Which spokesperson should be used in which crisis?

An experimental study into the effects of message frame, gender of the spokesperson and crisis severity on credibility of the spokesperson, emotions and trust in the organization.

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Abstract

Aim. An organization hopes to avoid a crisis, but most organizations have to face it during their existence. In this case, organizations make often use of a spokesperson. The stakeholders assess the crisis based on the presentation of this spokesperson. The spokesperson is at such a moment the public face of the organization. Therefore, it is important to give serious thoughts about which spokesperson and message are used. The purpose of this study was to experimentally investigate to what extent message frame (rational vs emotional), the gender of the spokesperson (male vs female) and the crisis severity (low vs high) influence the perceived credibility of the spokesperson, emotions (anger and sympathy) and trust in the organization.

Method. An online experiment, using 2 (message frame: rational vs emotional) x 2 (gender of the spokesperson: male vs female) x 2 (crisis severity: high vs low) research design was executed among 204 Dutch respondents. The respondents were exposed to one of the eight videos in which the variables have been manipulated.

Findings. The findings of this study show a trend effect of message framing on the amount of sympathy. Additionally, the results show that the gender of the spokesperson has a significant effect on expertise. A male spokesperson is perceived as more expert than a female spokesperson. The crisis severity had an effect on the amount of anger and sympathy. Furthermore, the study shows a trend in the interaction effect between message frame and crisis severity. A rational message frame scores better in a crisis with high severity than in a crisis with low severity. Other interactions or mediation effects are not found.

Conclusion. This study only found a few significant effects. This indicates that many factors can play a role in minimizing the damage in a crisis and that using the right spokesperson and the right message frame is really complex. Organizations should be very careful in their choices and further research is required.

Keywords: spokesperson, message frame, crisis severity, gender.

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1. Introduction

An organization hopes to avoid a crisis, but most organizations have to face it during their existence. An example is the Listeria contamination of meat products in the Netherlands in October 2019. Several products of the company Offerman contain the Listeria bacteria[1]. This contamination resulted in three deaths and one miscarriage in the last two years. The products of the company were recalled from all points of sale. The recall of the products and the media attention for the incident resulted in uncertainty for the consumers, especially for the consumers in the high-risk groups like pregnant women. They were not sure which meat products were safe to eat and which products were possibly contaminated. Midwives receive many calls from worried pregnant women asking for advice[2].

A crisis, such as the above described, can result in damage to the organization. The reputational damage caused by a crisis can result in financial damage and even threaten the organization's survival (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). To decrease the damage, clear communication is crucial during crises (Coombs, 2015). Nowadays, crisis communication occurs not only through press releases and print media but often more via audio-visual media. For example, organizations can post a video on their social media platforms with information about the incident. In this case, organizations make often use of a spokesperson. The spokesperson is at such a moment the public face of the organization. The stakeholders assess the crisis based on the presentation of the spokesperson (Coombs, 1999). Therefore, it is important to give serious thoughts about which spokesperson and message are used.

Most of the studies about crisis communication are conducted with textual responses or reactions of the organization (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015). Nowadays, as already described above, with the introduction of social media, crisis communication occurs not only through press releases and print media but often more via audio-visual media. In this type of media, the visual characteristics of the spokesperson are more visible. One of the most prominent visual characteristics of the spokesperson is gender, race, and age. Hong and Len-Riós (2015) research the effect of the race of the spokesperson on the spokesperson credibility and they found that in case of a product recall the credibility of black and white spokesperson are almost equal. There is also done research towards the age of the source. An older spokesperson is perceived as more

[1] https://nos.nl/artikel/2304630-in-twee-jaar-drie-doden-en-miskraam-door-listeriabacterie-in-vleeswaren.html
[2] https://nos.nl/artikel/2305159-onrust-onder-zwangeren-nvwa-komt-hier-en-daar-nog-mogelijk-besmet-vlees-tegen.html

credible compared with a younger spokesperson (Weibel, Wissmath, & Groner, 2008). The gender of the spokesperson can affect the perceived credibility of the spokesperson. According to Brownlow and Zebrowitz (1990), women in television commercials are perceived as less expert than men. The differences in the perceived expertise between males and females are studied in several contexts, for example, newscasters, tv commercials, blogs and politics (Brownlow & Zebrowitz, 1990; Weibel et al., 2008). However, at this moment there is only less research on gender and crisis communication.

The current studies in crisis communication are focused on the impact of emotional versus rational message frames (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015). Jin (2009) shows the importance of emotions in crisis communication. The use of emotions in the message can affect the evaluation of the spokesperson and the organization (Jin, Park & Len-Rios, 2010). An interesting gender stereotype is that women are the more emotional gender (Durik et al., 2006). It is possible, with the existence of this stereotype, that the gender of the spokesperson influences the effectiveness of the message frame. However, at this moment there is no information about the relation between the message frame and the gender of the spokesperson.

Furthermore, a crisis can also differ in severity. This severity can have an effect on the effectiveness of the message frame. Knowledge about the right message frame in combination with the gender of the spokesperson or the crisis severity can be helpful for organizations who face a crisis and help them decrease the damage. With this information, an organization can make conscious choices in the used spokesperson or in the used message frame. This can help the organization in limiting crisis damage. So studying these three factors and the relationship between these factors can offer new contributions to theory and practice and therefore the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: To what extent do gender of the spokesperson (female vs male), message frame (rational vs emotional) and crisis severity (high vs low) affect the perceived credibility of the spokesperson, emotions (anger and sympathy) and trust in the organization.

RQ2: To what extent do gender of the spokesperson (female vs male), message frame (rational vs emotional) and crisis severity (high vs low) interact and influence the perceived credibility of the spokesperson, emotions (anger and sympathy) and trust in the organization.

This study is organized as follows. In the next chapter, the theoretical framework will present an overview of the already existing research that is done. Based on the theoretical framework the hypothesis will be formulated. After that, the methodology of this study will be described followed by the results of the data analysis and the findings of this analysis. Afterward, the limitations and future research directions will be presented. The last part of this study will contain the conclusion of this research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Organizational crisis

A threat to corporate reputation is a crisis. Coombs (2007) describes a crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat " (p. 164). Crises damage the corporate reputation and can affect the interaction with the stakeholders (Dowling, 2002). The reputational damage caused by a crisis can result in financial damage and even threaten the organization's survival (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Communication is essential in crisis time. The use of the right response strategy can protect the organization by decreasing reputation damage (Allen & Caillouet, 1994).

A well-known theory in the field of crisis communication is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) of Coombs (2007). This theory predicts the level of reputational threat of an organization based on the crisis type, the crisis history and the prior relationship reputation (Coombs, 2007). The SCCT is informed by the Attribution Theory. According to this theory, people constantly look to find causes or make attributions to events. Especially if these events are negative, which is the case during a crisis (Weiner, 1985). In the SCCT this attribution is called the crisis responsibility and can be defined as how much the organization's stakeholders attribute the crisis to the organization. Coombs (2007) stated that a higher perceived crisis responsibility of the organization leads to more reputation damage.

Attributions of causality result in emotional reactions (e.g., sympathy or anger) of the stakeholders (Weiner, 1985). When the stakeholder attributes a high responsibility to the organization, the negative emotions, like anger, increase and positive emotions, like sympathy, decrease (Coombs, 2007). Negative emotions have a negative effect on purchase intentions or can even result in actively boycotting the organization (Wetzer, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2007). In addition, there is also a relationship between emotions and trust. Positive emotions increase the trust in an organization, while negative emotions decrease this trust (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005).

Furthermore, a crisis can also have a direct effect on trust (McManus, Holtzman, Lazarus, Anderberg, & Jahansoozi, 2006). There are multiple examples of organizations that lost trust after a crisis (e.g. Volkswagen & Boeing). Trust can be formulated as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.14). Trust of stakeholders is crucial for organizations and the success of organizations. Trust

supports and builds the long-term relationship between stakeholders and organizations. Having trust in an organization provokes supportive behavior and protects against unsupportive behavior (Huang, 2001; Ki & Hon, 2007). Furthermore, several studies show the relation between trust and purchase intentions. More trust in an organization leads to a higher degree of purchase intentions (Gefen & Straub, 2004; McCole & Palmer, 2001).

2.2 Credibility of the spokesperson

In times of crisis, stakeholders seek information to deal with the uncertainty of the crisis (Weick, 1995). Therefore, an organization facing a crisis needs effective communication. The spokesperson is the person who gives the official response and explanation about the situation. The stakeholders will assess the organization based on the response of the spokesperson (Coombs, 1999). The choice for the right spokesperson in the right situation is crucial for the organization to restrict the reputational damage (Arpan, 2002). The importance of a credible spokesperson is supported in multiple studies. Spokespersons who are more credible are more likely to persuade the stakeholders to believe or accept or believe the message (Horai, Naccar, & Fatoullah, 1974; Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953; Schulman & Worral, 1970). The importance of the credibility of the spokesperson is also shown in the research of van Zoonen & van der Meer (2015). They found that the credibility of the spokesperson determines the overall attitude toward the organization in a crisis situation. A spokesperson with high credibility will result in a better overall attitude towards the organization compared with a spokesperson with lower credibility (van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015).

Credibility is a combination of three dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). However, Pornpitakpan (2004) stated, in her review about five decades of the persuasiveness of source credibility, that there is no evidence and clear indication for a relation between the physical attractiveness of the source and the source credibility. Therefore, the credibility of the source will in this study be based on the two dimensions trustworthiness and expertise.

Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which stakeholders perceive the intentions of the spokespersons as valid (Ohanian, 1990). Furthermore, trustworthiness refers to the stakeholder's confidence that the source is objective and honest without any manipulation or deception (Ohanian, 1990). When a source is seen as objective and honest, it is more likely that stakeholders assess the message as believable (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Several studies show

the influence of trustworthiness on attitude changes (Hovland et al., 1953; Johnson & Izzett, 1969).

Expertise refers to the fact that the stakeholders perceive the communicator as capable of making the correct statements (Hovland et al., 1953). Ohanian (1990) sees expertise as the knowledge that the communicator seems to possess to support the claims made in their message. However, it does not matter if the spokesperson is really an expert, as long as the audience sees the spokesperson as an expert (Erdogan, 1999). When the stakeholders perceive the spokesperson as an expert, the validity of the message will increase (Hovland et al, 1953). In addition, if the audience sees the spokesperson as an expert, it is more likely that the message will lead to an attitude change (Wiener & Mowen, 1986).

2.3 Message framing

When an organizational crisis arises, quick response of the organization is essential. The organization can decide to use a message frame in its response. By using a frame in the message, the organization chooses to focus on certain aspects of the message. The audience will pay more attention to these aspects (Druckman, 2001). According to Cho and Gower (2006), people's evaluation of a crisis has influenced the way the information is presented. The message can be framed by "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The use of the right message frame in the right situations can play an important role in minimizing the reputation damage of an organization during a crisis (Coombs, 2004).

In this study, two types of frames will be used: rational and emotional. A rational framed message shows information in a direct, straightforward, and objective way (Claeys, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013). The message is especially information focused and will attract the attention of the audiences to the given information (Moon & Rhee, 2012). The emotional frame appeal to the audiences' own emotions (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). According to Moon and Rhee (2012), "an emotional frame focuses 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" (p. 681).

2.3.1 Rational frame

An organization that uses a rational frame focus on factual and concrete information (Moon & Rhee, 2012). Because the audience especially focuses on the arguments in the message, the

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frame is often used to change the beliefs of the reader (Yoo & Rhee, 2012). Cleays and Cauberghe (2014) found that a rational message frame leads to a more positive post-crisis attitude toward the organization in case of high crisis involvement of the audience. The need for high involved stakeholders is to collect information, the rational framed matches this need by focussing on the content of the message (Yoo & Maclnnis, 2005).

2.3.2 Emotional frame

An organization that uses an emotional frame includes subjective, evaluative properties and emotionally loaded adjectives in their message (Stafford & Day, 1995). The emotional frame appeals to the public own emotions and therefore influences how consumers perceive the crisis (Moon & Rhee, 2012). Through the use of emotions, the organization becomes more human (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). There are studies that show that when an organization expresses emotions, it is more likely that they will be forgiven by the stakeholders (Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Kauffman, 2008; Legg, 2009). Additionally, Rosselli, Skelly, and Mackie (1995) show that the audience is more likely to accept the crisis response when the message includes emotions compared with a message that does not include emotions. According to Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014), showing emotions in the message can lead to decreasing feelings of anger towards the organization Furthermore, the evaluation of the stakeholder is less negative when emotions are used and therefore the damage on trust in the organization is also less (Claeys, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013). These findings lead to the following hypothesis:

H1: The use of an emotional message frame leads to a) more trust in the organization b) less anger c) more sympathy, compared with the use of a rational message frame.

2.4 Gender of the spokesperson

A crisis situation creates uncertainty for the stakeholders. In times of uncertainty, people are more sensitive to the visual characteristics of the source (Coleman & Wu, 2006). One of the most prominent visual characteristics of a spokesperson is the gender and therefore the gender can influence the credibility of the spokesperson (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009). Flanagin and Metzger (2003) state that the gender of the source can be seen as physical characteristics that have a direct influence on the persuasiveness.

Several studies explored the difference between men and women in perceived expertise. In most of the studies, men are perceived as more expert than women (Armstrong & McAdams,

2009; Brownlow & Zebrowitz, 1990; Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). For example research on gender differences in television commercials, a male television spokesperson is perceived as more expert (Brownlow & Zebrowitz, 1990). This difference in perceived expertise can be explained by the still existing gender stereotype roles. Women are more often occupying roles as caretaking, domestic, and lower status occupational roles while men often occupying higher status occupational roles (Carli, 2001). However, in the case of trustworthiness, it is the other way around. A female spokesperson is perceived as more trustworthy than a male spokesperson (Brownlow & Zebrowitz, 1990). Gender stereotypes see women as more honest, ethical, and more concerned about others and therefore perceived as more trustworthy (Huddy & Terkilsen, 1993; Paul & Smith, 2008).

However, perceived credibility is context related. For example, a female spokesperson in a female-related issue is seen as more expert than a male in combination with a female-related issue (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). In this study, there is made use of a gender-neutral issue and therefore the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The use of a male spokesperson leads to a) higher expertise b) lower trustworthiness, compared with the use of a female spokesperson.

2.5 Relation between message frame and gender spokesperson

An interaction effect is expected between the used message frame and the gender of the spokesperson. Showing emotions can help to decrease the experienced emotions by the stakeholders (Van der Meer and Verhoeven, 2014). Research executed in America found that 90% of the respondents see women as the more emotional gender (Gallup, 2000). In this research also women were included, therefore it can be concluded that also women see themselves as the more emotional gender (Gallup, 2000). In addition, Renner and Masch (2019) studied the emotional expression of German politicians in news broadcasts. They concluded that female politicians express more emotions in news broadcasts (Renner & Masch, 2019). This difference between men and women is established in previous research, the terms "very emotional" and "very aware of the feelings of others" were seen as more characteristics of females than males (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972). There can be stated that emotions are more seen as female characteristics. A female showing emotions

are seen as more natural than a male showing emotions. Therefore the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: The use of an emotional message frame in combination with a female spokesperson leads to a) more trust in the organization b) less anger c) more sympathy, compared with an emotional message frame in combination with a male spokesperson.

2.6 Crisis severity

Every crisis is different. For example, the intensity of a crisis differs per case. This intensity of the crisis is called the severity. The crisis severity is especially focused on the amount of damage caused by the crisis. Coombs and Holladay (2002) defined crisis severity as: "the amount of damage generated by a crisis including financial, human, and environmental damage" (p. 169). The crisis severity influences the reputation damage. High crisis severity results in a higher amount of reputation damage for the organization (Claeys, Cauberghe & Vyncke, 2010). However, the impact of a crisis is not similar for each stakeholder. The perceived severity increases when the crisis negatively influences the personal goals of the stakeholders. For example, decreasing profit by the organization will results in a high perceived severity for shareholders compared with other stakeholders or if the crisis is about a product you consume, there are more consequences and therefore you experience a higher severity.

Furthermore, findings of previous studies show that the perceived severity influences the perception of the responsibility. Laufer, Gillespie, McBride, and Gonzalez (2005) found that a more severe crisis leads to more blame for the organization. If the severity increases, the public will attribute a greater responsibility to the organization and the reputation damage will increase (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). As already described above, according to the SCCT, a person attributes responsibility for the crisis and will experience an emotional reaction to the crisis. A high attributed crisis responsibility will lead to more negative emotions (Coombs, 2007). Anger and sympathy are the most important emotions according to the Attribution Theory. If the audience judges the organization as highly responsible, anger is often evoked and the sympathy reduced (Wiener, 2006). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: High crisis severity crisis leads to a) lower trust in the organization b) more anger c) less sympathy, compared with low crisis severity.

2.7 Relation between crisis severity and message frame

The crisis severity can have a moderating effect on the message frame. There is only less research about this effect so far. However, research of Claeys and Cauberghe (2014) showed that a crisis with a high perceived severity leads to higher involvement of the stakeholders. In addition, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) say that when there is a high involvement of the stakeholders, the arguments in the message are more important because stakeholders look for information and therefore especially focus on the content of the message. In the case of low involvement in the crisis, stakeholders are more focussed on simple assumptions and cues (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). A rational message frame focuses more on factual and concrete information and contains more arguments (Moon & Rhee, 2012).

However, a rational reaction to a crisis can be perceived as distant, cold, and not involved. This is in contradiction to the experienced emotions of the stakeholders. The higher the severity of a crisis, the more perceived responsibility and this will lead to more negative emotions (Coombs, 2007). According to Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014), showing emotions in the message can lead to decreasing feelings of anger towards the organization. Furthermore, the organization turns out to be perceived as more human (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). This information leads to the following hypothesis:

H5: The effects of the used message frame are moderated by the severity of the crisis, suggesting that an emotional message frame leads to a) more trust in the organization b) less anger c)more sympathy when the crisis severity is high, compared with the use of a rational message frame and a high crisis severity.

2.8 Mediating effect of the credibility of the spokesperson

The credibility of the spokesperson can work as a mediator for the relationship between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variables trust in the organization, anger, and sympathy. According to Zoonen & van der Meer (2015), a credible spokesperson has a positive effect on organizational reputation. A spokesperson that is perceived as trustworthy is seen as objective and honest without any manipulation or deception and therefore it is more likely that the source can be trust and so the organization is perceived as trustworthy (Ohanian, 1990). The following hypothesis is formulated:

H6: The credibility of the spokesperson works as a mediator for the relationship between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variables a) trust in the organization b) anger c) sympathy.

2.9 Conceptual model

All literature and hypothesis are summarized in a conceptual model. This model can be found in Figure 1.
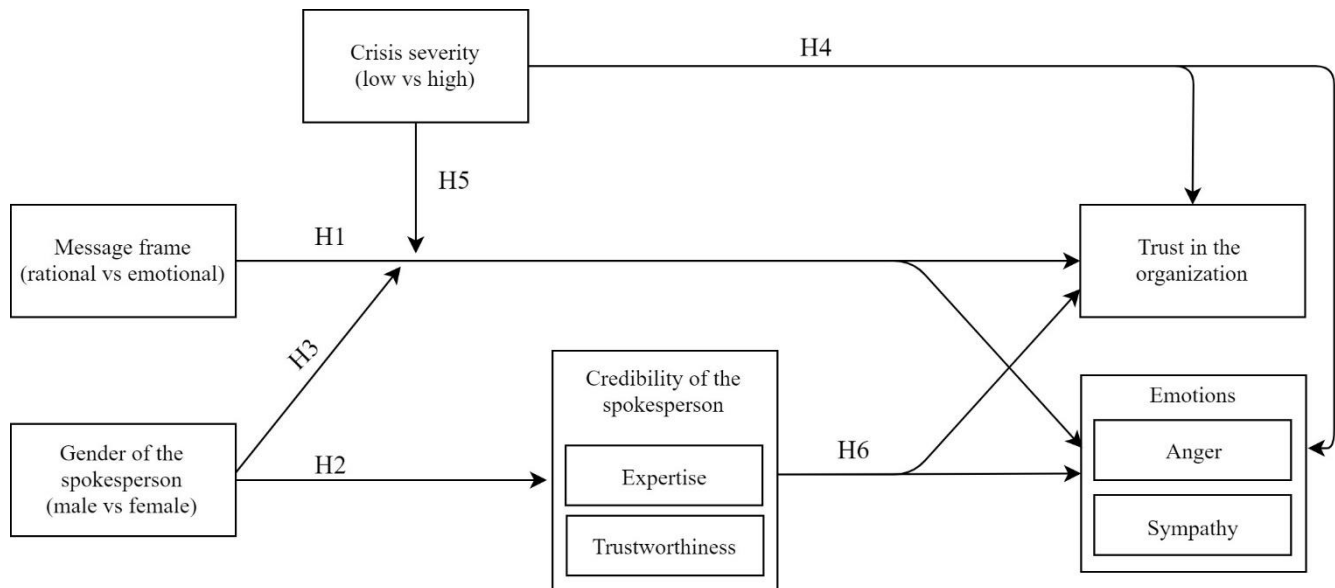

Figure 1: Conceptual model

3. Method

3.1 Research design

In order to test the hypotheses, this study had a 2 (message frame: rational vs emotional) x 2 (gender of the spokesperson: male vs female) x 2 (crisis severity: high vs low) research design. This research design resulted in eight different conditions. The eight conditions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Scenarios gender, message frame, and severity

Scenario 1	Scenario 5
Male, rational, high	Female, rational, high
Scenario 2	Scenario 6
Male, rational, low	Female, rational, low
Scenario 3	Scenario 7
Male, emotional, high	Female, emotional, high
Scenario 4	Scenario 8
Male, emotional, low	Female, emotional, low

3.2 Stimulus material

With a 2 x 2 x 2 design are there eight different scenarios, an overview of all the scenarios is given in Table 1. The effect of the gender of the spokesperson is manipulated by using a male and female spokesperson. Both spokespersons had comparable ages, races, and attractiveness, this is established in the pre-test. In this way, these personal features of the spokespersons could not influence the level of credibility. There is made use of videos. In this way, the gender of the spokesperson was directly visible for the respondents. Furthermore, the rest of the settings in the videos were as neutral and similar as possible. Both spokespersons were sitting before a white wall and at a brown table with a microphone on it. Screenshots of a male and female condition can be found in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

The frame of the message is manipulated in a rational or emotional frame. In the rational frame, the message is given in a direct, straightforward, and objective way (Clayes, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013). The manipulated emotional frame focuses 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). The text of the spokespersons can be found in Appendix 1.

The severity of the crisis was manipulated by using two different types of crises. In

manipulation with low crisis severity, there was a problem with the labeling of the product. The amount of sugar in the product is displayed incorrectly. On the label was mentioned that the product contains 10 grams of sugar instead of 30 grams. In the case of the high crisis severity, the ice creams contained a dangerous bacteria that leads to food poisoning. There were already some consumers with serious food poison.

Figure 2: Screenshot of a scenario with a male spokesperson.

Figure 3: Screenshot of a scenario with a female spokesperson.

3.3 Pre-test

In order to determine the correct stimulus materials and manipulations for the main study, a pre-test was conducted. In this pre-test, fifteen people participated. Firstly, the respondents saw ten different products. They had to indicate, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from totally female until totally male, if they experience the product as female or male. This established the gender neutrality of ice creams (M=2.87), the used product in the main study.

Furthermore, the respondents saw pictures of possible spokespersons. From the in total four pictures (2 male and 2 female), the respondents were randomly assigned to two pictures (1 male and 1 female). The aim of this part of the pre-test was to determine the two most suitable and comparable spokespersons. The respondents had to answer questions about trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. The most comparable man and woman were used in the main study.

3.4 Procedure

The link to the online experiment was distributed via snowball sampling. Respondents of the survey were approached via social media, WhatsApp and face-to-face and asked to participate in the online questionnaire. First, the respondents were informed about the rights as respondent and they had to give their permission to participate in the survey. The first questions in the questionnaire were about demographic characteristics. After that, the respondents saw a video that included one of the eight conditions. The respondents were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions. After watching the video they had to answer questions about the credibility of the spokesperson, emotions, trust in the organization and their personal experience towards the crisis. Subsequently, the respondents saw the same video once again and they had to answer questions about the message frame and crisis severity. Finally, they were thanked for participating in the survey and informed about the use of a fictitious organization and crisis.

3.5 Manipulation check

Before analyzing the manipulations a factor analysis was conducted. This factor analysis is based on the main study and included 204 respondents. With this factor analysis, it was possible to see if the items of the manipulation check loaded on the right construct. Table 2 shows the result of this factor analysis. It can be concluded that all items load on the correct constructs and no items were deleted.

There were four items for the message frame. The respondents had to answer the items on a 7-point Likert scale with opposite options. They had to answer the question "I experience the reaction of the spokesperson as.." on scales from 1= emotional until 7= rational, 1= informal until 7= formal, 1= compassionate until 7= cold-hearted and 1= personal until 7= impersonal. The scenarios with the emotional message frame scored an average of 4.50 (SD=1.35) and the rational message frame scored an average of 5.11 (SD=1.20). A T-test determined a significant difference (t(204)=-3.40, p <.00) between the two message frames.

The manipulation check for crisis severity consisted of three items. The respondents had to answer the items on a 7-point Likert scale with opposite options. They had to answer the question: "I experience the incident as.." on scales from 1= not sever until 7=really sever, 1=not dangerous until 7=really dangerous and 1=harmless until 7=harmful. The scenario with low severity scored an average of 3.68 (SD=1.44) and the high severity scenario scored an average of 5.13 (SD=1.10). A T-test determined a significant difference (t(204)=-8.11, p <.00) between the two types of severity.

Table 2

Factor analysis for the items of the manipulation check

Item	1	2
Message frame		
Harmful - harmless	.94	
Not dangerous – really dangerous	.93	
Not sever – really sever	.91	
Crisis severity		
Personal - impersonal		.88
Compassionate - cold-hearted		.85
Emotional – rational		.81
Informal – formal		.59
Cronbach's Alpha	.92	.81

Table 3 gives an overview of the results of independent t-tests. As described above, the manipulations message framing and crisis severity are both significant. It can be concluded that the manipulations for message frame and crisis severity both worked.

Table 3

Mean scores, standard deviations and independent t-tests of the manipulation check

Manipulation	M	SD	Sig. (2-tailed)	t
Framing			.00	-3.40
Emotional	4.50	1.35		
Rational	5.11	1.20		
Severity			.00	-8.11
Low	3.68	1.44		
High	5.13	1.10		

note: measured on a 7 points Likert scale.

3.6 Participants

A total amount of 230 respondents participated in this study. 15 respondents were deleted because they did not watch the video in total. Furthermore, there were 11 respondents that answer the question "I know the spokesperson in the video" with yes and therefore excluded from the data. This resulted in 204 correct filled in questionnaires. From this 204 respondents were 88 males (43.1%), 115 females (56.4%) and one person answer the question with "other" (0.5%). The average age of the respondents was 28.86 year (SD=12.94). Most respondents had a WO Bachelor's degree (27.9%), HBO degree (21.6%) or WO master's degree (21.1%). A total overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents per condition can be found in Table 4.

Table 4
Demographics of the respondents per condition

Scenario	Gender	Age (M)	Education	N	%
1 Male, rational, high	11 male 14 female	28.12	1 low 5 middle 19 high	25	12.3%
2 Male, rational, low	13 male 13 male	28.21	2 low 9 middle 15 high	26	12.7%
3 Male, emotional, high	9 male 17 female	31.38	0 low 9 middle 17 high	26	12.7%
4 Male, emotional, low	15 male 11 female	27.44	1 low 5 middle 21 high	27	13.2%
5 Female, rational, high	12 male 17 female	28.03	0 low 10 middle 17 high	29	14.2%
6 Female, rational, low	10 male 12 female	26.45	0 low 5 middle 17 high	22	10.8%
7 Female, emotional, high	11 male 16 female	32.59	0 low 6 middle 23 high	27	13.2%
8 Female, emotional, low	7 male 15 female	28.09	0 low 7 middle 15 high	22	10.8%
Total	88 male 115 female	28.86	4 low 56 middle 144 high	204	100%

3.7 Measurements

As described in the theoretical framework, credibility exists of two constructs: expertise and trustworthiness. The constructs contained multiple items. For expertise examples of items were "the spokesperson is informed" and "the spokesperson is efficient". For the construct trustworthiness, examples of items were "the spokesperson transmits credibility" and "the spokesperson is trustworthy" (Ohanian, 1991). To measure the emotions sympathy and ager, McDonald, Glendon, and Sparks (2011) formulate eight items. Examples of items were "I'm angry" and "I feel sorry". Trust was measured with the scale from Hon & Grunig (1999). They use six items to determine trust. Examples of items were: "This organization treats people like me fairly and justly" and "This organization can be relied on to keep its promises". The total overview of all the constructs and the additional items can be found in Appendix 2.

The respondents had to answer all the statements on a 7 points Likert scale and indicated their level of agreement with the given statement. The scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). To be sure of the manipulations, a manipulation check was added. At the end of the survey, the respondents had to answer questions about the gender of the spokesperson, the used message frame and the severity of the crisis.

3.8 Validity and reliability

To establish the validity of the survey, a factor analysis was conducted. The item for sympathy "I feel sorry" did not load on the correct construct. Instead of loading on the construct sympathy, the item load on the construct anger. This item was deleted. Table 5 shows the factor analysis for the remaining items. Furthermore, the Cronbach's alpha of the constructs is measured, the results can also be found in Table 5. All constructs scored above .750 and therefore all the dependent variables were valid and no more items were deleted.

Table 5

Factor analysis for the dependent variables

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Expertise					
Qualified	.80				
Intelligent	.80				
Expert	.72				
Knowledgeable	.72				
Experienced	.72				
Skilled	.66				
Trust in the organization					
This organization can be relied on to keep its promises		.72			
This organization treats people like me fairly and justly		.70			
I feel very confident about this organization's skills		.69			
Whenever this organization makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me		.69			
This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do		.68			
I believe that this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions		.67			
Trustworthiness					
Honest			.82		
Sincere			.74		
Transmits credibility			.72		
Reliable			.64		
Anger					
Disgusted				.77	
Angry				.77	
Annoyed				.74	
Outranged				.74	
Sympathy					
Compassion					.82
Empathy					.72
Sympathetic					.67
Eigenvalue	10.38	2.20	1.54	1.18	.91
Explained Variance	45.15	9.58	6.70	5.13	3.94
Cronbach's Alpha	.90	.90	.89	.81	.79

4. Results

In this chapter, the results of the different analyses will be discussed. First, the correlation between all the dependent variables will be shown. Second, the main effects of the independent variables on emotions (anger and sympathy) and trust will be described. Subsequently, the interaction effect will be shown. Finally, the mediating effect will be discussed.

4.1 Correlation

First, a correlation analysis of the dependent variables was conducted. With a correlation analysis, it is possible to establish the absence of multicollinearity. Multicollinearity is a problem because it undermines the statistical significance of a variable. In Table 6, the results of the Pearson's correlation are shown. All the constructs have strong correlations among each other and all variables have a significant effect. However, the correlation is not over .80 and hereby the presence of multicollinearity can be excluded (Mansfield & Helms, 1982).

Furthermore, the relationship between the dependent variables indicates the possible mediating effect of the dependent variables' anger, sympathy, and trust through expertise and trustworthiness. The actual mediating effect will be discussed in chapter 4.4.

Table 6
Pearson's Correlation between variables

	Expertise	Trustworthiness	Anger	Sympathy	Trust
Expertise	1				
Trustworthiness	.69**	1			
Anger	-.33**	-.47**	1		
Sympathy	.47**	.55**	-.25**	1	
Trust	.65**	.67**	-.51**	.58**	1

**Significant effect $p<0.05$

4.2 Main effects

To see what the effects of the independent variables are on all the dependent variables, a MANOVA analysis was conducted. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 7. The results indicate that the message frame (Wilks' Λ = .94, $F(5, 192)$=2.30, p=.05) and crisis severity (Wilks' Λ = .91, $F(5, 192)$= 3.94, p=.00) have significant effects on the dependent variables. The exact effects of the independent variables will be discussed in the upcoming paragraphs. Furthermore, the results indicate that there are no interaction effects. These interaction effects will be discussed in chapter 4.3.

Table 7
MANOVA effect for independent variables

	Wilks' Λ	df	F	Sig.
Message frame	.94	5, 192	2.29	.05*
Gender of the spokesperson	.97	5, 192	1.28	.28
Crisis severity	.91	5, 192	3.94	.00**
Frame x gender	.99	5, 192	.40	.85
Frame x severity	.98	5, 192	.99	.43
Gender x severity	.99	5, 192	.30	.91
Frame x gender x severity	.97	5, 192	1.29	.30

*Significant effect p<0.05, **Significant effect p<0.01

4.2.1 Message frame

Overall there is a significant effect of the message frame on the dependent variables (Wilks' Λ = .94, $F(5, 192)=2.30$, $p=.05$). The Between-Subject Tests show that the message frame has no significant effect on anger, sympathy, and trust in the organization. Therefore, hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c are not supported. However, there is an indication that there exists a trend effect of message frame on the sympathy ($F(1,196)=3.18$, $p=.08$). An emotional message frame scores higher (M=3.68) on sympathy than a rational message frame (M=3.40). An overview of the MANOVA analysis can be found in Table 8

Table 8
MANOVA effects of the message frame

Dependent measure	Sum of sq.	df	Mean sq.	F	Sig.
Expertise	1.22	1	1.22	1.04	.31
Trustworthiness	.93	1	.93	.53	.47
Anger	.34	1	.34	.23	.63
Sympathy	4.86	1	4.86	3.18	.08
Trust	.00	1	.00	.00	.98

*Significant effect p <0.05, **Significant effect p <0.01

In Table 9, the means and standard deviations of the message frame are presented. An emotional message frame scores higher (M=3.30) on anger than a rational message frame (M=3.22) and the scores on trust are exactly the same in the emotional (M=4.37) and rational (M=4.37) condition.

Table 9
Means and standard deviations of the message frame

Dependent measure	Emotional			Rational		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Expertise	102	4.68	1.04	102	4.51	1.14
Trustworthiness	102	4.62	1.44	102	4.75	1.18
Anger	102	3.30	1.28	102	3.22	1.14
Sympathy	102	3.68	1.29	102	3.40	1.24
Trust	102	4.37	1.07	102	4.37	1.07

Note: measured on a 7-points scale

4.2.2 Gender of the spokesperson

Overall there is no significant effect of gender of the spokesperson on the dependent variables (Wilks' Λ = .97, $F(5, 192)$= 1.28, p=.28). However, the Between-Subject Tests show that there is a significant effect of the gender of the spokesperson on the expertise ($F(1,196)$=4.20, p=.04). A male spokesperson scores significantly higher on expertise (M=4.75) than a female spokesperson (M=4.43). Therefore, hypothesis 2a is supported. There are no effects found for the gender of the spokesperson and the trustworthiness and therefore hypothesis 2b is not supported. An overview of the MANOVA analysis can be found in Table 10.

Table 10
MANOVA effects of gender of the spokesperson

Dependent measure	Sum of sq.	df	Means sq.	F	Sig.
Expertise	5.19	1	5.19	4.20	.04*
Trustworthiness	.69	1	.69	.39	.58
Anger	.24	1	.24	.17	.69
Sympathy	.924	1	.92	.60	.44
Trust	3.20	1	3.20	2.58	.11

*Significant effect p <0.05, **Significant effect p <0.01

A male spokesperson scores higher on trustworthiness (M=4.74) than a female spokesperson (M=4.63). However, as already described above, this difference is not significant. The other means and standard deviations of the gender of the spokesperson can be found in Table 11.

Table 11
Means and standard deviations of the gender of the spokesperson

Dependent measure	Male			Female		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Expertise	104	4.75	.98	100	4.43	1.18
Trustworthiness	104	4.74	1.25	100	4.63	1.38
Anger	104	3.21	1.20	100	3.30	1.22
Sympathy	104	3.59	1.25	100	3.48	1.29
Trust	104	4.50	.99	100	4.37	1.20

Note: measured on a 7-points scale

4.2.3 Crisis severity

Overall there is a significant effect (Wilks' Λ = .91, F(5, 192)= 3.94, p=.00) of crisis severity on the dependent variables. The crisis severity has a significant effect on anger (F(1,196)=4.54, p=.03). The dependent variable anger scores significantly higher when the crisis severity is high (M=3.79), compared with a low crisis severity (M=3.06). Thus, hypothesis 4b is supported.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference between crisis severity and sympathy (F(1,196)=9.28, p=.00). There is more sympathy in crisis with high severity (M=3.79) compared with a low crisis severity (M=3.26). This effect is the opposite of the expected. Therefore, hypothesis 4c is not supported effect. There is no significant effect on trust. Therefore, hypothesis 4a is also not supported. All effects of crisis severity on the dependent variables can be found in Table 12.

Table 12
Manova effects of crisis severity

Dependent measure	Sum of sq.	df	Mean sq.	F	Sig.
Expertise	1.55	1	1.55	1.33	.25
Trustworthiness	2.04	1	2.04	1.26	.28
Anger	6.68	1	6.68	4.54	.03*
Sympathy	14.19	1	14.19	9.28	.00*
Trust	.25	1	.25	.21	.65

*Significant effect p <0.05, **Significant effect p <0.01

Table 13 shows the means and standard deviations of crisis severity on the dependent variables. The trust in the organization is higher in de condition with the high crisis severity (M=4.40) than the condition with the low crisis severity (M=4.34)

Table 13
Means and standard deviations of crisis severity

Dependent measure	Low			High		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Expertise	97	4.52	1.11	107	4.59	1.07
Trustworthiness	97	4.59	1.34	107	4.69	1.29
Anger	97	3.06	1.23	107	3.43	1.16
Sympathy	97	3.26	1.24	107	3.79	1.25
Trust	97	4.34	1.06	107	4.40	1.15

Note: measured on a 7-points scale

4.3 Interaction effects

To test the interaction effects of the message frame and gender of the spokesperson on the dependent variables and the interaction effect of the message frame and crisis severity on the dependent variables, a MANOVA was conducted. The results show that there were no significant interaction effects. Table 14 shows an overview of all the interaction effects. Therefore, hypotheses 3a, 3b, 3c, 5a, 5b, and 5c are not supported. However, the interaction between the message frame and the crisis severity on the dependent variable sympathy ($F(1,196)=2.90$, $p=.09$) indicates a trend. The scores for sympathy were higher when the message frame was rational in combination with a high severity crisis ($M_{rational \times high}=3.78$), compared with a rational message frame with a low severity crisis ($M_{rational \times low}=2.97$). This in contradiction with the expectation. This effect can be found in Figure 4.

Table 14
MANOVA for the interaction effects

		Sum of sq.	df	Mean sq.	F	Sig.
Frame x gender	Expertise	.05	1	.05	.04	.84
	Trustworthiness	1.76	1	1.76	1.00	.32
	Anger	.01	1	.01	.01	.95
	Sympathy	.78	1	.78	.51	.48
	Trust	.02	1	.02	.02	.90
Frame x severity	Expertise	1.37	1	1.37	1.17	.28
	Trustworthiness	.75	1	.75	.43	.51
	Anger	.19	1	.19	.13	.72
	Sympathy	4.44	1	4.44	2.90	.09
	Trust	.07	1	.07	.06	.81
Gender x severity	Expertise	.14	1	.14	.12	.73
	Trustworthiness	.15	1	.15	.09	.77
	Anger	.27	1	.27	.18	.67
	Sympathy	1.92	1	1.92	1.25	.26
	Trust	.46	1	.46	.37	.54
Frame x gender x severity	Expertise	2.49	1	2.49	2.13	.15
	Trustworthiness	.98	1	.98	.59	.46
	Anger	.02	1	.02	.02	.90
	Sympathy	1.36	1	1.36	.89	.35
	Trust	.49	1	.49	.39	.53

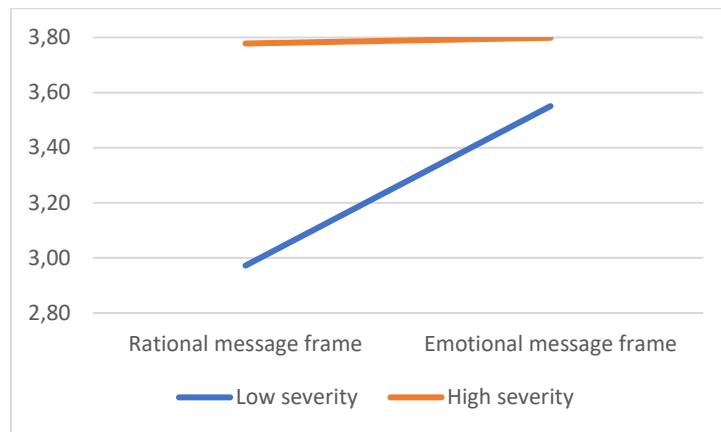*Significant effect p<0.05, **Significant effect p<0.01

Figure 4: Interaction effect between message frame and crisis severity on sympathy

4.4 Mediating effect of the credibility of the spokesperson

To test the mediating effects of the gender of the spokesperson on emotions and trust in the organization through the credibility of the spokesperson, Hayes' process was used. Before the mediation can be confirmed four steps should be carried out (Barion & Kenny, 1986). Step 1 is verifying a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. Step 2 is verifying a significant effect of the independent variable on the mediator. Step 3 confirms the significance of the relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable in the presence of the independent variable. Step 4 confirms the insignificance of the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable in the presence of the mediator.

4.4.1 Mediating effect on the relationship between gender of the spokesperson and trust

The Hayes' process in SPSS showed that there is no significant effect between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variable trust in the organization (b = -.10, t(200) = -.96, p = .34). This means that the conditions of step 1 are not met and therefore the credibility of the spokesperson does not work as a mediator on the effect of the gender of the spokesperson on the trust in the organization. Therefore, hypothesis 6a is not supported.

4.4.2 Mediating effect on the relationship between gender of the spokesperson and emotions

The Hayes' process in SPSS showed that there is no significant effect between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variable sympathy (b = -.00, t(200) = -.01, p = .99). This means that the conditions of step 1 are not met and therefore the credibility of the spokesperson does not work as a mediator on the effect of gender of the spokesperson on the perceived sympathy.

Furthermore, the test also showed that there is no significant effect between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variable anger (b = .05,

t(200) = .31, p = .76). It can be concluded that the credibility of the spokesperson has no mediating effect on the relationship between the gender of the spokesperson and emotions and therefore hypotheses 6b and 6c are not supported.

4.5 Hypotheses

Table 15

Overview of the supported or not supported hypotheses

	Description	Supported/ not supported
H1	The use of an emotional message frame leads to a) more trust in the organization b) less anger c) more sympathy, compared with the use of a rational message frame.	a) not supported b) not supported c) not supported
H2	The use of a male spokesperson leads to a) higher expertise b) lower trustworthiness of the spokesperson, compared with the use of a female spokesperson.	a) supported b) not supported
H3	The use of an emotional message frame in combination with a female spokesperson leads to a) more trust in the organization b) less anger c) more sympathy, compared with an emotional message frame in combination with a male spokesperson.	a) not supported b) not supported c) not supported
H4	High crisis severity crisis leads to a) lower trust in the organization b) more anger c) less sympathy, compared with low crisis severity.	a) not supported b) supported c) not supported
H5	The effects of the used message frame are moderated by the severity of the crisis, suggesting that an emotional message frame leads to a) more trust in the organization b) less anger c) more sympathy when the crisis severity is high, compared with the use of a rational message frame and a high crisis severity.	a) not supported b) not supported c) not supported
H6	The credibility of the spokesperson works as a mediator for the relationship between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variables a) trust in the organization b) anger c) sympathy.	a) not supported b) not supported c) not supported

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to experimentally investigate to what extent message frame (rational vs emotional), the gender of the spokesperson (male vs female) and the crisis severity (low vs high) influence the perceived credibility of the spokesperson, emotions (anger and sympathy) and trust in the organization and how this interact with each other.

5.1 Message frame

This study did not find significant effects between the used message frame and the trust in the organization and emotions. However, there is found a trend between the message frame and sympathy. The sympathy was higher when there was made use of an emotional message frame. For anger, there was barely a difference between the rational and emotional message frames. This in contradiction to the study of Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014). They stated that the use of emotions in a message reduces the anger of stakeholders. An explanation of why the scores for anger are barely lower in the emotional framed condition compared with the rational framed condition could be that in general the rational message frame evoked less feelings, so also anger feelings. Claeys, Cauberghe and Leysen (2013) describe a rational message frame as direct, straightforward and objective without referring to emotions. It is possible that because of the omitted emotions in the reaction, the stakeholder also evoked less emotions and therefore experienced less anger.

Furthermore, there was no significant effect between the message frame and trust in the organization. The trust in the organization was with the use of a rational message frame exactly the same as with the use of an emotional message frame. This is in contrast with Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), they say that trust in the organization increase when an organization communicates emotions in their message. An explanation could be the existence of the relationship between emotions and trust. According to Dunn and Schweitzer (2005), positive emotions increase the trust in an organization, while negative emotions decrease this trust. They found that when the stakeholder experience anger, the trust in the organization decreases. The fact that there was no difference between the amount of anger in a rational message response and emotional message response, may influence the effect of the message frame on the trust in the organization.

5.2 Gender of the spokesperson

This study found a significant effect between the gender of the spokesperson and expertise. This in line with the expectations that overall a male is perceived as more expert (Brownlow & Zebrowitz, 1990). However, no relationship was found between the gender of the spokesperson and trustworthiness. There was expected that a female was perceived as more trustworthy because they are seen as more honest, ethical, and concerned about others (Huddy & Terkilsen, 1993; Paul & Smith, 2008). This difference can be caused by other characteristics of the spokesperson. For example, O'Connor and Barclay (2017) stated that the voice of the person also influences the perceived trustworthiness. In addition, the facial expressions of the spokesperson also have an effect on the trustworthiness (Frith, 2009). This study made use of a video, and therefore these other characteristics were also visual and hard to control. This could have influenced the results of trustworthiness.

5.3 Crisis severity

This study found significant effects between crisis severity and anger and sympathy. As predicted a crisis with high severity resulted in more anger. This is in line with Wiener (2006), he stated that a crisis with high severity often evoked anger. However, a surprising result is the relationship between crisis severity and sympathy. It was expected that a crisis with high severity leads to less sympathy than a crisis with low severity. This study established the opposite. The stakeholders experienced significantly more sympathy in case of a crisis with high severity. The theoretical framework assumed that anger and sympathy are two opposite variables, a stakeholder experience anger or sympathy. However, this study found that the two emotions can exist at the same time. An explanation for this finding can be how the stakeholders interpret sympathy. The participants of the survey had to indicate to what extent they experience sympathy after watching the video. It is possible that they experienced sympathy but not towards the organization but towards the victims of the crisis. According to Salovey and Rosenhan, (1989), sympathy occurs when "awareness of others' suffering elicits feelings of sympathy, especially when the suffering is seen as undeserved'' (p. 637). The high sever condition contained more suffering for the victims and maybe, therefore, the respondents experienced more empathy in this condition. This could be an explanation of why the sympathy in the condition with the high crisis severity resulted in more sympathy. Thus, it is plausible that the questions for sympathy were not correct formulated which could influence the results.

5.4 Interaction effects

There was expected that the use of an emotional message frame in a crisis with high severity leads to more sympathy, less anger and more trust in the organization. There were no significant effects on anger and trust. However, this study found a trend in the interaction effect between message frame and severity on the perceived sympathy. The rational message frame scored higher on sympathy in a crisis with high severity. This is the opposite of what was expected. The expectation was that an emotional message frame worked better in combination with a high severe crisis. However, the emotional message frame was almost the same in both severity conditions. The rational message frame scored higher in the crisis with high severity. This contradiction can be explained with the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Petty and Cacioppo (1981). They stated that when there is a high involvement of the stakeholders, the arguments in the message are more important because stakeholders look for information and therefore, they are especially focused on the content of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). In the case of high crisis severity, the stakeholders are highly involved and therefore it is possible that they were more focused on the concrete information and the rational message frame worked better in crisis severity.

Furthermore, the respondents in the survey got the task to look and listen really carefully to the video. It is possible that by these clear instructions, the respondents watch more carefully and were more focussed on the arguments in the reaction than in a natural situation. This can be the reason that the rational message frame scored higher in the condition with the high crisis severity.

5.5 Mediation effects

This study found no evidence that the credibility of the spokesperson works as a mediator for the relationship between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variables trust in the organization and emotions. Because there were only less main effects, it also was unlikely to find a mediation effect. The reasons for not finding the main effects are already described above.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

The aim of this study was to examine the effects of the message frame, gender of the spokesperson and crisis severity in the response of an organization in a crisis. This knowledge was to strengthen the theoretical basis that provides insights in which spokesperson should be used with which message in which organizational crisis. The results of this study showed a lot of contradictions with the previous literature. The message frame did not have any influence on the emotions and trust in the organization. It can be concluded that the effectiveness of the message frame depends on several factors and situations. The best message frame to use is really complex and future researchers have to keep this in mind.

Furthermore, the results show that anger and sympathy can be both experienced at the same time. Especially in a crisis with high severity, the stakeholders can experience sympathy and anger. The emotions that stakeholders experience are not positive or negative. It is possible that both emotions, anger, and sympathy, can be experienced by the stakeholders at the same time. The exact relationship between positive and negative emotions should be determined in future research.

6.2 Practical implications

A crisis can damage the organization and its reputation. This research tried to find out which spokesperson should be used in which crisis and which message frame the spokesperson should use to minimize the damage for the organization in crisis time. Firstly, there is an indication of a trend between message frames and sympathy. The use of an emotional message frame will lead to more sympathy feelings. Furthermore, the use of male spokesperson results in more perceived expertise of the spokesperson. So if the organization wants to perceived as an expert, there are indications that the use of a male spokesperson is a bit more effective.

Furthermore, the study showed only less main effects and interaction effects. This indicates that many factors can play a role in minimizing the damage in a crisis and that using the right spokesperson and the right message frame is really complex. Organizations should be very careful in their choices in for example message frames. It is important to analyze the stakeholders carefully and know as much as possible about these stakeholders. Based on this information, choices should be made.

7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

The study includes several limitations. The first limitation is the sample of the study. The data is collected with the snowballing technique. This technique may have an effect on the representativeness of the sample. The average age of the sample was 28.86 year, which is quite young. Furthermore, most of the respondents were highly educated and there were only a few lower educated respondents. This limitation makes the findings less generalizable. Therefore, future research could use other target groups to see whether it causes discrepancies in the results of this particular study.

Second, because there was made use of a video, other personal characteristics of the spokespersons, besides gender, were also present. The voice of a spokesperson or the facial expressions of the spokesperson could influence the results. Therefore, future research should control these personal factors, for example, with the use of computer software which can manipulate the voice or facial expressions of the spokesperson. This causes more similarity between the male and female condition. Because of this, the influence of other personal characteristics can be excluded.

Third, the used product in the crisis was ice cream. Ice creams are low involvement products and therefore it is likely that the effects found in this study are also generalizable to cases with other low involvement products. However, it not sure that the effects found in this study are the same in the case of high involvement products. For future research, it will be interesting to find out what the effects are in case of high involvement products. This means that instead of using ice cream as product it is interesting to use, for example, a car as product.

Another limitation is the use of a fictitious organization and a fictitious crisis. Although this prevents that previous crises or prior reputation knowledge of the organization influenced the results. However, maybe this made it difficult for the respondents to empathize with the situation. To involve the respondents more in the crisis, future research should use a scenario-based questionnaire. Furthermore, for future research, it might be an option to use an existing organization. However, when using an already existing organization it is necessary to implement a zero measurement. With this zero measurement can the respondents' existing opinion about the organization be established.

Furthermore, a practical limitation of this study is the choice for the gender of the spokesperson. Not all organizations can choose between a male or female spokesperson. They have only one person employed who acts as spokesperson. In this case, the organizations are

not able to make choices in the use of spokespersons. This makes this study only valuable for organizations that have access to both a female and male spokesperson.

8. Conclusion

This study has shown that there is a trend in the experienced sympathy influenced by the message frame. A reaction that includes an emotional message frame results in more sympathy. However, there are no effects found between message frame and trust in the organization and between the message frame and anger. Furthermore, the gender of the spokesperson has an effect on perceived expertise. A male spokesperson scored higher on expertise than a female spokesperson. For trustworthiness, no effect was found. Also, the expected interaction between the message frame and the gender of the spokesperson was not found. The crisis severity had an effect on anger and sympathy. A crisis with high severity resulted in more anger and more sympathy. Especially the effect on sympathy was surprising. There was expected that a crisis with high severity resulted in less sympathy. A reason for this can be the way the respondents interpreted sympathy. It is possible that they feel empathy for the victims and not for the organization. The interaction effects between the message frame and severity has only shown a trend effect on sympathy. The rational message frame resulted in the condition with the high crisis severity in more sympathy than in the condition with the low crisis severity. If an organization uses a rational message frame, it is better to use it in a crisis with high severity. Lastly, this study found no evidence that the credibility of the spokesperson works as a mediator for the relationship between the independent variable gender of the spokesperson and the dependent variables trust in the organization and emotions. To conclude, this study only found a few effects. This indicates that many factors can play a role in minimizing the damage in a crisis and that using the right spokesperson and the right message frame is really complex. Organizations should be very careful in their choices and further research is required.

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Appendix 1

Message frame: Emotional Crisis severity: Low

"Ik wil beginnen met oprechte excuses namens Frozio aan te bieden. We zijn erop gewezen dat op de verpakking van de Frozio vanille ijs foutieve voedingswaarden vermeld staan. Op de verpakking stond vermeld dat het product maar 10 gram suiker bevat. Dit is echter een drukfout, in werkelijkheid bevat het product 30 gram suiker per portie. Het spijt ons verschrikkelijk en we begrijpen uitermate goed hoe vervelend dit is voor consumenten. We zullen er alles aan doen om dergelijke fouten in de toekomst te voorkomen. Nogmaals onze excuses."

Message frame: Rational   Crisis severity: Low

"Ik wil namens Frozio melden dat wij erop gewezen zijn dat op de verpakking van de Frozio-ijsjes foutieve voedingswaarden vermeld staan. Op de verpakking stond vermeld dat het product maar 10 gram suiker bevat. Dit is echter een drukfout, in werkelijkheid bevat het product 30 gram suiker per portie. De verpakkingen zullen zo snel mogelijk worden aangepast, zodat de correcte informatie op de verpakking wordt weergegeven."

Message Frame: Emotional   Crisis severity: High

"Ik wil beginnen met oprechte excuses namens Frozio aan te bieden. Tientallen consumenten van Frozio-ijs hebben zich gemeld met ernstige voedselvergiftigingsverschijnselen. Er zijn sterke vermoedens dat er een bacterie is ontstaan in de opslagtank van de melk door het onnauwkeurig schoonmaken van deze tank. Alle producten zijn zo snel mogelijk uit verkooppunten teruggeroepen. We zijn verbijsterd en bedroefd en leven enorm mee met de getroffen consumenten. We zullen er alles aan doen om dergelijke fouten in de toekomst te voorkomen. Nogmaals onze excuses."

Message frame: Rational   Crisis severity: High

"Ik wil namens Frozio melden dat tientallen consumenten zich gemeld hebben met ernstige voedselvergiftigingsverschijnselen. Er zijn sterke vermoedens dat er een bacterie is ontstaan in de opslagtank van de melk door het onnauwkeurig schoonmaken van deze tank. Alle producten zijn zo snel mogelijk uit alle verkooppunten teruggeroepen. Zodra wij meer informatie over het incident hebben zullen wij dit melden."

Appendix 2

Construct	Item	Source
Expertise	Knowledgeable Experienced Qualified Skilled Expert Intelligent	Ohanian, 1991
Trustworthiness	Transmits credibility Honest Reliable Sincere	Ohanian, 1991
Anger	Angry Disgusted Annoyed Outraged	McDonald, Glendon, & Sparks, 2011
Sympathy	Sympathetic Sorry Compassion Empathy	McDonald, Glendon, & Sparks, 2011
Trust in the organization	This organization treats people like me fairly and justly Whenever this organization makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me This organization can be relied on to keep ts promises I believe that this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions I feel very confident about this organization's skills This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.	Hon & Grunig, 1999