



UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Product-Harm Crisis Communication:
Examining the Combination of Message Framing,
Crisis severity, and Prior-Reputation

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S1731491

MASTER THESIS

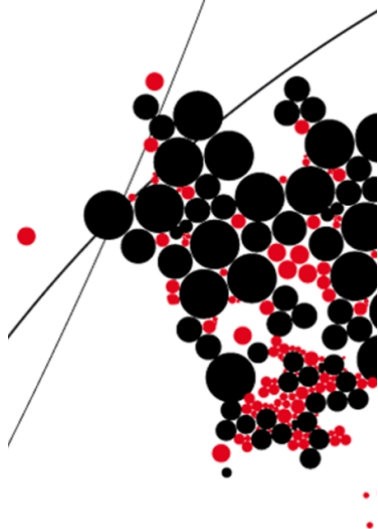
COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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Abstract

Aim: The current study gives insight on the interplay of message, crisis severity and prior-reputation during a product-harm crisis on consumers' trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions. **Method:** The results of this study were gathered by using a 2 (Framing: rational vs. emotional) x 2 (Severity: low vs. high) x 2 (Pre-crisis reputation: positive vs. negative) between-subjects experimental design. The three dependent variables were the stakeholders' trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions. Additionally, the product involvement was chosen as a covariate. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight fictitious crisis articles and then took part in an online survey. **Results:** The results revealed that the message framing does not influence the dependent measures. However, it was found that a positive pre-crisis reputation positively influences all the dependent variables. Furthermore, the current study found a significant effect of crisis severity on forgiveness, but not on trust and purchase intentions. Finally, this study also found an interaction effect between message framing and prior-reputation on forgiveness. **Practical implications:** Practitioners are advised to build a strong reputation before the crisis happens in order to protect the organization from negative crisis outcomes. Furthermore, this study stresses the importance of using an emotional framing in case of negative prior-reputation as it leads to higher forgiveness. **Conclusion:** The current study contributes to the field of research by presenting a valid basis of knowledge on crisis communication strategies and more specifically on the effects of message framing, crisis severity, and prior reputation.

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1. Introduction

Many organizations have to face a crisis at some point, causing both financial and reputational damages on the company. More specifically, product-harm crises can have devastating negative outcomes on a brand, its market share, and sales (Liu & Shankar, 2015). For instance, the American food chain Chipotle was hit by a severe E.Coli contamination last year that sickened 55 people. Despite the brand's public apology, this crisis hurt its profit by 82%, but also damaged its reputation. An insider from the company warned that a full recovery in sales and reputation would take years (Wahba, 2016). Another example of product crisis is the one currently faced by Samsung and its massive recall of the new Galaxy 7. Again, a Samsung insider said about the crisis that it directly impacted their products, brand, and trust with consumers (Lee, 2016).

These two examples emphasize how crises can sometime threaten companies' entire existence and mostly arise unexpectedly. Therefore, it is important for organizations to be ready to act immediately (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Coombs (2004) also emphasizes the importance for the crisis-response to be appropriate to the crisis at hand in order to minimize or repair reputational damage. Indeed, Pearson and Mitroff (1993) claim that « an organization is vulnerable to limitless types of crises » (p. 49) and organizations must decide how best to communicate about it by, for instance, using responses such as apology, denial or justification (Coombs, 2007).

Organizational crisis is defined as «a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and

means of resolution » (Person & Clair, 1998, p. 59). When a crisis happens, it endangers the organization's viability and reputation (Coombs, 2007). Despite the organization's activity and reputation, a crisis can also affect the consumers. This is the case in product-harm crisis, defined as an organizational crisis related to a particular brand, wherein products appear to be defective or even dangerous (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). This kind of crisis is expected to become more frequent due to the increasing complexity of products and the consumers' higher expectations (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). In crises situations, crisis communication is used to limit negative outcomes, and is defined as « the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation » (Coombs, 2010, p. 20).

Crisis-response strategies have already been studied over the years. However, the rise of product-harm crises has happened relentlessly in recent decades (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000), and it is this business reality and the disastrous effects that some crises have on companies nowadays that have prompted this study. Moreover, a gap remains in the literature concerning potential interactions between variables. The research aims to fill that gap by investigating the effect of message framing, crisis severity, and pre-crisis reputation, and their interaction during product-harm crises. While the independent variables presented in this study have been researched in the past individually, their interactions could have important influences on the outcomes of a crisis situation. Scholars have investigated the effects of message framing and tend to agree on the fact that the way a message is framed strongly influences its outcomes, potentially decreasing stakeholders' feelings of anger and increasing the organization's trustworthiness (Mayer

& Tormala, 2010; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Also, studies have been conducted and claim that the crisis severity influences the crisis outcomes, as the severity will affect the organization's perceived crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Finally, researchers suggest an organization pre-crisis reputation is a potential buffer against reputational damage during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). The chosen variables could have important individual and collective outcomes on a crisis situation, and yet their combination has not been investigated before. This shows a strong need for additional research in the subject.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to contribute to the field of crisis communication by investigating the impact of content framing, crisis severity, and pre-crisis reputation during a product-harm crisis with reference to their interactions together in a 2x2x2 experimental design. Important insights for practitioners could be derived by examining how content framing, if used appropriately, can influence crisis communication outcomes, depending on the crisis severity and the organization's prior reputation. These three variables are chosen to discover how their combination can impact consumers' forgiveness, purchase intentions and trust. Indeed, depending on how severe a crisis is, and how negative a pre-crisis reputation is, consumers could react differently to a rationally or emotionally framed message, strongly impacting the crisis outcomes. In general, the research question can be formulated as:

RQ: *To what extent do the framing of the message, in combination with the severity of the crisis, and the pre-crisis reputation influence consumers' trust of the organization,*

forgiveness, and purchase intentions towards the organization?

The theoretical framework is presented in the following chapter where the variables are discussed using an overview of previous studies, and the hypotheses are introduced. In the third chapter, the operationalization of the research method is discussed, describing the procedure and the participants. In the fourth chapter, the data and the results are analyzed. The potential interaction effects of the independent variables are presented in this chapter. The fifth chapter consists of the discussion of the result. Finally, the limitations of the study and its practical and theoretical implications are presented in chapter 6.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1.1 Organizational crisis

Organizational crises are now considered ordinary parts of business (Kim, 2013) and despite all the managers' efforts, most crises can not be prevented (Siomkos & Shrivastava, 1993). As Siomkos and Shrivastava (1993) said it, different events can trigger a crisis, such as product injuries, major technological accidents, hostile takeover attempts, environmental pollution incidents and sudden decline in demand for products, causing damage to human life, property and the natural environment. Crises widely vary in terms of crisis types, causes, and effects due to the increasingly complex society in which they operate (Moon & Rhee, 2012). If mishandled, an organizational crisis can lead to serious damage such as financial losses, public safety and reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, it is important for companies to use the appropriate crisis

strategy.

Pearson and Chair (1998) define an organizational crisis as “a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (p. 60). However, Moon & Rhee (2012) suggest that when defining a crisis, the public perception should be included, rather than only mentioning its devastating effects, as customers’ perception can strongly affect crisis outcomes. Therefore, they cite Coombs’ (2012) definition of an organizational crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens the organization’s performance and generates negative outcomes” (p.2), stressing the importance of the public perception of the event.

As a crisis could lead the affected organization into disrepute, its survival and the preservation of its reputation are closely tied to crisis management (Coombs, 2012; Robert & Lajtha, 2002; in Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013). Indeed, a crisis leads stakeholders to question the organization’s trustworthiness (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005) and to a decrease in consumers’ purchase intentions (Lyon & Cameron, 2004; Turk et al., 2012, in Clayes and Cauberghe, 2015). Coombs and Holladay (2002) also posit that the perceived responsibility for the crisis influences the damage of the organizations’ reputation. The more responsible the organization is perceived, the more severe is the reputational damage. Consequently, scholars claim that the ultimate goal of crisis communication management is to preserve and restore the relationship between an organization and its

public (Moon & Rhee, 2012). Organizations must restore their reputation and their stakeholders' trust. To do so, organizations often use different message framing and response strategies (Clayes and Cauberghe, 2014).

In the current research, one specific type of crisis is described—a product-harm crisis, as opposed to moral-harm crisis. On the first hand, moral-harm crises refer to social and ethical issues of organization, such as organizations' connection to child labor, discrimination, or environmental issues (Dutta & Pulling, 2011). On the other hand, product-harm crises refer to organizational crises related to a particular brand, wherein products appear to be defective or even dangerous (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). It includes defective products, product sabotage, and product misuse (Vassilikopoulou, Siomkos, Chatzipanagiotou & Pantouvakis, 2009). During a product-harm crisis, most of the financial loss is due to the damage in consumers' trust and perceptions of the brand, rather than by the possible costs of the product recall itself (Davidson & Worrell, 1992; Pruitt & Peterson, 1986; in Klein & Daward, 2004).

Finally, the increasing complexity of products, the more exigent customers, and vigilant media have lead to an increasing number of product-harm crises (Klein & Damar, 2004). Due to the increase in product-harm crises, this study focuses on this specific type of crisis.

2.1.2 Effects of product-harm crises

Product-harm crises are serious and frequent events in organizations. Therefore, Siomkos and Shrivastava (1993) stressed the importance for organizations to learn more about what responses to product-harm crises are the most successful. In order to measure the responses success, this study assesses consumers' willingness to forgive and trust the organization as well as their willingness to buy the organizations' products again.

During a product-related crisis, the level of trustworthiness is endangered and is therefore an important outcome to investigate. Trustworthiness is defined as "the perceived characteristics of the trustee that serve as the primary basis on which individuals are willing to accept vulnerability" (Dirks & Skarlicki, 2009, p. 137). The way a message is framed, and the severity of a crisis are said to influence consumers' trust after a crisis (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1969; Verhoeven, van Hoof, ter Keurs and van Vuuren, 2012).

Also, forgiveness provides useful guidelines on assessments of consumers' responses to product-related crises (Moon & Rhee, 2012), as it usually plays a pivotal role in reducing conflicts and restoring relationships (Xie & Peng, 2009). Authors (Moon & Rhee, 2012) define forgiveness in the context of organizational crises as "the public effort to reduce negative thinking, overcome unpleasant emotion and restore their damaged relationship with an organization due to a crisis" (p. 680) and use it as a concept encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral forgiveness. First, the cognitive dimension explains how consumers understand and abandon negative attitude toward the organization. Second, the affective dimension explains how consumers withdraw hatred for the

organization. Finally, the behavioral dimension indicates how consumers meet the organization and improve their relationship with the organization (Oh, 2006, 2008; in Moon & Rhee, 2012). Not much is known about how the message framing, the crisis severity, and the organization prior-reputation might influence consumers' forgiveness.

Finally, consumers' behavioral intentions are investigated following a product related crisis through purchase intentions, defined as "an individual's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand" (Spears & Singh, 2004, p. 56). Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) suggest that behavioral intentions signal whether customers will remain with or defect from the company. Indeed, consumers can choose to stop purchasing products from the organization in crisis. The way a message is framed, the severity of a crisis, and the organization prior-reputation are said to influence purchase intentions (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Vassilikopoulou et al., 2009)

2.2 Message framing

When a crisis occurs, the organization needs to communicate about it and decide how to frame its crisis-response. Indeed, a crisis-response can both be rationally—describing information in a direct and objective manner, or emotionally framed—describing information in a subjective and evaluative manner (Clayes, Cauberghe and Leysen, 2013. Entman (1993) defines message framing as "to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating the text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 55). Message framing is said to have impacts

on persuasion effectiveness, as the way a message is framed influences stakeholders' willingness to attend and remember the content of the message (Mckay, Manchanda, Smith & Huhmann, 2011). Moreover, Cho and Gower (2006) suggest that the public's perception is strongly influenced not only by the objective facts of the crisis event, but by the way the facts are communicated. Therefore, they claim that framing a crisis could influence stakeholders' evaluation of the organizational responsibility for the crisis event, meaning that the right frame could lead to a more positive attitude toward the organization in crisis. Investigating the role that emotions play in crisis communication and the effects of different frames could help organizations communicate in the most appropriate way, minimizing the crisis damage on organizational reputation (Coombs, 2004).

2.2.1 Rational framing

Organizations can frame their messages in a rational manner by focusing « on providing factual and concrete information on a crisis event itself and describing the steps the organization is taking to manage the crisis situation” (Moon & Rhee, 2012, p. 681). Claes, Cauberghe and Leysen (2013) define rationally framed messages as describing information in a direct, straightforward, and objective manner. An information-centered frame would stimulate a cognitive appraisal by attracting the attention directly on the content of the crisis-response (Moon & Rhee, 2012). Scholars (Claes & Cauberghe, 2014) have shown that a rational message framing leads to a more positive post-crisis attitude toward the organization in case of high crisis involvement, because objective arguments require stakeholders to focus their attention on the content of the message.

Huang (2008) also claims that a rational frame would result in milder crisis responses from stakeholders, as they do not get distracted with emotional appeal.

2.2.2 Emotional framing

Organizations can also decide to frame their message in an emotional manner by focusing “more on expressing the organization’s sincere sorrow, regret, and concern for those affected by a crisis in describing how the organization is managing the crisis situation” (Moon & Rhee, 2012, p. 682). Claeys, Cauberghe and Leysen (2013) describe emotionally framed messages as including subjective, evaluative properties and emotionally loaded adjectives and aim at stimulating emotions, either positive or negative (Moon & Rhee, 2012). By using emotions, the company appears to be more human. These emotions tend to influence how consumers perceive the crisis (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Other researches also claim that emotionally framed messages have more positive effects on stakeholders' attitude and behavioral intentions as they are more likely to be remembered (Flora & Maibach, 1990; Kim & Cameron, 2011).

2.2.3 Expected effects of message framing

Studies suggest that emotionally framed messages are seen as more positive by stakeholders than rationally framed messages (Claeys, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013; Jin, 2009; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Indeed, stakeholders' feeling of anger tends to decrease when the organization includes emotions in their message (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). According to the authors, the positive effects of emotional framing is due to the fact that a lack of emotion from the organization would be perceived as an

absence of involvement and sincerity regarding the crisis. This could imply that emotions would also increase stakeholders' forgiveness and trust toward the organization in crisis. Moreover, according to Kim and Cameron (2011), emotions would also influence attitudes and behavioral intentions. This means that an emotionally framed crisis-response could positively influence stakeholder's purchase intentions.

H1: An emotional frame leads to higher a) trust, b) forgiveness toward the organization, c) purchase intentions, as compared to a rational frame during a product-harm crisis.

2.3 Crisis severity

Crises can vary in the severity of the damage they inflict, and the perceived severity is assumed to influence the reputation damage of a crisis (Claeys, Cauberghe & Vyncke, 2010). Crisis severity refers to the evaluation of damage caused by the organization, including the number of injuries, deaths, environmental and financial damage (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010; Coombs, 1998). Lee (2004) also posits that a crisis is more severe when it has direct consequences for the audience, as compared to when the event is of little consequences, leading to different kinds of brand damage (Liu & Shankar, 2014). Hence, the severity of a crisis could be operationalized as whether consumers were injured or killed due to the organizational crisis.

Authors explain the influence of perceived severity on reputation by the fact that crisis severity has proven to influence perception of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Lee, 2004; Liu & Shankar, 2015). They claim that the more severe the crisis is perceived by the stakeholders, the more personally involved the stakeholders are, leading

to more attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization (Lee, 2004). This is also supported by the defensive attribution theory in psychology, which suggests, that “when an incident results in a more severe outcome, consumers will attribute a greater blame to the responsible party than when the outcome is less severe” (Robbennolt 2000, as cited by Liu & Shankar, 2015, p. 2522). According to Coombs and Holladay (2002), a strong crisis responsibility would lead to a more negative crisis reputation and important brand damage.

2.3.1 Expected effects of crisis severity

Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke (2010) discovered that a more severe crisis leads to a more negative perception of reputation. Concerning the effect of crisis severity on trust and forgiveness, no direct effects have been proven yet. Lee (2004) did hypothesize that consumers would mistrust an organization after a severe crisis, but no significant effects were found during her research. Therefore, these hypotheses are tested again in this study.

If crisis severity and crisis responsibility are indeed correlated, it is expected that a severe crisis would trigger more negative emotion and send a danger signal to consumers concerning the possible risks of being a customer of the organization in crisis (Lee, 2004), also influencing consumers behaviors toward the organization. If more responsibility for the crisis due to a high severity crisis does indeed lead to more negative emotions (Coombs, 2007), it can be assumed that a low-severity crisis will have a less negative influence on both trust and forgiveness, as compared to a high-severity crisis. Finally, researchers (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Fediuk, Coombs & Boters, 2010;

Vassilikopoulou et al., 2009) state that crisis severity has a negative influence on purchase intentions. This means that purchase intentions after a low-severity crisis are expected to be higher, as compared to a high-severity crisis.

H2: A low-severity crisis leads to higher a) trust, b) forgiveness toward the organization, c) purchase intentions, as compared to a high-severity crisis during a product-harm crisis.

2.4 Pre-crisis reputation

Pre-crisis reputation refers to the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders before the crisis. According to Coombs and Holladay (2002, 2006), the amount of reputation loss during a crisis would depend on the organization's pre-crisis reputation. Corporate reputation can be defined as stakeholders overall evaluation of an organization that reflects the extent to which they perceive the organization as « good » or « bad » (Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Reputation is based on direct experience with the organization, its past actions and future prospects, and any other form of communication and symbolism providing information about the organization (Fombrun, 1996; Turk, Stewart, Kim & Hipple, 2012). Coombs (2007) suggests that, in times of crisis, stakeholders are likely to assess the organizations' responsibility based on three factors—the crisis responsibility, the crisis history, and the pre-crisis organizational reputation. Authors (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Sheldon & Sallot, 2009, in Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015) claim that pre-crisis reputation actually would even be more important than crisis history in times of crises.

A favorable pre-crisis situation is seen as a buffer against reputational damage during a crisis, meaning that the organization will suffer less reputational loss than organizations will with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). The first explanation is the expectancy confirmation theory. According to the theory, when people experience information that do not conform to their expectations, they tend to reduce cognitive dissonance by interpreting inconsistent information in a way that makes the information more consistent to their prior expectations (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Edwards & Smith, 1996, in Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015). Coombs and Holladay (2006) suggest that this mechanism can also be applied to organization crises. Therefore, they claim that consumers holding a favorable attitude toward an organization would focus on the positive aspects of the organization and ignore the negative information (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015). This explanation relates to “the halo effect”. As people’s evaluations of specific attributes of a person, brand, or object often assimilate to their global evaluation about it (Thorndike, 1920 in Klein & Dawar, 2004), the pre-crisis reputation would offer a protective shield against reputational damage.

As prior findings do not always offer solid proof for the shielding effect, Claeys and Cauberghe (2015) also offered an alternative explanation of the value of favorable pre-crisis reputation. Organizations with good pre-crisis reputation might have a better reputation after a crisis simply because they have more “reputational capital” to spend (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015). Therefore, every organization would suffer as much during a crisis, but one with a good prior-reputation would still have a better reputation after a crisis than one with a bad prior-reputation. Nevertheless,

the result of Clayes and Cauberghe (2015) did confirm the shielding assumption.

2.4.1 Expected effects of pre-crisis reputation

Studies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002) suggest that a negative prior-reputation would lead to higher attributions of crisis responsibility and more reputational damage (Clayes and Cauberghe, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Turk et al., 2012). This is proven by the “halo effect” of positive prior-reputation like explained in the previous section. As less responsibility for the crisis is again assumed to lead to less negative emotions (Coombs, 2007), a positive prior-reputation will have a positive influence on both trust and forgiveness. Prior-reputation is also said to influence the level of trust that consumers have in the organization (Siomkos & Shrivastava, 1993). Finally, researchers (Lyon & Cameron, 2004; Turk et al., 2012, in Clayes and Cauberghe, 2015) posit that a prior reputation would significantly influence consumers' purchase intentions. They found positive effects of favorable pre-crisis reputation on post-crisis attitude toward the organization and purchase intentions. Therefore, consumers would be more likely to purchase products from an organization with a positive prior-reputation.

H3: A positive pre-crisis reputation leads to higher a) trust, b) forgiveness toward the organization, and c) purchase intentions, as compared to a negative pre-crisis reputation during a product-harm crisis.

2.5 Interaction effect between message framing, crisis severity and prior-reputation

Not much is known in previous research about the interaction effects of the independent variables.

2.5.1 Two-way interaction effect of crisis severity and message framing

To the knowledge of the author, no research has proven an interaction effect between crisis severity and message framing. It could be expected that people would prefer a rational frame during high severity crises, as they expect the organization to provide information and straightforward facts about the severe crisis. However, it is likely to be the other way around, with consumers preferring excuses and expression of sadness during a high severity crisis. Indeed, as severe crises are experienced as highly emotional events for consumers, the expression of emotions might portray the organization as more humane and sincere, which in turn would enable people to feel more sympathy toward the organization (Van de Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). An emotional framing is said to influence the way consumers perceive the crisis, leading to a more positive attitude and behavioral intentions (Flora & Maibach, 1990; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). The positive effects of an emotional frame could therefore be used as a buffer against the negative impacts of a severe crisis. Hence, as no previous research answered the potential interaction between crisis severity and message framing, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4: An emotional framing in combination with a high severity crisis leads to higher a) trust, b) forgiveness toward the organization, and c) purchase intentions as compared to the combinations of rational framing and high severity.

2.5.2 Two-way interaction effect of prior-reputation and message framing

Concerning the interactions between message framing and prior-reputation, no previous research has been conducted so far. Claeys and Caubergue (2014) suggest that a favorable pre-crisis reputation is a buffer against reputational damage during a crisis, meaning that an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation would suffer more reputational loss than organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation. Also, authors (Claeys, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013; Jin, 2009; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014) claim that emotionally framed messages would be perceived as more positive by stakeholders, leading to more positive attitudes and behavioral intentions than rational messages. As using an emotional frame is said to portray the organization as more humane and sincere, it might be used as a buffer when the organization has a negative prior-reputation. Therefore, it might be hypothesized that an emotional framing will help an organization in crisis, despite its negative reputation. Hence, as the potential interactions between message framing and prior-reputation have not been investigated so far, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H5: An emotional framing in combination with a negative prior-reputation crisis leads to higher a) trust, b) forgiveness toward the organization, and c) purchase intentions as compared to the combinations of rational framing and negative prior-reputation.

2.5.3 Three-way interaction of message framing, prior-reputation, and severity

Finally, no literature on a three-way interaction effect between crisis severity, message framing, and prior-reputation has been found in previous researches. The current study

looks into the effects of such interaction on stakeholders' trust, forgiveness toward the organization, and purchase intentions with the intentions of extending crisis communication research. Therefore, an exploratory research question is formulated for the three-way interaction:

RQ1: To what extent do crisis severity, message framing, and prior-reputation interact with each other during a product-harm crisis and influences consumers' a) trust, b) forgiveness toward the organization, and c) purchase intentions?

2.5.4 Covariates

The current study also included the product involvement as covariate as this external factor can influence the way respondents answer the questionnaire and react to the crisis. Participants' involvement and interest in the product used in the stimuli material might affect the result of the research. According to McDonald and Härtel (2000), the more involved stakeholders are with a crisis, the stronger the crisis outcomes. This means that consumers' involvement is an important covariate, as it could impact their resulting emotions to the crisis, such as their purchase intentions and their emotions toward the product in crisis.

2.6 Conceptual model

Figure 1 represents the assumed relationships among the variables in a comprehensive research model.

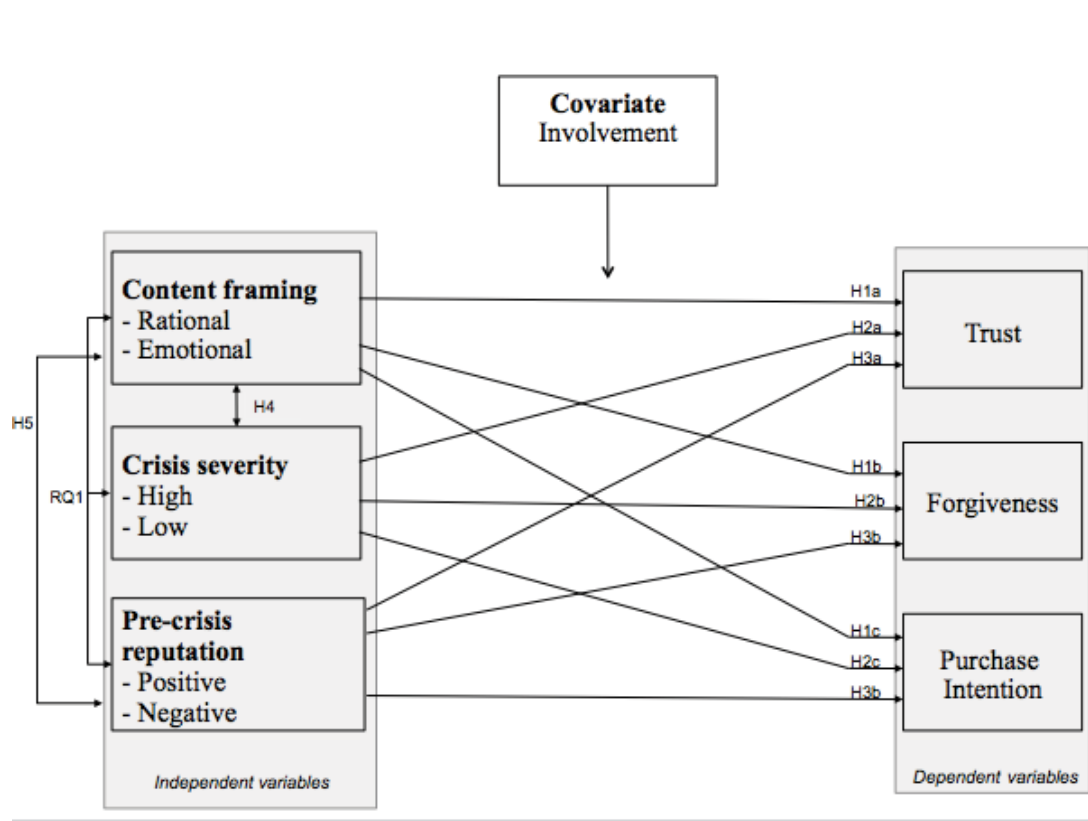


Figure 1. Research model

3. Method

3.1 Design

In order to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, a 2 (Framing: rational vs. emotional) x 2 (Severity: low vs. high) x 2 (Pre-crisis reputation: positive vs. negative) between-subjects experimental design is used. The three dependent variables are the stakeholders' trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions (Figure 1). Additionally, the product involvement was chosen as a covariate. The product involvement was not manipulated but was expected to have an influence on the dependent variables. In total, eight different scenarios were randomly assigned to respondents during the research. The

research adopted a product-harm crisis situation, meaning the crisis concerned a product that could have dangerous impacts on stakeholders.

3.2 Procedure

Participants were approached via social media (Facebook, LinkedIn) and asked to participate in an online experiment. Participants were also gathered through snowball samplings, as people contacted by the researcher were asked to share the survey with their own network. Moreover, the survey was submitted to several online communities in which students exchange surveys. An online experiment was chosen, as it would keep participants in their own environment, instead of emphasizing a research environment. In real life people also encounter crises messages in their own environment and this study would more accurately mimic the reaction. Using an online experiment also allows respondents to answer the survey in their own chosen time.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions. Before starting the survey, respondents are informed that their answers are completely confidential and that their personal information will not be used or shared with any third parties. Then, they have to read a short introduction of the research and are asked to carefully read the newspaper article they are presented. Once they read the hypothetical crisis message, they must first fill manipulation checks, in order to verify whether the manipulation of the different scenarios had the desired effects. Respondents are then asked questions regarding the dependent measure, such as the perceived trustworthiness of the organization, their potential forgiveness toward the organizations, and their purchase

intentions. Finally, respondents are asked demographic questions, such as age, sex, and educational level.

3.3 Stimulus Material

The independent variables were manipulated in scenarios and adapted into the NLTIMES lay-out. This newspaper was chosen, as it presents Dutch news in English and allowed students in the Netherlands to answer the survey, regardless of their level of Dutch as all respondents needed to be students living in the Netherlands. This criterion was chosen in order to assure a homogeneous sample with similar ages and levels of education. Also, the newspaper exists, which increase the credibility of the crisis message. The article presented a product crisis related to a waffle company. A fictitious organization was created (“Lekkere nederlandse”) in order to prevent any subject bias or prior knowledge about the company influencing respondents’ answers (Siomkos, 1999; Coombs, 1995). This is particularly important to control the effects of pre-crisis reputation. Moreover, a waffle company was chosen because it is assumed participants are highly involved when reading about crises in the food sector, and because waffle is a famous and highly consumed Dutch product. Indeed, it is expected that consumers will be strongly affected by a food-related crisis. The eight scenarios can be found in Appendix A. Figure 2 represents an example of one of the scenarios.

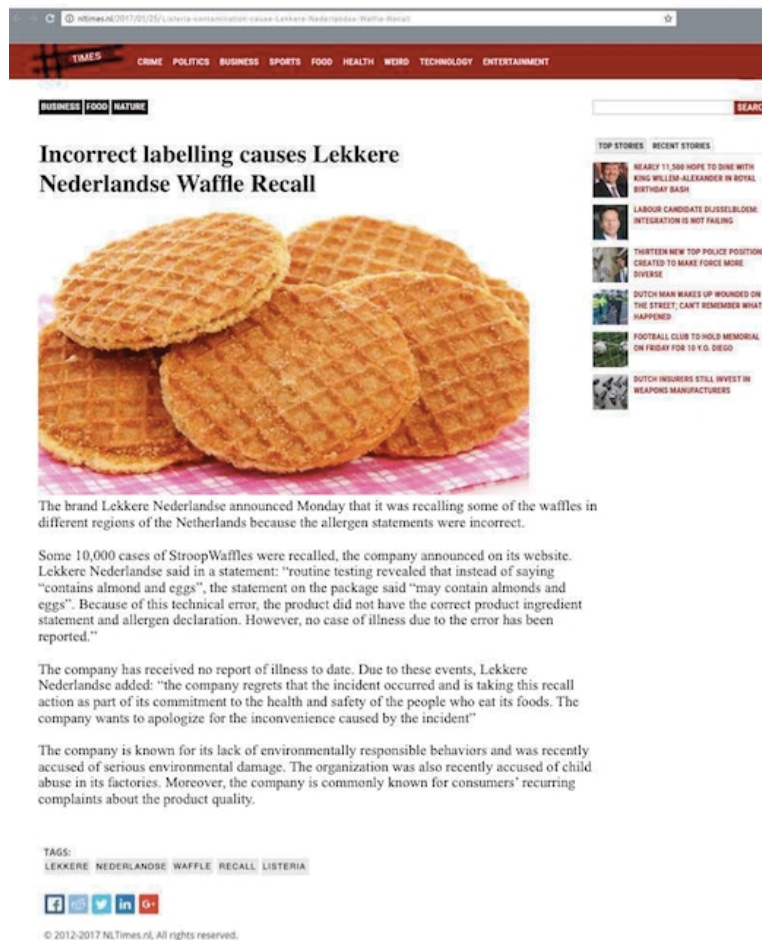


Figure 2. Example of the stimulus material

First, the framing of the message was manipulated. As Clayes, Cauberghe and Leysen (2013) defined rationally framed messages as using direct, straightforward, and objective information, the rationally framed scenario presented information in a straightforward manner (e.g. "We regret that this incident occurred", "the organization wants to apologize for the inconvenience"). In the emotionally framed scenario, the information was presented in a subjective, evaluative, and emotional manner (e.g. "we are deeply sorry",

“we are devastated”, “this is a tragedy”), in order to stimulate respondents’ emotions (Clayes, Cauberghe and Leysen, 2013).

Second, crisis severity was manipulated by changing the nature of the crisis. In the low-severity scenario, the company had made an error on the allergen label of the waffles, which offered consumers misleading information (saying « may contain almond and eggs » instead of « contains almonds and eggs »). This error resulted in low effects on the consumers and no case of illness. In the high-severity scenario, the crisis was a listeria contamination of the waffles, which could lead to sickness for healthy individuals, and even to fatal infections for young children and elderly people. The article claimed that the company had already reported more than twenty cases of illness.

Finally, prior reputation was manipulated by briefly presenting the organization in crisis. Positive pre-crisis reputation involved positive adjectives and a profitable company involved in corporate social responsible activities (e.g. “known for its corporate social activities”, “cares for the environment”, and “known for its high quality products”). The negative pre-crisis reputation involved negative adjectives, and a company known for its customers recurring complaints (e.g. “known for its lack of environmental responsible behaviors”, “accused of child abuse”, and “known for its bad quality products”).

3.4 Manipulation check

In order to check whether the independent variables—message framing, crisis severity and pre-crisis reputation—were manipulated correctly, a pre-test was conducted before

the actual research began. The sample consisted of 19 participants resembling the real respondents, i.e students living in the Netherlands. Respondents were assigned to one of the eight scenarios and asked several questions.

Concerning the crisis severity, respondents were first asked to indicate “How severe do you consider the damage caused by the crisis?” on a five-point Likert scale inspired by Claeys, Cauberghe, Vyncke (2010). The items ranged from 1=not severe at all to 5=very severe. Then, they were asked “How does the crisis impacted on consumers' health?” from 1= no direct damage on consumers' health to 5= direct damage on consumers' health. Respondents were also asked whether consumers were “not injured at all” or “severely injured” using a five-point Likert scale. Moreover, respondents were asked to what extend did the company have a positive or negative pre-crisis reputation using an adapted five-point Likert scale by Kiambi and Schafer (2016). The participants evaluated the pre-crisis reputation by answering the questions: “Overall, your impression of this organization’s prior reputation (before the crisis) is” and “How do you perceive the organization before the crisis?” from 1=very unfavorable/very negatively to 5=very favorable/very positively. Respondents were also asked whether the organization was known for its negative behavior/bad quality products or for its positive behaviors/good quality products. Finally, participants were asked if they perceived the crisis as realistic, based on a five-point Likert scale from 1=very unrealistic to 5=very realistic.

After this pre-test was conducted, the data was measured using an independent sample t-test. The results showed a lack of significant difference between the independent

variables. Therefore, the manipulation for the framing and the prior-reputation were modified, in order to emphasize the difference between the emotional/rational framing and the negative/positive prior reputation. For instance, the crisis severity was emphasized by changing the part “two incidents of illness have been reported” with “the company has received over twenty reports of illness and five persons were taken to the hospital”. Moreover, the manipulation checks’ questions were revised and integrated into the final questionnaire.

In the final questionnaire, the manipulations were checked again using an independent sample t-test. This time, the test proved significant difference for all manipulations. A significant difference was found for framing ($t(143)=-4.82, p=.000$). A significant difference was also found for severity ($t(143)=-14.04, p=.000$), and for prior-reputation ($t(143)=-11.23, p=.000$).

3.5 Respondents

Participants were gathered within a five-week period via social media and e-mail. A total of 262 respondents started the survey. Of these participants, 231 completed the survey. After checking the manipulations and the missing values, 143 surveys were useful for this study. The exact distribution of participants among the eight scenarios can be found in table 1. The mean age of the participants is 24.29, with ages ranging from 18 to 41 ($SD=3.89$). The low standard deviation is caused by the fact that respondents were all students. Concerning the level of education, 76.2% of the respondents were highly educated (bachelor or master degree completed). Finally, regarding their gender, 37.1%

were male and 62.9% were female. The complete overview of the participants' demographic information can be found in table 2 to see if division is proportionate.

Table 1. *Distribution of gender per condition*

	Rational frame				Emotional frame			
	Low severity		High severity		Low severity		High severity	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Negative	6	7	5	11	7	14	11	10
Prior-reputation								
Positive	7	14	6	11	6	8	11	10
Prior-reputation								

Table 2. *Distribution of the gender, age, and education level.*

		N	%	M	SD
Gender	Men	53	37.1		
	Women	90	62.9		
Age				24.29	3.89
Education	Less than high school	0	0		
	High school	37	23.8		
	Bachelor	72	50.3		
	Master	35	24.5		
	Doctorate or higher	2	1.4		

3.6 Measurements

The constructs of the present study were measured using different scales drawn and modified from previous researches. The participants were presented with statements in order to measure trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions. Participants were then required to indicate to what extent they (dis)agreed with the statements. Items were measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

First, trust was investigated using an existing scale designed by Hon and Grunig (1999). This scale consisted of 6 items, adjusted to the present crisis. An example of these items is: "This organization treats its consumers fairly and justly". The statements were displayed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, and proved to be reliable in this study ($\alpha = .925$).

Second, forgiveness was measured by using an existing scale from Xie and Peng (2009). The scale consisted of a total of five items. An example of these items is: "I would disapprove of this company". The statements were displayed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. It proved to be reliable in this study ($\alpha = .939$).

Third, purchase intentions were measured by using an existing scale used by Lin, Chen, Chiu, and Lee (2011). The scale consisted of four different items, adjusted to the present crisis. An example of these items is: "Given the chance, I intend to purchase from Lekker Nederlandse". The statements were again displayed using a five-point Likert

scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. It proved to be very reliable in this study ($\alpha = .940$).

Finally, the covariate in this study is the involvement with the product, measured with “Do you like waffles”, and “How often do you buy waffles”. This covariate was chosen because if the respondents never eat waffles, they may not be affected by the crisis situation. In this study, it did not prove to be reliable ($\alpha = .567$). Therefore, only the item “How often do you buy waffles” was kept to measure the respondents’ involvement with the product.

3.7 Factor analysis

A factor analysis was conducted to discover the underlying structure of the variables. The results of the analysis can be found in Table 3. Both trust and purchase intentions items loaded on the correct factors and continued with further analysis. However, the first three items of the variable forgiveness had to be removed, as they loaded on the same variable as trust. The loadings on trust were higher than the loadings on forgiveness, therefore the variable trust continued with further analysis. Finally, two other recoded items for forgiveness, namely “Given the company’s response, I would condemn it” and “I would disapprove of this company.” were loading on the correct component and were therefore used in the result section.

Table 3. *Results of the factor analysis with VARIMAX rotation of the items and an absolute value of .50 (Note: *Items are used in the result section)*

ITEM	Rotated Factor Loading		
	1	2	3
TRUST1	.735*		
TRUST2	.850*		
TRUST3	.731*		
TRUST4	.847*		
TRUST5	.712*		
TRUST6	.787*		
FORGIV1	.633		
FORGIV2	.563		
FORGIV3	.669		
PURIN1		.819*	
PURIN2		.842*	
PURIN3		.841*	
PURIN4		.911*	
Recode FORGIV4			.738*
Recode FORGIV5			.929*

4. Results

To test the effects of message framing, crisis severity, and prior-reputation on the dependent variables, a MANOVA and MANCOVA were conducted using SPSS GLM. The results can be found in Table 4. A MANCOVA analysis was performed in order to control the influence of the covariate, i.e the respondents' involvement with the product in crisis. In this section, the results are presented. First, the main effects are discussed. Second, the interaction effects between the variables are discussed. Finally, a global overview of the results is presented.

Table 4. Results of the MANOVA and MANCOVA (including involvement with the product) for the independent variables framing, severity, and prior-reputation on the dependent variables (Note: * significant at the .05 level, ** significant at the .001 level).

Factors	Statistical method	Trust	Forgiveness	Purchase intentions
		F(p-value)	F(p-value)	F(p-value)
Framing	MANOVA	1.60(.208)	.94(.334)	.66(.419)
	MANCOVA	1.16(.220)	.68(.409)	.59(.443)
Severity	MANOVA	2.01(.158)	7.67(.006*)	3.1(.081)
	MANCOVA	2.01(.158)	7.84(.006*)	3.1(.081)
Prior-reputation	MANOVA	105.44(.000**)	35.65(.000**)	22.51(.000**)
	MANCOVA	103.22(.000**)	33.94(.000**)	21.85(.000**)
Framing x Severity	MANOVA	.080(.772)	1.43(.233)	.06(.800)
	MANCOVA	.080(.773)	1.45(.230)	.06(.801)
Framing x Prior-reputation	MANOVA	.037(.848)	7.30(.008*)	1.28(.259)
	MANCOVA	.03(.855)	7.02(.009*)	1.24(.267)
Framing x Severity x Prior-reputation	MANOVA	1.65(.200)	1.73(.190)	1.53(.218)
	MANCOVA	1.63(.203)	1.69(.196)	1.51(.221)

4.1 Main effects for message framing

Message framing did not show a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda: $p=.667$). When excluding the covariate no significant effect of message framing could be found on the dependent variables. This means that respondents reading the emotionally framed article did not score higher on trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions as stated in the hypothesis.

The inclusions of the covariate did not change the effects of the message framing.

Consequently, the results mean that the hypothesis 1a, 1b, and 1c are not supported.

Table 4 and 5 give an overview of the effects of framing on the dependent variables.

Table 5. *Descriptive statistics message framing*

Dependent measure	Rational			Emotional		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Trust	67	3.21	.91	76	3.20	.85
Forgiveness	67	3.20	1.03	76	3.21	.78
Purchase Intentions	67	2.75	1.07	76	2.76	.98

4.2 Main effects for crisis severity

Crisis severity showed a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda: $p=.035$). When excluding the covariate, there was significant main effects found for crisis severity on consumers' forgiveness ($f(1, 134)=7.67$, $p=.006$), which means that participants in the low severity crisis ($M=3.40$, $SD=.97$) felt more likely to forgive the organization than those in the high severity crisis ($M=3.03$, $SD=.80$). However, no

significant effect was found for the crisis severity on consumer's trust ($f(1, 134)=2.01$, $p=.158$) and purchase intentions ($f(1, 134)=3.1$, $p=.081$).

The inclusion of the covariate did not influence the effects of the crisis severity on the dependent variables. Indeed, significant effects of the crisis severity could still be found for forgiveness ($f(1, 1354)=7.84$, $p=.006$). Again, no significant difference was proven for trust ($f(1, 135)=2.01$, $p=.158$) and purchase intentions ($f(1, 135)=3.1$, $p=.081$).

Thus, the results show that the hypothesis 2 can be supported for its part b, but not for the part a and c. This means that a low crisis severity does not lead to higher trust and purchase intentions. An overview of the results can be found in table 4 and 6.

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics crisis severity*

Dependent measure	Low			High		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Trust	69	3.28	.91	74	3.13	.84
Forgiveness	69	3.40	.97	74	3.03	.80
Purchase Intentions	69	2.89	1.08	74	2.75	.99

4.3 Main effects for prior-reputation

Prior-reputation showed significant effects on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda: $p<.000$). When excluding the covariate significant effects of the organization's prior-reputation was found for trust ($f(1, 134)=105.44$, $p<.000$), forgiveness ($f(1, 134)=35.65$, $p<.000$), and purchase intentions ($f(1, 134)=22.51$, $p<.000$). This means that participants in the positive prior-reputation scored significantly higher on trust

($M=3.78$, $SD=.55$), than participants in the negative pre-crisis reputation ($M=2.63$, $SD=.77$). Moreover, participants in the positive pre-crisis reputation scenario scored higher on forgiveness ($M=3.58$, $SD=.82$) than those in the negative pre-crisis reputation scenario ($M=2.82$, $SD=.81$). Finally, a positive effect of positive prior-reputation could be found concerning respondents' purchase intentions ($M=3.1$, $SD=.96$) as opposed to respondents' in the negative prior-reputation scenario ($M=2.40$, $SD=.90$).

When including the covariate similar significant effects could be found for trust ($f(1, 135)=103.22$, $p<.000$), forgiveness ($f(1, 135)=33.94$, $p<.000$), and purchase intentions ($f(1, 135)=21.85$, $p<.000$). Again, the inclusion of the covariate did not change the results, which means that the respondents' involvement with the product does not have significant impact on their level of trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions during a product-harm crisis.

The results show that the hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c are all supported in this study. This implies that a positive prior-reputation does lead to higher trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions during a product-harm crisis. Table 6 and 7 give an overview of the effects of prior-reputation on the dependent variables.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics prior-reputation

Dependent measure	Negative			Positive		
	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Trust	71	2.63	.77	72	3.78	.55
Forgiveness	71	2.82	.81	72	3.58	.82
Purchase Intentions	71	2.40	.90	72	3.10	.96

4.4 Interaction effects

Next, the two-way interaction effects between message framing and crisis severity, and message framing and prior-reputation are discussed, as well as the three-way interaction effects between message framing, crisis severity, and prior-reputation. Again, all results were controlled for the potential influence of the covariate by conducting MANCOVA analyses. The descriptive statistics can be found in Tables 8, 9, and 10.

4.4.1 Message framing and crisis severity

The interaction of message framing with crisis severity did not show a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda: $p=.494$). When excluding the covariates, no interaction effect was found between message framing and crisis severity for trust ($f(1, 134)=.080$, $p=.773$), forgiveness ($f(1, 134)=1.43$, $p=.233$), and purchase intentions ($f(1, 134)=.06$, $p=.800$).

Very similar results were found when including the covariate. Indeed, still no interaction effect was found between message framing and crisis severity for trust ($f(1, 135)=.080$, $p=.772$), forgiveness ($f(1, 135)=1.45$, $p=.230$), and purchase intentions ($f(1, 135)=.06$, $p=.801$) when including respondents' involvement with the product.

Therefore, it is concluded that there is no interaction effect between the message framing and the crisis severity during this crisis. Hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c are not supported. An overview of the results can be found in table 8 and 7.

Table 8. *Interaction effects message framing and crisis severity*

		Rational			Emotional		
Dependent measure		N	M	SD	n	M	SD
Trust	Low	34	3.33	.87	35	3.24	.96
	High	33	3.09	.96	41	3.17	.75
Forgiveness	Low	34	3.51	1.11	35	3.28	.81
	High	33	2.88	.84	41	3.15	.76
Purchase intentions	Low	34	2.90	1.08	35	2.88	1.09
	High	33	2.58	1.05	41	2.65	.74

4.4.2 Message framing and prior-reputation

The interaction of message framing with prior-reputation showed a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda: $p=.021$). When excluding the covariate, message framing combined with prior-reputation were found to have significant effects on forgiveness ($f(1, 134)=7.30, p=.008$). However, no interaction effect was found for trust ($f(1, 134)=.037, p=(.848)$) and purchase intentions ($f(1, 134)=1.28, p=.259$). On the one hand, this means that participants facing a negative pre-crisis reputation scored higher on forgiveness in the emotional frame condition ($M=3.72, SD=.84$) than in the rational frame ($M=3.03, SD=.73$). On the other hand, participants facing a positive pre-crisis reputation scored higher on forgiveness in the rational frame ($M=2.88, SD=.84$) than in the emotional frame ($M=3.42, SD=.79$).

Similar effects were found when including product involvement as the covariate. Again, a significant effect was found between message framing and prior-reputation on forgiveness ($f(1, 135)=7.02, p=.009$), while no effect was found for trust ($f(1, 135)=.037, p=.848$) and purchase intentions ($f(1, 135)=1.24, p=.267$).

Thus, the results show that the hypothesis 4 is supported for its part b, but not for the part a and c. This means that a positively loaded reputation does act as a buffer during a crisis, allowing the organization to communicate in a rational way. An overview of the results can be found in table 9 and 7.

Table 9. *Interaction effects message framing and prior-reputation*

Dependent measure	Prior-reputation	N	Rational		n	Emotional	
			M	SD		M	SD
Trust	Negative	29	2.53	.83	42	2.71	.72
	Positive	38	3.73	.56	34	3.82	.54
Forgiveness	Negative	29	2.52	.84	42	3.03	.73
	Positive	38	3.72	.84	34	3.42	.79
Purchase intentions	Negative	28	2.20	1.01	42	2.53	2.53
	Positive	38	3.16	.94	43	4.04	3.04

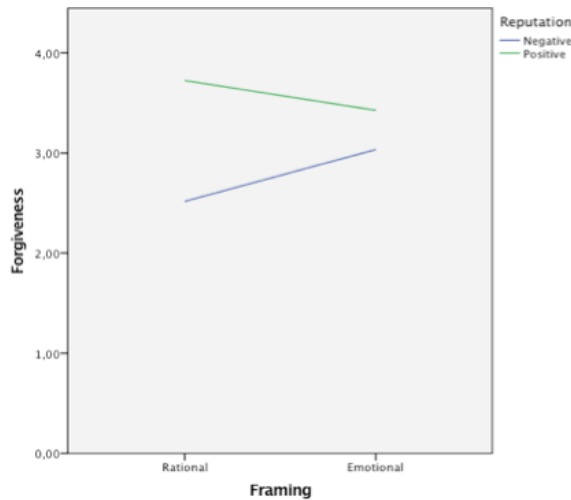


Figure 5. Graph for interaction effect between framing and prior-reputation on forgiveness.

4.4.3 Three-way interaction

The interaction of message framing with crisis severity and prior-reputation did not show a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda: $p=.465$).

When excluding the covariate, no significant interaction effect was found between the message framing, the crisis severity, and the prior-reputation in this study. Indeed, the results did not show significant effect from the three-way interaction on trust ($f(1, 134)=1.65, p=.200$), forgiveness ($f(1, 134)=1.73, p=.190$), and purchase intentions ($f(1, 134)=1.53, p=.218$).

Still no interaction effect was found between the three independent variables when the involvement with the product was included as covariate. The results were similar for trust ($f(1, 135)=1.63, p=.203$), forgiveness ($f(1, 135)=1.68, p=.196$), and purchase intentions

($f(1, 135)=1.51, p=.221$).

Considering the results, it is concluded that no interaction effect exists between message framing, crisis severity, and prior-reputation in this study.

Table 10. *Three way interaction effects*

Construct	Prior-reputation	Low Severity		High severity	
		Rational Framing	Emotional Framing	Rational Framing	Emotional Framing
		M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Trust	Negative	2.65(.80)	2.70(.79)	2.42(.87)	2.70(.67)
	Positive	3.75(.61)	4.05(.55)	3.71(.52)	3.65(.48)
Forgiveness	Negative	2.85(.54)	3.00(.67)	2.25(.55)	3.07(.81)
	Positive	3.93(.96)	3.71(.82)	3.47(.60)	3.22(.71)
Purchase intentions	Negative	2.38(1.05)	2.53(.94)	2.06(.99)	2.52(.65)
	Positive	3.23(.99)	3.41(1.11)	3.07(.87)	2.79(.83)

4.5 Results overview

The tables 11 and 12 give a global overview of the hypotheses and research questions given.

Table 11. *Overview over supported and non-supported hypotheses*

<i>HYPOTHESIS</i>	
Hypothesis 1a An emotional frame leads to higher trust as compared to a rational frame during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 1b An emotional frame leads to higher forgiveness toward the organization compared to a rational frame during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 1c An emotional frame leads to higher purchase intentions compared to a rational frame during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 2a A low-severity crisis leads to higher trust compared to a high-severity crisis during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 2b A low-severity crisis leads to higher forgiveness compared to a high-severity crisis during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Supported</i>
Hypothesis 2c A low-severity crisis leads to higher purchase intentions compared to a high-severity crisis during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 3a: A positive pre-crisis reputation leads to higher trust compared to a negative pre-crisis reputation during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Supported</i>
Hypothesis 3b A positive pre-crisis reputation leads to higher forgiveness compared to a negative pre-crisis reputation during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Supported</i>
Hypothesis 3c A positive pre-crisis reputation leads to higher purchase intentions compared to a negative pre-crisis reputation during a product-harm crisis.	<i>Supported</i>
Hypothesis 4a: An emotional framing in combination with a high severity crisis leads to higher trust compared to the combinations of rational framing and high severity.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 4b: An emotional framing in combination with a high severity crisis leads to higher forgiveness compared to the combinations of rational framing and high severity.	<i>Supported</i>
Hypothesis 4c: An emotional framing in combination with a high severity crisis leads to higher purchase intentions compared to the combinations of rational framing and high severity.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 5a: An emotional framing in combination with a negative prior-reputation crisis leads to higher trust compared to the combinations of rational framing and negative prior-reputation.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 5b: An emotional framing in combination with a negative prior-reputation crisis leads to higher forgiveness compared to the combinations of rational framing and negative prior-reputation.	<i>Non-supported</i>
Hypothesis 5c: An emotional framing in combination with a negative prior-reputation crisis leads to higher purchase intentions compared to the combinations of rational framing and negative prior-reputation.	<i>Non-supported</i>

Table 12 Overview over the research question's results

RESEARCH QUESTION	
RQ1: To what extent do crisis severity, message framing, and prior-reputation interact with each other during a product-harm crisis and influences consumers' a) trust, b) forgiveness toward the organization, and c) purchase intentions?	<i>No significant interaction effect between message framing, crisis severity, and prior-reputation was found during this study.</i>

5. Discussion

The conclusions and discussion of this study are presented in this chapter. First, the results are discussed and compared to previous studies. Then, theoretical and practical implications are presented. Finally, recommendations for future research and a general conclusion are given.

5.1 General discussion

This study aimed at examining the direct and interaction effects of message framing, crisis severity, and prior-reputation and their role on the consumers' trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions. This study also examined the effects of the involvement with the product by considering how often respondents buy waffles. However, the results including the covariate were always extremely similar to the results excluding the covariate. It can therefore be concluded that consumers' involvement with the product did not change the effects of the dependent variables in this study.

A number of significant results were found, supporting previous research in the field of pre-crisis reputation, yet results also failed to support previous studies in the field of message framing and crisis severity.

5.2 Message framing

Based on previous studies it was expected that an emotionally framed message would lead to higher trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions. Indeed, previous literature suggests that emotionally framed messages influence stakeholders' attitude and behavioral intentions by making the organization appear as more humane (Claeys, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013; Kim & Cameron, 2011). However, no significant difference was found between the rational and the emotional frame. Respondents' trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions were very similar, regardless of how the crisis message was framed.

Accordingly, the results of this study imply that the use of message framing during a crisis does not significantly influence consumers' emotions or behavioral intentions. An explanation could be that the influence of the message framing actually depends on the personality of the reader. Indeed, while some authors (Claeys, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013; Kim & Cameron, 2011) have claimed that an emotionally framed message would lead to more positive post-crisis outcomes, others studies (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Moon & Rhee, 2012) have suggested the opposite. The authors claim that a rational message attracts the stakeholders' attention directly on the content of the crisis message; leading to a more positive attitude toward the organization. All things considered, it is concluded that the influence of the message framing depends on factors that have not been studied in the current research.

5.3 Crisis severity

It was expected that a low-severity crisis would lead to higher trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions as previous studies suggest that a severe crisis triggers more negative emotions and behaviors toward the organization (Lee, 2004). This study shows that a low-severity crisis positively influences consumers forgiveness. However, no significant effect was found between the low and the high severity crisis for consumers' trust and purchase intentions.

As it was hypothesized, this study proves that a low-severity crisis leads to higher forgiveness. However, the results do not prove the hypotheses formulated by Lee (2004) concerning the positive effects of a low-severity crisis on trust and purchase intentions. It also disconfirmed the results of different other authors (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Fediuk, Coombs & Boters, 2010; Vassilikopoulou et al., 2009) who claim that a low-severity crisis leads to higher purchase intentions. An explanation is that consumers' trust and purchase intentions are most of the time negatively influenced by a crisis on the short-term, regardless of its severity. Indeed, a product-harm crisis always leads to negative emotions and discloses the risks consumers are exposed to (Lee, 2004). Regardless, consumers seem to be more likely to forgive the organization when the severity of the crisis is low.

5.4 Prior-reputation

Based on previous studies it was expected that a positive pre-crisis reputation would lead to higher trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions. As hypothesized, the prior-reputation of the organization in crisis proved to significantly influence all dependent variables. These findings proved the buffering effect, as formulated by Claeys and Cauberghe (2014). The authors claim that when an organization has a positive pre-crisis reputation, consumers are more likely to focus on the positive aspects and ignore the negative information, leading to more positive outcomes (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015). The outcomes of the present study empirically prove this statement, as a positive pre-crisis reputation did lead to higher trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions.

5.5 Interaction effect between message framing and crisis severity

The aim of this study was to contribute to the field of crisis communication by discovering potential interaction effects between message framing and crisis severity. Despite the fact that no previous study had proven an interaction effect between crisis severity and message framing, it was expected that the positive effects of an emotional frame could protect an organization against the negative impacts of a severe crisis. However, no proof was found of an interaction effect of the dependent variables on trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions. This means that both message framing will have the same influence on stakeholders regardless of the crisis severity. The reason why there were no interaction effects can be explained by the fact that this study did not prove any main effect of message framing and only little effects of crisis severity independently.

5.6 Interaction effect between message framing and prior-reputation

The second research question was about the potential interaction between message framing and prior-reputation. As the interaction effects between the two dependent variables have not been investigated in the past, it was hypothesized that an emotional frame could be used as a buffer when an organization had a negative pre-crisis reputation, which would lead to more positive outcomes. The results confirmed the hypothesis and proved a significant interaction effect for forgiveness, but not for trust and purchase intentions. Respondents score higher on forgiveness when an emotionally framed message is used in combination with a negative pre-crisis reputation. Moreover, respondents scored higher on forgiveness when a rationally framed message was used in combination with a positive prior-reputation. These results imply that an emotionally framed message can indeed lead to higher forgiveness when the organization has a negative prior-reputation. This means that when an organization has a negative reputation, consumers prefer apologies and the organization's expression of sadness in order to forgive the organization. As there were no main effect found for framing, it is concluded that message framing is only effective in a crisis situation when used in combination with other factors.

5.7 Three-way interaction effect

As no literature on a three-way interaction between crisis severity, message framing, and prior-reputation is found in previous research, an explorative research question has been

formulated. However, no significant effect was found between the three variables in this study. Further research is needed to elaborate on potential interactions between the variables.

6. Implications and limitations

6.1 Theoretical implications

The aim of this study was to add to the field of crisis communication by adding knowledge to previous research. More specifically, this study gave insight on the interplay of message framing, crisis severity, and prior-reputation during a product-harm crisis.

This study contradicts previous researches on the effect of crisis severity. The crisis severity did not have any influence on consumers' trust and purchase intentions. It was concluded in this study that the crisis severity might influence consumers on the long-term, while their level of trust and purchase intentions would always be negatively impacted by a crisis on the short-term, regardless of the severity. However, the long-term effects of the crisis could not be measured in the current study. Therefore, a recommendation for future research is to conduct a longitudinal research in order to measure the results over a longer period of time.

Finally, it was observed that message framing does not have any main effect on consumers independently, but does when combined with prior-reputation. Further studies would be needed to test the impact of message framing in combination with other

communication strategies.

6.2 Managerial implications

Crises threaten organizations' survival and reputation and lead to a decrease in consumers' trust and purchase intentions (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys and Cauberghe, 2015). It is of great importance for organizations to use the right communication strategies in order to positively influence the crisis outcomes. This study offers practical guidelines for practitioners on the effects of communication strategies on consumers, depending on the crisis severity and the prior-reputation.

Firstly, this study proved the importance of a positive prior-reputation in times of crisis. This means that practitioners should focus on building a strong reputation before the crisis happens as it functions as a buffer against negative crisis outcomes (Claeys and Cauberghe, 2014). Indeed, although this does not provide insights in terms of communication strategies, it stresses that when focusing on building a positive reputation, the organization will be more easily trusted and forgiven in times of crisis. Also, consumers are more likely to purchase product from an organization in crisis if it has a positive pre-crisis reputation than when the organization has a negative prior-reputation.

Secondly, this study shows that crisis severity is not an important factor during a crisis, as it does not influence consumers' trust and purchase intentions. This suggests that all crises are emotional events for consumers, and that practitioners should not underestimate the consequences of a low-severity crisis. This stresses the importance of paying attention to every crisis, regardless of its severity in order to prevent negative crisis outcomes.

Crisis managers are therefore encouraged to strongly focus on consumers' emotions during any product-harm crisis in order to positively influence their trust towards the organization, and, in turn, their purchase intentions.

Finally, message framing showed no direct main effect on trust, forgiveness, and purchase intentions in this study. Yet, this does not mean that crisis practitioners do not need to pay attention to how crisis messages are framed as this study proved an interaction effect between message framing and prior-reputation on forgiveness. Forgiveness is an important factor to consider as it usually plays a critical role in restoring relationships between organizations and consumers (Xie & Peng, 2009). Therefore, this study stresses the fact that when an organization has a negative prior-reputation, practitioners need to use an emotional frame in order to earn consumers' forgiveness. As consumers already have a negative relationship with the organization, they expect the organization to provide sincere apologies and expression of sadness.

6.3 Limitations

While this research was a good starting point, it included several limitations that can be mentioned and improved in future research. By using the results and the limitations of this study, further research can contribute to the field of crisis communication and help organizations to prevent reputational damage in times of crisis.

The first limitation of this study is that the surveys were distributed through social networks and online students communities as a convenience sample was used to collect the data. This led to an overrepresentation of highly educated respondents. This makes it hard to generalize this study to other populations as highly educated consumers might

process information differently during a crisis. A high level of education might make it easier to identify different stimuli. However, as respondents in this study were not influenced by the message framing, it could actually be that highly educated people focus more on the facts rather than on how the message is framed, as compared to lower educated people. Further studies would be needed to test the impact of educational level on the effects of message framings.

Another limitation in this study is the small sample size. Indeed, of the 262 people that took part in the survey, 119 were excluded. The respondents who failed to complete the entire survey, or who completed it in an unrealistic time frame were excluded from the survey. Ideally, those who did not answer the manipulation questions correctly should have been excluded too but this would have resulted in a very small sample size. As the manipulation checks proved significant differences for all variables, respondents with wrong answers were not excluded. This lessens the validity of the study, as respondents who did not distinguish the different stimuli might have influenced the results. Moreover, using too small samples decreases the internal and external validity of the study and increases the chance of making wrong conclusions (Faber & Fonseca, 2014). Therefore, a second recommendation for future research is to increase the sample size, which allows stricter inclusion conditions and higher validity.

Furthermore, a fictitious waffle company in a crisis situation was used during this study. A fictitious organization was used in order to prevent subject bias and prior knowledge

with the organization to influence respondents' answers (Siomkos, 1999; Coombs, 1995) especially concerning the effects of prior-reputation. However, the lack of reality of the crisis situation might have made it difficult for participants to rate trustworthiness and purchase intentions only based on what they had read in the article. Therefore, the findings might not be generalizable to other existing companies. Moreover, a waffle company was used as waffles were perceived as a famous Dutch product but no preliminary study was performed to test the respondents' involvement with the product. Therefore, it is possible that this is not a product that the respondents frequently use and this could have influenced their response to the crisis.

7. Conclusion

The goal of this research was to answer the question: “ *To what extent do the framing of the message, in combination with the severity of the crisis, and the pre-crisis reputation influence consumers' trust of the organization, forgiveness, and purchase intentions towards the organization?*”. A product-harm crisis was used during this study. Furthermore, consumers' involvement with the product in crisis was used as a covariate.

This study proved no main effect for the message framing on the dependent measures. However, it was found that a positive pre-crisis reputation positively influences all the dependent variables. Furthermore, the current study found a significant effect of crisis severity on forgiveness, but not on trust and purchase intentions. Finally, this study found an interaction effect between message framing and prior-reputation on forgiveness. An organization should use an emotionally framed message when facing a crisis with a

negative prior-reputation.

8. Acknowledgment

I would first like to thank my first supervisor Ardion Beldad for his guidance and helpful feedbacks despite the difficulties of writing a thesis abroad. Our numerous skype meetings and emails and his patience were a great support in writing this research. In addition, I would also like to thank my second supervisor Mark Tempelman who helped providing new insights with important parts of my thesis.

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Appendix A: stimuli material


Emotional framing, low-severity, positive prior-reputation

nlTimes.nl/2017/01/25/Listeria-contamination-causes-Lekker-Nederlandse-Waffle-Recall

CRIME POLITICS BUSINESS SPORTS FOOD HEALTH WEIRD TECHNOLOGY ENTERTAINMENT

BUSINESS FOOD NATURE

Incorrect labelling causes Lekker Nederlandse Waffle Recall



The brand Lekker Nederlandse announced Monday that it was recalling some of the waffles in different regions of the Netherlands because the allergen statements were incorrect.

Some 10,000 cases of StroopWaffles were recalled, the company announced on its website. Lekker Nederlandse said in a statement: "To our surprise, routine testing revealed that instead of saying "contains almond and eggs", the statement on the package said "may contain almonds and eggs". This is a tragedy, as because of our unforgivable labelling error, the product did not have the correct product ingredient statement and allergen declaration. Hopefully, no case of illness due to the error has been reported."

The company has received no report of illness to date. Due to these events, Lekker Nederlandse added: "We have no words to describe how deeply sorry and devastated we are about the incident and are taking this recall action as part of our commitment to the health and safety of the people who eat our foods. We offer our sincerest apologies for our terrible mistake"

The company is known for its corporate social responsible activities. For instance, the waffle company has recently invested some of its profit to communities in need. The company also cares for the environment and started the 5% for the Planet pledge, donating 5% of its sales to help save the environment. Moreover, the company is commonly known to provide consumers with high quality products.

LEKKERE NEDERLANDSE WAFFLE RECALL LISTERIA

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- DUTCH MAN WAKES UP WOUNDED ON THE STREET; CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED
- FOOTBALL CLUB TO HOLD MEMORIAL ON FRIDAY FOR 16 Y.O. DIEGO
- DUTCH INSURERS STILL INVEST IN WEAPONS MANUFACTURERS


Rational framing, high-severity, negative prior-reputation

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Listeria contamination causes Lekker Nederlandse Waffle Recall



The brand Lekker Nederlandse announced Monday that it was recalling some of the waffles in different regions of the Netherlands because they may have been exposed to listeria.

Some 10,000 cases of StroopWaffles were recalled, the company announced on its website. Lekker Nederlandse said in a statement: "routine testing revealed a confirmed case of contamination in the products, and already two incidents of illness have been reported. Listeria monocytogenes is the species of pathogenic bacteria that causes the infection listeriosis. The infection is serious and sometimes fatal in people with weakened immune systems".

The company has received over twenty reports of illness to date, and five persons were taken to the hospital. Due to these events, Lekker Nederlandse added: "the company regrets that the incident occurred and is taking this recall action as part of its commitment to the health and safety of the people who eat its foods. The company wants to apologize for the inconvenience caused by the incident"

The organization is known for its lack of environmentally responsible behaviors and was recently accused of serious environmental damage. The organization was also recently accused of child abuse in its factories. Moreover, the company is commonly known for consumers' recurring complaints about the product quality.

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Rational framing, high-severity crisis, positive prior-reputation

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Listeria contamination causes Lekker Nederlandse Waffle Recall



The brand Lekker Nederlandse announced Monday that it was recalling some of the waffles in different regions of the Netherlands because they may have been exposed to listeria.

Some 10,000 cases of StroopWaffles were recalled, the company announced on its website. Lekker Nederlandse said in a statement: "routine testing revealed a confirmed case of contamination in the products, and already two incidents of illness have been reported. Listeria monocytogenes is the species of pathogenic bacteria that causes the infection listeriosis. The infection is serious and sometimes fatal in people with weakened immune systems".

The company has received over twenty reports of illness to date, and five persons were taken to the hospital. Due to these events, Lekker Nederlandse added: "the company regrets that the incident occurred and is taking this recall action as part of its commitment to the health and safety of the people who eat its foods. The company wants to apologize for the inconvenience caused by the incident"

The company is known for its corporate social responsible activities. For instance, the waffle company has recently invested some of its profit to communities in need. The company also cares for the environment and started the 5% for the Planet pledge, donating 5% of its sales to help save the environment. Moreover, the company is commonly known to provide consumers with high quality products.

TAGS:
LEKKERE NEDERLANDSE WAFFLE RECALL LISTERIA

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Rational framing, low-severity, positive prior-reputation

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Incorrect labelling causes Lekkere Nederlandse Waffle Recall



The brand Lekkere Nederlandse announced Monday that it was recalling some of the waffles in different regions of the Netherlands because the allergen statements were incorrect.

Some 10,000 cases of StroopWaffles were recalled, the company announced on its website. Lekkere Nederlandse said in a statement: "routine testing revealed that instead of saying "contains almond and eggs", the statement on the package said "may contain almonds and eggs". Because of this technical error, the product did not have the correct product ingredient statement and allergen declaration. However, no case of illness due to the error has been reported."

The company has received no report of illness to date. Due to these events, Lekkere Nederlandse added: "the company regrets that the incident occurred and is taking this recall action as part of its commitment to the health and safety of the people who eat its foods. The company wants to apologize for the inconvenience caused by the incident"

The company is known for its corporate social responsible activities. For instance, the waffle company has recently invested some of its profit to communities in need. The company also cares for the environment and started the 5% for the Planet pledge, donating 5% of its sales to help save the environment. Moreover, the company is commonly known to provide consumers with high quality products.

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Incorrect labelling causes Lekkere Nederlandse Waffle Recall



The brand Lekkere Nederlandse announced Monday that it was recalling some of the waffles in different regions of the Netherlands because the allergen statements were incorrect.

Some 10,000 cases of StroopWaffles were recalled, the company announced on its website. Lekkere Nederlandse said in a statement: "To our surprise, routine testing revealed that instead of saying "contains almond and eggs", the statement on the package said "may contain almonds and eggs". This is a tragedy, as because of our unforgivable labelling error, the product did not have the correct product ingredient statement and allergen declaration. Hopefully, no case of illness due to the error has been reported."

The company has received no report of illness to date. Due to these events, Lekkere Nederlandse added: "We have no words to describe how deeply sorry and devastated we are about the incident and are taking this recall action as part of our commitment to the health and safety of the people who eat our foods. We offer our sincerest apologies for our terrible mistake"

The organization is known for its lack of environmentally responsible behaviors and was recently accused of serious environmental damage. The organization was also recently accused of child abuse in its factories. Moreover, the company is commonly known for consumers' recurring complaints about the product quality.

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Appendix B

Items/scales of the model variables

Description	Sources
<i>Trust</i>	<i>Hon and Grunig (1999).</i>
This organization treats its consumers fairly and justly. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)	
Whenever this organization makes an important decision, I know it will concern its consumers. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)	
This organization can be relied on to keep its promises. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)	
I believe that this organization takes the opinions of its consumers into account when making decisions. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)	
I feel very confident about this organization's skills. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)	
This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)	

*Forgiveness**Xie and Peng (2009).*

I would think favorably of this company. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

Given the company's response, I would condemn it. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

Given the company's response, I would forgive it. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

I would disapprove of this company. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

I feel sympathetic toward this company. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

*Purchase intention**Lin, Chen, Chiu, and Lee (2011).*

Given the chance, I intend to purchase from Lekkere Nederlandse. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

I will not hesitate to purchase from Lekkere Nederlandse in the future. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

It is likely that I will buy products from Lekkere Nederlandse in the near future. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)

I expect to purchase Lekkere Nederlandse in the near
future. (strongly disagree / strongly agree)
