation internally, because, if
>
> the management isn't going to act now, then they never will…arrange external advice on
>
> the issue, because apparently your own CSR team is not capable to get things sorted, since
>
> the company has faced similar crises, then you need to get your external support.

In a similar vein, the organisation's short CSR history was deemed damaging to its reputation. As Participant 5 states: "Well, it's very small and if all the other things happened, a donation like that doesn't seem genuinely right. It seems more like 'window dressing' or 'green washing' kind of thing." Stakeholders could interpret the short CSR history as a way of diverting attention from organisational misdeeds, such as the crisis at hand. As such, participants chose to avoid sharing anything regarding the company's past in any stakeholder communication endeavour.

As a measure for debunking the allegations, participants chose to either start internal investigations at the facilities where the allegations originate from, or to invite journalists themselves for a tour of the facilities. The latter option would display the organisation's willingness to cooperate, as Participant 10 argues:

> And even if you show these journalists around, they just won't just turn around and change
>
> their tone, because they are a journalist, they typically don't immediately or will not

immediately rectify a story if he thinks he has solid proof of his statements, but at least you

can solve them in a bit and show that you're transparent and that you're willing to

cooperate.

4.5 Summary of results

The crisis communication strategies differed across all four scenarios, but some patterns

emerged. In the first two scenarios, a lot of emphasis was placed on the fact that the occurrence of

the crisis was outside of the organisation's control, thus attributing almost no blame to the

organisation. Additionally, CSR history was used to display the organisation's continued

commitment to socially responsible efforts in the first scenario, whereas in the second scenario

there was dissensus on how or whether to even use this factor in the response strategy.

In the other two scenarios, where the responsibility attribution was high, the crisis

communication strategy shifted from externalising the cause of the crisis to instead prioritising

transparent communication with stakeholders while internal investigations were performed. In the

third scenario, some participants suggested using the organisation's CSR history in the response

strategy, while others were concerned about raising suspicions about the organisation's genuine

commitment to CSR efforts if the CSR history was communicated to stakeholders. In the fourth

scenario, the organisation's CSR history was completely ignored in the crisis communication

strategy due to the possibility of the public framing the short history of CSR efforts as an attempt at

greenwashing and diverting attention from the current crisis.

5. Discussion

Reputational assets are one of the most important resources that an organisation can have. Although reputation is intangible, it is nonetheless a factor that directly affects organisational performance. It is therefore imperative that organisations adopt adequate measures to build and protect their reputational assets, lest organisational issues or crises risk damaging reputation. This qualitative experimental study aimed to determine the connection between organisational CSR history and crisis communication strategies using four fictive crisis scenarios.

The fields of CSR communication and crisis communication have been extensively studied from a quantitative perspective (Gálvez-Sánchez et. al, 2024; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Although these insights strengthen our understanding of these fields, these studies are performed from the perspective of outside stakeholders, with a lack of empirical research conducted from the perspective of the organisation undergoing a crisis. As Coombs (2010) argues:

> Much existing crisis communication research is speculative, simply ideas researchers think might work based on cursory analyses of case studies. The cases focus on how the crisis communication was enacted and evaluate its effectiveness based on some criteria of the researchers' choosing. Too little of the research is tested to determine the validity of the recommendations. (p. 720)

In other words, research within the crisis communication sphere focuses too much on speculations of how crisis communication should be handled instead of concrete, evidence-based scientific proof. This is not to say that extant knowledge on crisis communication is flawed because of supposed subjectiveness in their scopes. Rather, the argument here is that crisis managers should approach crises using strategies that have been scientifically proven to succeed (Coombs, 2007).

By interviewing corporate communication professionals, insights into the interrelatedness between crisis communication strategies and organisational CSR history were discerned. These insights will hopefully aid crisis managers in their future crisis management endeavours.

5.1 Discussion of the first scenario

In the first scenario, CSR history was overshadowed by the organisation's positive prior relational reputation and low crisis responsibility attribution. Coombs's (2007) informing strategy, which aims to keep stakeholders informed when the organisation's crisis responsibility is low (Table 1), encapsulates the participants' response strategy almost entirely. Because of this¸ it is difficult to gauge whether CSR history was a determinant factor in the crisis communication strategies the participants would use. It is likely that the organisation's long CSR history acted as a reputational buffer which, even though it would not be explicitly highlighted in the response strategy, increased the legitimacy of the organisation's claims of continuous dedication to socially responsible efforts. Using CSR history in the crisis communication strategy would have likely increased the effectiveness of the response strategy, as literature has shown that organisations with a longer CSR history benefitted more when using CSR in their crisis communication strategy (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). However, it can be assumed that the low crisis responsibility - pertaining to the victim cluster (Coombs, 2007) - had a more significant impact on how the crisis is approached from a communication perspective than the long CSR history.

Although not formally measured in this study, the researcher noticed that the first scenario was discussed least by most participants. It is unclear precisely why this was the case, but some participants described this case as an ideal situation and others stated that an organisation with such a favourable background rarely, if ever, would exist. The simplicity of this scenario prompted some participants to state that there is not even a crisis at all. Thus, future qualitative experimental

studies should account for the order in which scenarios are presented or implement other measures to prevent this phenomenon from occurring.

5.2 Discussion of the second scenario

In the second scenario, participants again emphasised the low responsibility attributed to the organisation for the crisis occurrence. Some participants suggested conducting internal investigations to determine the true extent of the damage, possibly due to the organisation's low credibility as a result of its unfavourable background. Stakeholders experience stress during crises which can be alleviated by providing up-to-date information (Coombs, 2007). It is likely that this strategy was not required during the first scenario because, as participants have argued, public trust in the organisation diminishes when its prior relational reputation is negative. Thus, the investigation would showcase the organisation's commitment to resolving the crisis. In this regard, some participants argued that publicly apologising for the short CSR history is beneficial, promising to do better in the future. Using the short CSR history in the response strategy would have likely resulted in increased stakeholder scepticism (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Participant 3's argument that all organisations are expected to partake in CSR efforts implies that using CSR history in the crisis communication strategy would be ineffective, regardless of the organisation's background. This can be explained by the growing demand by stakeholders for organisations to be more sustainable and socially responsible, as Coombs (2010, p. 6) argues:

> In the last few years a growing number of organisations now call their social responsibility reports sustainability reports. The name change reflects the growing significance of sustainability as a CSR expectation. In turn, it can be argued that sustainability is increasing in importance as a criteria/expectation for reputations.

Thus, framing the organisation's short CSR history as a turning point in its commitment to CSR efforts might have beneficial impacts on the organisation's reputation. To this end, it can be argued that, alongside prior relational reputation and crisis history, CSR history can also act as an intensifying factor for the attributions of crisis responsibility.

In terms of CSR history, the approaches to this scenario closely resemble the rebuild crisis response strategies (see Table 1). As Coombs (2007, p. 172) argues, "Rebuild strategies are the main avenue for generating new reputational assets." This is reflected in the participants' suggestions of apologising for the lack of organisational CSR efforts, paired with promises to commit to these efforts more effectively in the future. The desired outcome of this crisis communication strategy is to rebuild reputation after a victim cluster crisis harms it. Thus, when faced with a crisis pertaining to the victim cluster, crisis managers can consider using a short CSR history to reinstate trust in stakeholders, framing it as a turning point for the organisation.

Interestingly, the time factor was brought up by a participant who stated that there is little time to conduct internal investigations, where a swift response would be more effective than waiting for the investigation results. In their framework on sustainability crises, Grunwald & Schwill (2020) argue that, if an organisation waits too long to issue a response, it has to not only explain how and why the incident happened, but also why the response took so long to be released. Although not formally studied nor discussed in this paper, it is possible that the time factor also influences crisis communication strategies.

5.3 Discussion of the third scenario

In the third scenario, internal investigations were quickly suggested by most participants. This contrasts with the first scenario, where no participant suggested an investigation even though

crisis responsibility attributed towards the organisation was different. This suggests that the need for information is greater in crises from the preventable cluster than in those from the victim cluster (Coombs, 2007). Similarly to the second scenario, participants argued that the investigation would provide the organisation more time to draft an adequate public response, again indicating the influence of the time factor in the crisis communication strategy.

Participants were confident that stakeholders would be more lenient towards the organisation despite the high blame attribution. Literature recognises that this halo effect can appear when CSR history is long (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). In this case, however, some participants argued that using the long CSR history in the response strategy might raise suspicions about the organisation's true commitment to CSR efforts. As such, based on participants' statements, the halo effect in this case is likely a result of the positive prior relational reputation rather than the long CSR history.

Although the organisation's background was the same in the first and third scenarios, participants approached the third scenario a lot more proactively by engaging with stakeholders more attentively and conducting internal investigations. Moreover, due to the crisis pertaining to the preventable cluster, some participants argued that apologising for the situation is the most beneficial course of action. These crisis communication strategies resemble another rebuilding strategy (Coombs, 2007) where, although the organisation has a favourable background, participants recognise the possible harm a crisis like this could inflict upon reputation. As such, by apologising and investigating the situation, the organisation displays its commitment to transparency and cooperation as an effort to rebuild trust with stakeholders.

An outlier among the participants was Participant 8 who, after inferring what the fourth case is about, mentioned that the third scenario is, in fact, worse than the fourth. Their argument is

solidified by examples of real companies that actively abuse workers' rights, yet still conduct operations despite the occasional public backlash. This implies that stakeholders will be more disappointed if an organisation with a favourable background mistreats employees than an organisation with an unfavourable background does so. In other words, a preventable crisis is less damaging to reputation when the organisation's background is already unfavourable. This is an interesting perspective that could be the foundation for future research in this direction.

5.4 Discussion of the fourth scenario

In the fourth scenario, participants focused primarily on stakeholders' needs. Similarly to the third scenario, participants insinuated that the problem is internal more than it is external. A preventable crisis exacerbated by an unfavourable background could have devastating effects on reputation (Coombs, 2007). Some participants also stated that the situation should have been brought to attention internally before the crisis emerged. This describes the pre-crisis stage, where information about possible causes of crises and how to avoid the occurrence of a crisis is gathered. (Coombs & Holladay 2010). The issue would be taken up internally because, as some participants argued, communication can only fix so many problems before it becomes redundant.

The negative prior relational reputation and unfavourable crisis history further intensified the blame attribution of the organisation. Participants would therefore employ another rebuilding strategy, where they would either conduct internal investigations, invite journalists to the facilities where the allegations originate from, or both. This would be an attempt at building the organisation's reputation from the ground up by displaying cooperation and transparency.

If the CSR history is used in the response strategy, stakeholders might interpret the short CSR history as an attempt at greenwashing or diverting attention from the crisis at hand (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Because of this, participants chose to avoid talking

about the organisation's past CSR efforts. This indicates that a short CSR history should not be used in the crisis communication strategy when a similar crisis happened in the past and the prior relational reputation is negative.

5.5 Answering the research question

The four fictive crisis scenarios sought to diversify the approach that the professionals would take to managing the crisis from a communication perspective. CSR history was constituted as a reputational threat during a crisis in conjunction with Coombs's (2007) three factors that fall under the same umbrella – initial crisis responsibility, prior relational reputation, and crisis history -, for the purpose of determining the interrelatedness of CSR history and crisis communication strategies. As such, the research question this study aimed to answer is: "What is the interrelatedness between CSR history and crisis communication strategies?"

This qualitative experimental study has determined that the type of crisis and the organisation's background determine the way in which CSR history is framed in crisis communication strategies.

When the crisis pertains to the victim cluster and the organisation has a favourable background, a long CSR history acts as a reputational buffer. However, its effects might be miniscule when compared to a positive prior relational reputation, which is more effective in avoiding reputational damage.

When the crisis pertains to the victim cluster and the organisation has an unfavourable background, a short CSR history could be framed as a turning point in the organisation's future commitments to CSR efforts. It should be noted, however, that consumer scepticism about the organisation's genuine commitments to CSR efforts can arise.

When the crisis pertains to the preventable cluster and the organisation has a favourable

background, using the CSR history in the crisis communication strategy might lead to consumer scepticism about the organisation's genuine commitments to CSR efforts.

When the crisis pertains to the preventable cluster and the organisation has an unfavourable background, utilising a short CSR history in the crisis response strategy might be interpreted as an attempt at greenwashing or diverting attention from the current crisis, thus further damaging reputation.

5.6 Limitations and future research

The two crisis types that were used in the scenarios were based on the victim and preventable clusters. Coombs (2007) also discusses the accidental cluster, where the blame attribution of organisations is minimal and "the event is considered unintentional or uncontrollable by the organization" (p. 167). In this cluster, the organisation unintentionally caused the crisis, in cases such as an equipment failure causing an accident. Although this cluster is significant in studying and better understanding the crisis communication discipline, it was not included in this study's design in fear of overloading participants with information during the interviews. Additionally, the increased expected time of conducting the interviews could have possibly discouraged participants from partaking in the study. The accidental cluster was slightly touched upon by participants, however, in the first scenario. Some participants mentioned that the facilities might not have been earthquake-proof, which could have increased the blame attributed to the organisation for the crisis occurrence. Even so, future research could study the accidental cluster as well.

Future research should also consider examining the role of the time factor in crisis situations. Participants have sometimes mentioned time as a significant factor that impacted the crisis communication strategies. As such, time might also constitute another reputational threat during a crisis, especially when the organisation does not respond within a timeframe expected by

stakeholders (Grunwald & Schwill, 2020).

6. Conclusion

This qualitative experimental study aimed to fill a gap in the current knowledge about the interrelatedness between CSR history and crisis communication. Results indicate that, during a crisis, CSR history should only be used in the response strategy when the organisation has a favourable background and has a low blame attribution. Under any other circumstance, stakeholders have a chance to become sceptical of the organisation, even if the CSR history is long.

To better determine the extent to which CSR history intertwines with crisis communication strategies, further research that encompasses the accidental cluster (Coombs, 2007) should be conducted as well. Additionally, this study sought to understand the decision-making processes of corporate communication professionals. Interviews were deemed the most appropriate form of data collection, but future research in this area could consider branching out to other study designs as well.

The insights of this study will hopefully aid crisis managers in their future crisis communication and crisis management endeavours. Obviously, the crisis communication strategies laid out by the participants of this study, as well as the conclusions drawn based on these strategies, should be assessed critically before being adapted to a real crisis. The crisis communication discipline requires evidence-based scientific research for crisis managers to manage crisis situations most effectively (Coombs, 2007), but crisis managers must put into balance the ramifications of their decisions before committing to a crisis communication strategy. To this end, crisis managers, corporate communication professionals and public relations scholars are encouraged to ponder over the results and implications of this study so that our knowledge of the crisis communication discipline can further expand.

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8. Appendix

During the preparation of this work, I used no artificial intelligence tools.

8.1 Appendix A

The first crisis scenario

PRISC Crisis case

PRISC was founded in 1993 in France and operates in the textile manufacturing industry. PRISC processes raw materials, such as cotton and polyester, and sells the processed materials to businesses who operate in industries such as fashion and furniture, among others. Its corporate values include integrity, transparency, community, quality and sustainability. PRISC's mission is to build strong partnerships with its clients by developing high quality and sustainable fabrics. Over time, PRISC has opened manufacturing plants across East Asia and South America, offering promising job opportunities to locals. Currently, PRISC cooperates with over 40 clients worldwide.

In 2024, an earthquake struck and damaged several of PRISC's manufacturing facilities in East Asia. PRISC has released a public statement in which they highlight the halting of operations in the region due to the earthquake rendering the facilities unusable for some time, and that the earthquake struck outside of work hours, so no physical harm was done to anyone. Stakeholders have various stances: the public turns to social media to extend its support for PRISC; PRISC's clients remain patient while PRISC reinstates its facilities; activists remain

passive.

Prior to the earthquake…

- … PRISC has upheld **good** relationships with its stakeholders. Clients are **happy** with how PRISC manages its operations. Activists viewed PRISC in a **positive** light, based on the company's commitments to socially responsible efforts. Based on their social media presence, the public perceived PRISC, broadly speaking, **positively**.

- … PRISC **has not** faced crises similar to this in the past.

- … PRISC has made **several** donations – in forms of equipment and/ or money - to farmers who work on the plantations PRISC buys raw materials from. Additionally, starting from **2011**, PRISC has been working on housing projects for impoverished families in the areas in which its manufacturing plants are located. PRISC has been releasing yearly transparency reports for the past **20** years, where they discuss and detail their commitment to long-term goals for social and environmental responsibility and making quality products, highlighting the importance of the company's cooperation with its clients and compliance to governmental regulations and laws.

You take over the role of a spokesperson for PRISC. Based on the presented information, how do you tackle this situation in order to best protect PRISC's reputation?

8.2 Appendix B

The second crisis scenario

PRISC Crisis case

PRISC was founded in 1993 in France and operates in the textile manufacturing industry. PRISC processes raw materials, such as cotton and polyester, and sells the processed materials to businesses who operate in industries such as fashion and furniture, among others. Its corporate values include integrity, transparency, community, quality and sustainability. PRISC's mission is to build strong partnerships with its clients by developing high quality and sustainable fabrics. Over time, PRISC has opened manufacturing plants across East Asia and South America, offering promising job opportunities to locals. Currently, PRISC cooperates with over 40 clients worldwide.

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Prior to the earthquake…

- … PRISC has upheld **bad** relationships with its stakeholders. Clients are **unhappy** with how PRISC manages its operations. Activists viewed PRISC in a

negative light, based on the company's commitments to socially responsible efforts. Based on their social media presence, the public perceived PRISC, broadly speaking, **negatively**.

- … PRISC **has** faced crises similar to this in the past. Seven years ago, a flood stopped operations at a South American plant. Operations were briefly halted but now everything is back to normal.

- … PRISC has made **one** donation – in forms of equipment and money - to farmers who work on the plantations PRISC buys raw materials from. Additionally, starting from **2021**, PRISC has been working on housing projects for impoverished families in the areas in which its manufacturing plants are located. PRISC has been releasing yearly transparency reports for the past **5** years, where they discuss and detail their commitment to long-term goals for social and environmental responsibility and making quality products, highlighting the importance of the company's cooperation with its clients and compliance to governmental regulations and laws.

You take over the role of a spokesperson for PRISC. Based on the presented information, how do you tackle this situation in order to best protect PRISC's reputation?

8.3 Appendix C

The third crisis scenario

PRISC Crisis case

PRISC was founded in 1993 in France and operates in the textile manufacturing industry. PRISC processes raw materials, such as cotton and polyester, and sells the processed materials to businesses who operate in industries such as fashion and furniture, among others. Its corporate values include integrity, transparency, community, quality and sustainability. PRISC's mission is to build strong partnerships with its clients by developing high quality and sustainable fabrics. Over time, PRISC has opened manufacturing plants across East Asia and South America, offering promising job opportunities to locals. Currently, PRISC cooperates with over 40 clients worldwide.

In 2024, PRISC faced backlash over alleged abuse of worker's rights at five of their manufacturing plants. In an article, journalists have reported people working in "awful conditions, usually without proper training, for long hours and little compensation". Stakeholders have various stances: the public turns to social media to express its distaste for PRISC; PRISC's clients are debating whether maintaining relationships with PRISC can lead to reputational damage for their own company; activists are calling for PRISC boycotts; the government of PRISC's country of origin questions the legality of the company's operations and demands a report for the past five years of the company's operation.

Prior to the allegations…

- … PRISC has upheld **good** relationships with its stakeholders. Clients are **happy** with how PRISC manages its operations. Activists viewed PRISC in a **positive** light, based on the company's commitments to socially responsible efforts. Based on their social media presence, the public perceived PRISC, broadly speaking, **positively**.

- … PRISC **has not** faced crises similar to this in the past.

- … PRISC has made **several** donations – in forms of equipment and/ or money - to farmers who work on the plantations PRISC buys raw materials from. Additionally, starting from **2011**, PRISC has been working on housing projects for impoverished families in the areas in which its manufacturing plants are located. PRISC has been releasing yearly transparency reports for the past **20** years, where they discuss and detail their commitment to long-term goals for social and environmental responsibility and making quality products, highlighting the importance of the company's cooperation with its clients and compliance to governmental regulations and laws.

You take over the role of a spokesperson for PRISC. Based on the presented information, how do you tackle this situation in order to best protect PRISC's reputation?

8.4 Appendix D

The fourth crisis scenario

PRISC Crisis case

PRISC was founded in 1993 in France and operates in the textile manufacturing industry. PRISC processes raw materials, such as cotton and polyester, and sells the processed materials to businesses who operate in industries such as fashion and furniture, among others. Its corporate values include integrity, transparency, community, quality and sustainability. PRISC's mission is to build strong partnerships with its clients by developing high quality and sustainable fabrics. Over time, PRISC has opened manufacturing plants across East Asia and South America, offering promising job opportunities to locals. Currently, PRISC cooperates with over 40 clients worldwide.

In 2024, PRISC faced backlash over alleged abuse of worker's rights at five of their manufacturing plants. In an article, journalists have reported people working in "awful conditions, usually without proper training, for long hours and little compensation". Stakeholders have various stances: the public turns to social media to express its distaste for PRISC; PRISC's clients are debating whether maintaining relationships with PRISC can lead to reputational damage for their own company; activists are calling for PRISC boycotts; the government of PRISC's country of origin questions the legality of the company's operations and demands a report for the past five years of the company's operation.

Prior to the allegations…

- … PRISC has upheld **bad** relationships with its stakeholders. Clients are
  unhappy with how PRISC manages its operations. Activists viewed PRISC in a
  negative light, based on the company's commitments to socially responsible
  efforts. Based on their social media presence, the public perceived PRISC,
  broadly speaking, **negatively**.

- … PRISC **has** faced crises similar to this in the past. Seven years ago, other
  companies in the same industry faced public outburst over unethical labour
  conditions. Naturally, PRISC was called into question as well. PRISC published a
  video of one of their manufacturing plants to show that their workers are content,
  assuring stakeholders that it does not partake in unethical labour practices.

- … PRISC has made **one** donation – in forms of equipment and money - to
  farmers who work on the plantations PRISC buys raw materials from.
  Additionally, starting from **2021**, PRISC has been working on housing projects
  for impoverished families in the areas in which its manufacturing plants are
  located. PRISC has been releasing yearly transparency reports for the past **5**
  years, where they discuss and detail their commitment to long-term goals for
  social and environmental responsibility and making quality products, highlighting
  the importance of the company's cooperation with its clients and compliance to
  governmental regulations and laws.

You take over the role of a spokesperson for PRISC. Based on the presented information,
how do you tackle this situation in order to best protect PRISC's reputation?

8.5 Appendix E

Literature search log

Date	Database	Search string	Number of results
28.02.2024	Google Scholar	crisis response sustainability	3.150.000
02.04.2024	Google Scholar	CSR communication crisis	171.000
02.04.2024	Scopus	CSR communication crisis	152
15.04.2024	Google Scholar	situational crisis communication theory	877.000
15.04.2024	Google Scholar	CSR public relations	662.000
15.04.2024	Google Scholar	CSR crisis communication management	183.000
14.05.2024	Google Scholar	CSR as a boomerang	4.000
28.05.2024	Google Scholar	measure of agreement cohen's kappa	89.000