The effects of humour as a crisis communication strategy and response subjects on organizational reputation in different crisis situations: an empirical study in the Chinese cultural context

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Abstract

Traditional official crisis responses tend to adopt a rather serious response style and a sincere attitude, issued by an organizational identity. Yet, in real life, some organizations were successful at averting their reputation by adopting a crisis response strategy containing humour and sent from a more personal identity. This study explores the effects of humour as a crisis response strategy on social media on organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction in a Chinese cultural context. Furthermore, the role of the sender (personal versus organizational) is being investigated as well as the effect of crisis responsibility.

A 2 (message type: humorous versus non-humorous crisis response message) × 2 (response subject: personal identity versus organizational identity) x 2 (responsible versus non-responsible crisis situation) between subjects experimental study was conducted with 245 participants in which the effects were studied on organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction.

The results show that most findings are not in line with our hypotheses. A non-humorous crisis response has a better effect on the organizational reputation compared to a humorous response message. There are no effects of crisis responsibility and response subject on the dependent variables. Also, no interaction effects were found. Finally, secondary crisis communication was positively related to secondary crisis reaction as expected in the hypothesis.

Furthermore, the background of this study was the Chinese cultural context and social context. The results of this paper are promising as it could fill in some of these gaps in the literature of it. According to this research, both Chinese companies and international companies could master more theoretical knowledge in this field in order to make proper crisis responses towards increasing or restoring their reputation, for example by using humour as a crisis communication strategy in a more discreet way.

1. Introduction

In 2019, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) broke out globally and no continent is safe from its clutches (WHO, 2019). The magnitude of this disease is daunting to all and affect public health worldwide. To combat this pandemic, the public was asked to stay at home and keep social distance. In this situation, large numbers of people flocked to the supermarket to stock up on goods, and toilet paper became a sought-after item at once, and some even fought for it. Shelves were emptied across Europe as panicked citizens raced to stockpile essentials. In this situation, the Dutch prime minister claimed to be letting his country to relax and unwind as they had enough toilet paper to 'poop for ten years'. It seems that he tried to use this humorous tongue-in-cheek expression in order to ease tensions in society and reduce pressure on the supply chain during that period.

Albeit that no survey or evidence can prove it actually worked or how effective it is, the potential of using humorously response messages during crisis events should not be overlooked. Previous research has shown that in times of crisis companies tend to respond using more traditional crisis communication strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Yet in the last decade, humour has been introduced more frequently and the effectiveness of humorous crisis responses has begun to be examined by researchers. Most research only focused on exploring the effectiveness of humorously framed message when used as a crisis response, ignoring other influential factors when using humour. In fact, humour was defined in 2017 by Xiao, Verolien and Liselot (2017) as a double-edged sword in response to crises . In their research, it was shown that humorous crisis response messages can influence organizational reputation under certain conditions, such as in an inauthentic crisis situation (e.g., rumour). However, these studies did not delve into the effect of different levels of crisis responsibility in crisis situations. For instance, as rumour crisis can be seen as a slightly serious crisis situation where the organization does not need to take huge responsibility for it. Moreover, if humour is misused, not only does it fail to solve the crisis, but also trigger a new crisis, being a "second crisis". At this point, crisis responsibility should be considered as an important factor regarding the use of humour. It shows that a different crisis responsibility situation might be a crucial factor which influences the effect of humour. Therefore, we can realize that there is still a lack in

exploring the various influencing factors and applicable situations, which makes the effect of humour as a crisis communication strategy worthy of further research.

Moreover, Kim, Zhang and Zhang's 2016 article stressed that the importance of utilizing a CEO's personality in a crisis response, instead of a more anonymous organizational official identity. Indeed, the response subject is something to consider, especially when it comes to the use of humour in crisis situations. However, the literature does not prescribe how these two response subjects can effectively use humorous response message to increase organizational reputation under different situations of crisis responsibility. Should the humorous messages be sent by the CEO? Or the organization?

Based on the above, the aim of this research is to take these three factors into consideration comprehensively in order to analyse the effects of humour in crisis communication efforts. Doing so, this study examined the effect of a humorously framed crisis response message in the attribution of crisis response subjects (personal versus organizational) and different crisis situations (responsible versus non-responsible) in the Chinese cultural context, leading to the following research questions:

> *RQ1: What are the main and interaction effects of a humorous crisis response strategy, crisis responsibility, and response subject on organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reactions?*
> *RQ2: What is the relationship between secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction?*

2. Literature review

2.1 The interplay of corporate reputation and crisis communication strategy

"The awareness of an unexpected situation that challenges important stakeholder expectations and can seriously affect an organization's reputation and produce negative outcomes" is how a crisis is characterized by Coombs (2011). An organization's reputation is a precious intangible asset that must be safeguarded against the risks posed by a crisis (Barton, 2001). If a firm fails to properly manage a critical crisis situation, corporate reputation may diminish in terms of favourability and strength (Elsbach, 2006).

After a crisis, crisis communication is critical for reducing reputational harm because it allows companies to reframe the crisis situation and change stakeholders' perspectives (Coombs, 2015). In addition, adopting different crisis communication strategies can affect public perceptions and thus increase or decrease an organization's reputation (e.g., Glantz, 2010; Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson, 2015). There are two central frameworks in crisis communication research: The Image Repair Theory (IRT, Benoit, 1995; 1997) and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT, Coombs, 2007). Benoit first developed IRT through analysing a huge amount of crisis response cases and summarized five types of crisis response strategies that can be used. These crisis communication strategies can be regarded as persuasive messages. By using these strategies, the organizations aim to mitigate losses (e.g., loss of public support or sponsors) and intends to improve the own standing, including a recovery of trust or a better evaluation of one's reputation (Benoit & Benoit, 2008, Coombs, 2006). Subsequently, the SCCT was introduced which combines Attribution Theory and Image Repair theory and has been widely applied in the crisis communication field (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). It has a strong practical relevance since it allows a good consideration of the situation in which a crisis occurs. By doing so, the organization can take more several response strategies in different situations to protect or enhance their reputation. Nonetheless, SCCT still has some drawbacks since it does not consider in some ways about some important variables, which make it incomplete, such as emotions in a crisis response message (Coombs, 2007; Jin, 2009; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010). In this study, we focus on how humour used in the crisis communication

strategy effectively increase organization reputation. In addition, we investigate that which response subjects should be the better one to make the crisis response.

2.2 Secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction

Another gap of the SCCT theory is that it does not include customers' secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction as dependent variables. Secondary crisis communication means that crisis messages are shared or forwarded, and negative comments and information are disseminated. These negative comments and other communicative information can affect the public's thoughts and behaviours, such as their purchase intentions, which is known as Secondary crisis reaction (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Both concepts are somewhat similar to "Word of Mouth" and "purchase intentions", (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013; Siomkos and Malliaris, 2011).Costumers may convey negative information and attitudes about a product or the firm through secondary crisis communication which may result in a new crisis to the organizational reputation (Tucker & Melewar, 2005). The development of social media has also facilitated secondary crisis communication and makes it easier to spread information on various media platforms, so the effect of secondary crisis communication would be more pronounced, the negative organizational reputation would lead to more negative secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction. Hence, we could infer that here is a positive relationship between secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction. Thus, it is proposed that:

> *H1: Organizational reputation is positively related to both secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction.*

2.3 The Chinese cultural context

The cultural background of crisis events is essential to be taken into account. In many aspects, eastern culture and western culture are different. In the field of crisis communication, IRT (the Image Repair Theory) and SCCT (the Situational Crisis Communication Theory) are widely applied, but a limitation of these theories is that they are based on a specific social and culture context: the Western culture. There is not sufficient

evidence to support that they are eligible in dealing with various crisis communication efforts in different contextual dimensions including non-western cultures. Schwarz (2016) also pointed out that the crisis communication theories should be highly culturally sensitive, as the process of crisis communication contains multiple values and norms. Furthermore, humour is understood and used differently by people in different cultures (Martin, 2007). As confirmed by Hoffmann, Schwarz, Dalicho and Hutter (2014), the effect of humour applied in the field of communication differs with respect to the cultural background in which the receiver is located, especially in terms of the understanding and preference for humour. In the last two decades, psychologists have shown a continuous interest in studying individual differences in humour (Martin, 1998). Martin and Ford (2018) concluded that although humour is a universal behaviour, it is obvious that cultural differences may influence the use and effects of humour and "the situations that are considered appropriated for laughter". Some previous research already indicated that humorous crisis communication information is to some extent difficult to accepted by non-western audiences.

Therefore, the Chinese culture, as a representative of eastern culture which represents a large population in Asia, was chosen in this study, aimed to explore the effects of humorous crisis communication strategies in the context of Eastern culture.

2.4 The role of humour as a crisis response strategy

Different crisis response strategies can influence important communication outcomes (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). The field of emotional crisis communication has been studied in many studies. These early studies mainly focused on studying the emotions experienced by the crisis information responders such as the public (Choi & Lin, 2009), however, the crisis information senders like the organization also experience some types of emotions, and thus the crisis response message by the organization also can be emotional. Meer and Verhoeven (2014) concluded that, when the organization expresses shame and regret (negative emotions), this affects corporate reputations by minimizing and reducing the feelings of anger and increasing the public's acceptance of organizational information. Claeys, Cauberghe and Pandelaere (2016) also found, compared to a rational crisis response style,

communicating sad and negative emotions can minimize the damage to the organization's reputation in crisis communication. Therefore, the organization must know which emotional should be expressed in crisis communication in order to make it more effective.

Kim and Cameron (2011) illustrated that emotionally framed messages as a crisis response can act as a guidance of the public's responses. It usually undertakes the significant social functions and in doing so, it might affect relations between individuals (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner & Haidt, 1999), as well as between the individual and the organization. This results from the fact that emotional information tends to provide more information to help the public to make a decision and judgment in crisis situations (Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001). When it comes to the emotion of humour, it is undeniable that humour is comical, amusing and laughable (Yang, 2019). The functions of humour can be divided into two ways: to enhance the self and to enhance one's relationship with others. (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Its second function might play a more important role when it is applied to crisis situations. It involves using humour in interpersonal relationships to increase all parties' happiness, reduce conflict, strengthen interpersonal connections, and increase attractiveness of one person to another (Martin et al., 2003). Moreover, light-heartedness by means of the use of humour can reduce critical thinking (Moyer- Gusé, Mahood, & Brookes, 2011; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007), thereby enhancing persuasiveness and initiating a positive public sentiment. Furthermore, using humour may distract people from negative events because it must require the audience's attentional resources (Strick, Holland, Van Baaren, & Van Knippenberg, 2009).

The effect of humorous crisis response message on organizational reputation has been shown to be effective in several cases. Kim, Zhang, and Zhang (2016) analyzed a famous crisis event occurred at TMall Group, which was solved by its CEO Jack Ma with a humorous crisis response approach, it confirmed additional forms of response like humour applied in an organization. They used a series of qualitative and quantitative analysis to analyse the situation of the organization TMall, social media platforms and the corporate itself. They identified a number of further crisis strategies, where humour and

(self-)mockery as crisis communication styles are well suited for coping with existing public sentiment and restore corporate reputation in a crisis.

Hence, according to this assumption, it is proposed that:

H2: A humorous framed crisis response message leads to less damage to an organizational reputation compared to a non-humorous response message.

In addition to this, some scholars suggested that the existing strategies are not sufficient and comprehensive to deal with crisis. Example of Coombs's SCCT, effective crisis communication strategies include denial, diminish (justification) and rebuild (apology/compensation), depending on the perceptions of responsibility acceptance (Coombs, 2007). Once risks happened on social media, Coombs and Holladay (2012) recommended to use these strategies to tackle risks and bolster its reputation, by sending out positive messages about itself. Yet, SCCT ignored the use of emotional crisis communication strategy and its effect. A closer look to the literature on the use of emotionally framed messages in crisis, however, reveals several gaps and shortcomings, especially for positive emotions, like humour.

2.5 Response subjects: Personal or Organizational

Regarding the communication source or response subject used during a crisis, most previous research showed that the organizational source is more credible and more likely than the personal source, as this elicits more positive public responses and compliance on social media, positively affecting the organizational reputation (Liu, Austin and Jin, 2011; Park & Cameron, 2014). However, some studies reached some different conclusions and supported the use of the personal identity as response subject in crises.

Kellher (2009) found that a conversational human voice on social media is effective in lowering participants' perceptions of organizational crisis responsibility, and it is also positively associated with key relational outcomes like trust, commitment, and satisfaction. These key relational outcomes are preconditions of a good organization reputation. As Yang (2007) stated, conversational human voice is beneficial to organizational reputation in a

crisis as it can reduce negative perceptions on organization. The use of conversational human voice also can increase publics' positive responses to an organization, because it allows for the public generate more transparent and open perceptions of the organization (Scoble & Israel, 2006). The conversational human voice is also interactive, even though this interaction happens online (Kellher,2009). What is more, social media messages in first-person narratives benefit the organization as they let the audience understand how the crisis occured while providing emotional support to victims (Laer and Ruyter, 2010).

Moreover, according to the study from Van der Meer et al. (2014), an organization's spokesperson intentionally or unintentionally reveals the emotions he or she is experiencing. From the perspective of the public, they tend to subconsciously connect the spokesperson to the organization, and thus believe that the display of emotions by the spokesperson represents the attitude and point of view of the organization as a whole (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2010). Furthermore, if the spokesperson or CEO that represents the organization can convey negative emotions such as regret and shame as a crisis communication response, it can reduce the negative comments of stakeholders and enhance the reputation of the organization (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014).
Hence, it is assumed that:

> *H3: A crisis response message sent as a personal identity leads to less damage to an organizational reputation compared to a message sent as an organizational identity.*

2.5.1 Humour and response subjects

Apart from this, two response subjects (CEO versus 'the organization') who take the same crisis message such as a humorous message to cope with the same crisis event might have two distinct dissemination effects. In November 2013, TMall (an online retail site operating under the aegis of Alibaba Group—China's largest e-commerce company) was accused of false advertising. As a response, TMall within one hour after being accused, posted an official statement as the company's voice with a sincere attitude, and explained the truth of crisis to the public. They did however not attain an obvious and ideal effect like they expected as there still were lots of negative comments that appeared on social media. After deliberating on this issue, TMall's CEO Jack Ma made a second crisis response in a

humorous tone and took a self-mocking crisis communication strategy. Unexpectedly, it resolved this crisis event in the end successfully as well as turning into a positive public relations opportunity for the company. This case demonstrates the importance of a CEO's personality in crisis communication and humour strategies' successful adoption (Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016). When a CEO expresses his or her sense of humour, or engages in playful social behaviours, it can establish an incongruent relationship or meaning and amuse the public, which can be called "CEO trait humour" (Cooper, 2008; Duncan, 1982; Pundt & Venz, 2017). In Stocklein's research (2020), she referred to the interaction between CEO trait humour and reputation, suggesting that affiliative, self-enhancing and even aggressive humour can increase reputation.

This is due to the effect of CEO trait humour. According to research in psychology and management, CEO trait humour may have emotional, social, and cognitive effects on the audience (Cooper et al., 2018; Robert & Yan, 2007), and thus might affect their attitudes or perception of the CEO. For instance, self-enhancing humour usually raises the CEO's image and status beyond others (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). It may also lead to a better perception of the CEO, like being more likable and approachable (Gkorezis & Bellou, 2016). If a CEO uses a joke to give an explanation, the audience may feel funny and appreciate his/her personal charming and it might work better than an official but "cold" announcement (Stocklein, 2020).
Hence, it is assumed that:

> *H4a: A humorously framed crisis response message sent as a personal identity leads to less damage to an organisational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message sent as personal identity.*

However, if the company uses humour as an organizational identity, it might be counterproductive, as the audience might consider this behaviour as an unserious and irresponsible attitude. It is a possible drawback of humorous responses, as the sense of humour tends to convey a lack of firm sincerity, leading to a weaker perception of credibility (Shin & Larson, 2013). Thus, humorous responses may be seen as the corporate attempts to lighten the mood or get rid of failure by the public (Shin et al., 2016). Cooper (2005) also

mentioned that the use of humour in workplace may run the risks of making interpersonal communication appear insincere, and thereby damaging the organizational reputation. Hence, it is assumed that humour crisis is not conducive to increasing the organizational reputation.

> *H4b: A humorously framed crisis response message sent as an organizational identity leads to a lower organizational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message sent as organizational identity.*

2.6 The attributed crisis responsibility

When it comes to considering the specific crisis situation at hand, scholars already identified a total of 13 crisis types and explained how various crisis types impact selecting the appropriate crisis response strategies. Coombs and Holladay (2002) examined and analysed these 13 crisis types and reduced them to three crisis clusters: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the preventable cluster. In these three crisis situations, the organization needs to take different levels of responsibility, and adopt corresponding crisis response strategies. In general, crisis responsibility is the core variable to evaluate the crisis situation according to the SCCT (Coombs et al., 1998) as it is the key indicator which determines the organizational damage (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Ma and Zhan (2016) concluded, based on their empirical study, that organizational reputation is strongly associated with attributed responsibility, and there is enough evidence which directly pointed out: perception of crisis responsibility is positively correlated with reputational damage. Thus, it is proposed that:

> *H5: A responsible crisis situation damages the organizational reputation more compared to a non-responsible crisis situation.*

2.6.1 crisis responsibility and humour

Moreover, Vigsø came up a conclusion in 2013 that humorous response messages may be applied in a less-crisis responsibility situations (no serious damage or loss of lives). It is quite understandable, that, when the crisis causes terrible outcomes like lives lost or people injured seriously, humour or irony would most likely make the firm appear to be lacking empathy. Furthermore, it is often considered as an attempt at shifting the blame in a quite

crude way. In a case like less-crisis responsibility situation in Vigsø's study, humour crisis response could be useful to intend to restore the public's faith and trust in the organization, to improve the organization's image, as well as to soften up criticism, and vice versa. Therefore, we could put forth the following hypotheses:

> *H6a: In the case of non-responsible crisis situation, a humorously framed crisis response message leads to less damage to an organisational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message*
>
> *H6b: In the case of responsible crisis situation, a humorously framed crisis response message leads to a lower organisational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message.*

2.6.2 crisis responsibility and response subjects

The previous sections presented a detailed discussion of the importance of the role of the CEO in crisis communication, in particular, for inspiring support, confidence, and elevation of the organization's reputation (Verhoeven, Van Hoof, Ter Keurs & Van Vuuren, 2012). The CEO's involvement expresses the organization's commitment to the crisis (Jaques, 2012), but also demonstrates the importance the organization places on this crisis and its stakeholders and dispelling the perception that organization may be renege on its responsibilities to its stakeholders (Ulmer, Robert, Timothy & Matthew, 2007), giving them a higher level of confidence and in this way reducing damage and negative reactions (Pauly & Hutchison, 2005; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). Thus, the CEO seems to be the most trusted and credible source in conveying crisis information.

Many previous studies on crisis communication have also come to the above view, and it seems logical that an organization's spokesperson (like CEO) is significant in building and maintaining the organization's reputation (Arpan, 2002; Laufer, Garrett, & Ning, 2017; Pauly & Hutchison, 2005). Therefore, most of the literature endorses the benefits of CEO as the spokesperson in crises, and encourages CEO to be involved in all crisis situations (Turk et al., 2012). However, some opposing views still exist, Goodman, Lucero, Tan Teng Kwang, & Pang (2009) suggested that there is no need to be present or responsive to the public in all

crisis situations, depending on the level of blame and responsibility attributed to the organization. In minor crisis responsibility situations, such as rumour, baseless crises, the CEO does not need to step in to address the issues or explain it immediately, because the crisis is not necessarily blaming the organization, it is more important to establish the truth and find the solution than to step up and be an advocate on behalf of the organization. On the other hand, the authors suggested that the CEO should take immediate actions to step up at large at the onset of a crisis when the organization is causing widespread harm to its stakeholders and the society in general. This is because the organization is suffering from the diminishing of the public's trust and organizational reputation will be undermined as well, no matter what remedies the organization will take. As the most authoritative figure in the organization, it is the CEO's responsibility to stop this downward trend on organizational reputation. This study will clarify whether there is any difference in the interaction effect of crisis responsibility and response subjects on the organizational reputation. Based on the similar study by Goodman et al (2009), we can assume that:

H7a: In the case of non-responsible crisis situation, a crisis response message sent as a personal identity leads to a higher organisational reputation compared to a crisis response message sent as an organizational identity.

H7b: In the case of responsible crisis situation, a crisis response message sent as an organizational identity leads to a higher organisational reputation compared to a crisis response message sent as a personal identity.

2.6.3 Message type, crisis responsibility and response subjects

According to the previous studies, we can find three groups of two-way interaction effect and assume several reasonable hypotheses to examine, however, no similar research is known about a three-way interaction among message type, crisis responsibility and response subjects in crisis communication field.

Against this backdrop, this study referred the theoretical discussion in the previous chapters, this study was curious to see whether there is a significant difference in the effect of crisis communication strategies on organizational reputation among these three factors. Thus, we can pose our final research question.

RQ3: Is organizational reputation influenced by a three-way interaction among message type, crisis responsibility and message subjects?

2.7 Conceptual model

Based on the hypotheses elaborated before, the following research model (Figure 1) is the base of this study. This study proposes that a humorous message , crisis responsibility and different response subjects motivate the change of organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction after a crisis. Moreover, secondary crisis communication might affect secondary crisis reaction.
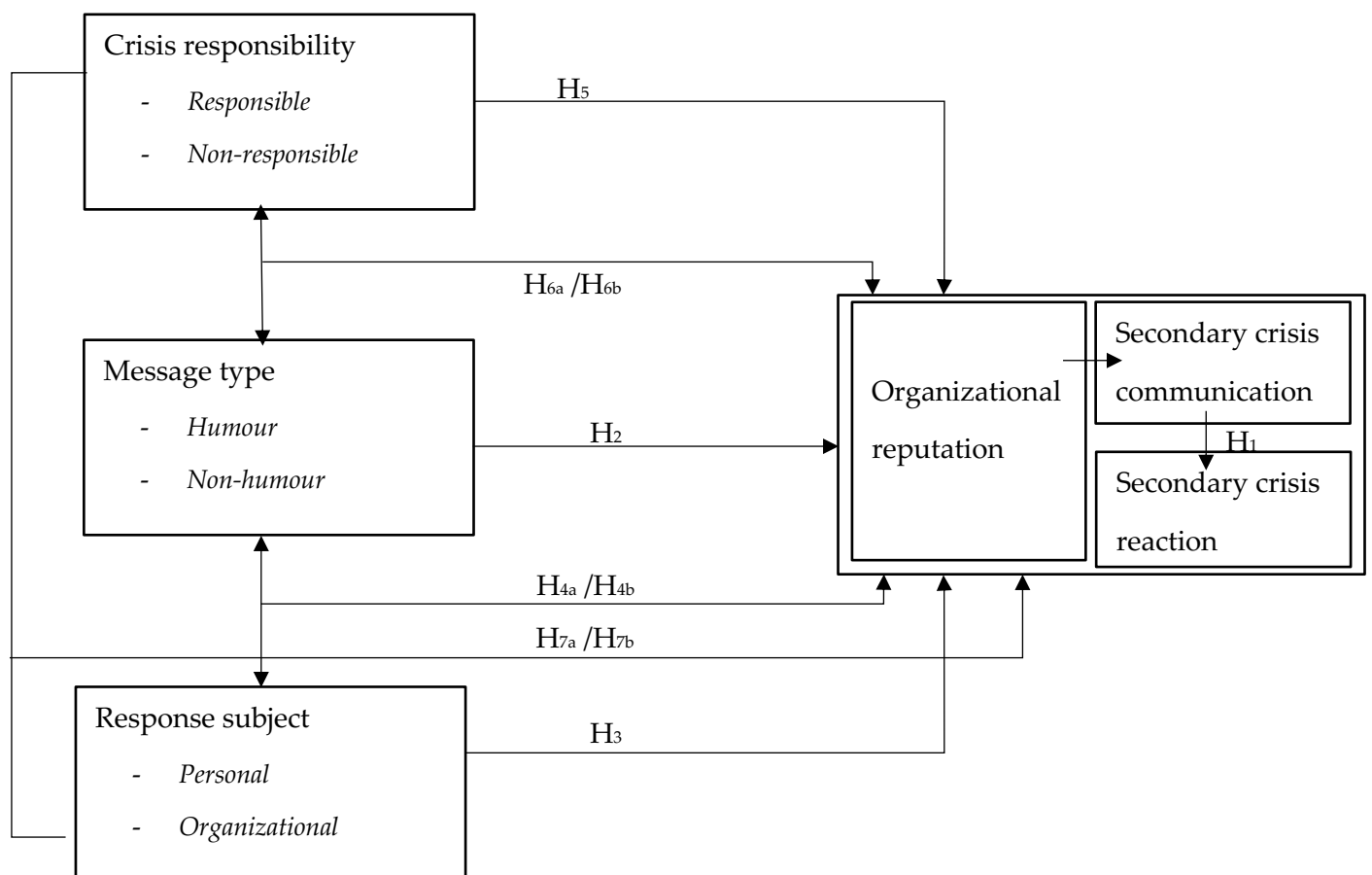
3. Research design and method

3.1 Design and procedure

This study used a quantitative experimental design to investigate the hypotheses. . Using a three-factors between subjects design with 2 (message type: humorous versus non-humorous crisis response message) × 2 (response subject: personal identity versus organizational identity), x 2 (crisis responsibility: responsible verse non-responsible), the effects were investigated on organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication, and secondary crisis reaction. Table 1 shows the total of eight conditions in this experiment and each respondent was distributed randomly to one of them. They needed to observe experimental materials and later answered the questions in the questionnaire. All questionnaires were distributed randomly and evenly by the Qualtrics system on the Internet.

Table 1

Experimental conditions

Experimental Condition	Message type	Response subject	Crisis responsibility situation
1	Humorous	Personal identity	Responsible
2	Non-humorous	Personal identity	Responsible
3	Humorous	Organizational identity	Responsible
4	Non-humorous	Organizational identity	Responsible
5	Humorous	Personal identity	Non-responsible
6	Non-humorous	Personal identity	Non-responsible
7	Humorous	Organizational identity	Non-responsible
8	Non-humorous	Organizational identity	Non-responsible

The questionnaire was divided into four parts. The questions in the first part included demographic questions, such as gender, age and educational background, as well as the use of Weibo (Chinese mainstream social media platform). Second, participants read a crisis scenario and a follow-up crisis response. In the third part they then answered the questions which focused on evaluations of the organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication (customer purchase intention) and secondary crisis communication (Word-

of-mouth). The fourth part contained a series of questions checking the manipulations. The questionnaire was designed and used in Chinese and translated to an English version that can be found in Appendix B.

3.2 Participants

Convenience sampling was applied for selecting the target respondents. The questionnaire was distributed randomly and its link was posted on some Chinese social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat groups. The initial number of participants was 276, but since there were six incomplete answers, these were considered as non-valid responses and had to be filtered out. Apart from that, the experiment contained a manipulation check question for response subject in order to test whether the participants read the stimulus material carefully. A total of 25 respondents gave the wrong answer here and were therefore filtered out as well. Thus, the final valid number of respondents was 245. As can be seen in Table 2, the gender ratio is not balanced as the number of female participants (72.2%) was higher than male participants (27.3%). Further, the age range mainly varied between 19 and 29 years with an overall mean age of 23.52. The mean age per condition can be seen in Table 2 as well. Finally, almost all participants were highly educated as 95.9% of the participants had a bachelor's degree, a master's degree or higher.

Table 2

Gender of the respondents and age mean per condition

Condition	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Total	Mean age
Non-responsible*organizational*non-humour	21	6	0	27	23.74
Non-responsible*organizational*humour	21	11	0	32	22.59
Non-responsible*personal*non-humour	19	11	1	31	23.12
Non-responsible*personal*humour	23	8	0	31	23.03
Responsible*personal*non-humour	23	9	0	32	24.73
Responsible*personal*humour	22	8	0	30	23.5
Responsible*organizational*non-humour	23	9	0	32	24.28
Responsible*organizational*humour	25	5	0	30	23.17
Total	177	67	1	245	23.52

3.3 Pre-test

In order to make sure that the stimulus material would be perceived as intended, a pre-test
was conducted before the formal test took place. A total of 30 participants participated in
this pre-test. The pre-test intended to test the manipulations of all independent variables: the
perceived humour, perceived crisis responsibility and crisis response subjects (message
source). The process of pre-test was the same as the formal test. In the pre-test some
problems with the materials were found: the difference between two senders cannot be
found clearly and the material of humorous crisis response tuned out to be not humorous
and amusing enough. So, the experimental material was reviewed and adjusted. Also, the
questionnaire layout was adjusted, including highlighting the outcomes of the crisis so the
reader would notice them better. Eventually, the third pre-test was successful since all
independent variables were statistically significant, and thus formed the input for the formal
test. In Table 3 below the results of the third pre-test are shown.

Table 3

Mean and SD for the three independent variables based on the third pre-test

		Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Crisis responsibility	Responsible	5.79	1.09	.84	**.000**
	Non-responsible	2.89	0.98		
Message type	Humorous	5.07	1.04	6.02	**.000**
	Non-humorous	2.89	0.98		
Response subjects	Personal	1.88	0.54	27.65	**.000**
	Organizational	1.07	.028		

*(Measurement of crisis responsibility and Message type are 7-point Likert scale, while measurement of response
subject is a two-point scale: 1 represents organizational identity; 2 represents personal identity)*

3.4 Stimulus material

Many previous and similar studies used fictitious crises as their experimental stimuli to
avoid interference from prior-crisis relationship and crisis history (e.g., Dean, 2004; Lyon &

Cameron, 2004; Sheldon & Sallot, 2008). In this study, a product-harm crisis accident was designed, which happened to a fictitious furniture company as well, called AAA Group. One of its products, a cabinet, appeared to have a safety issue which attracted considerable attention in society. Two different crisis situations were designed; a situation in which AAA group was responsible for the crisis and a situation in which AAA group was not responsible for the crisis and

Stimulus text Responsible crisis situation:

AAA Group is a world-famous Furniture manufacturing brand, which owns thousands of stores in many countries around the world. AAA Group is known for its good product quality and excellent social responsibility reputation. However, recently, a customer posted a negative comment on Weibo after having bought a cabinet from AAA. This customer complained that the cabinet has serious safety risks, because the cabinet tipped over when her kid was playing in front of it. Furthermore, the customer was sure that her kid did not touch the cabinet, indicating the cabinet not being stable and it could tip over by itself easily. The complaint caused a vast number of responses on social media and attracted much public attentions resulting in in a serious product safety crisis for AAA Group. Many challenged its authority and asked AAA Group to provide the proof of safety of its products as soon as possible and remove this cabinet from their stores. Soon afterwards, more users reported that the cabinet they bought caused similar accidents, even injuring people. After a series of investigations and tests, AAA Group admitted that this cabinet has some potential safety risks due to its design and materials. The cabinet cannot stand stable if it carries too heavy stuff. Turns out they took into account its aesthetics especially and ignored its safety and practical functions. Therefore, AAA Group apologised to the public and responded on the social media platform.

Stimulus text non-responsible crisis situation:

AAA Group is a world-famous furniture manufacturing brand, which owns thousands of stores in many countries around the world. AAA Group is known for its good product quality and excellent social responsibility reputation. However, recently, a customer posted a negative comment on Weibo after having bought a cabinet from AAA. This customer complained that the cabinet has serious safety risks, because the cabinet tipped over when her kid was playing in front of it. Furthermore, the customer was sure that her kid did not touch the cabinet, indicating the cabinet not being stable and it could tip over by itself easily. The complaint caused a vast number of responses on social media and attracted much public attentions resulting in a serious product safety crisis for AAA Group. Many challenged its authority and asked AAA Group to provide some kind of proof of safety of its products as

soon as possible or to remove this cabinet from their stores. After a series of investigations and tests, evidence showed that the root reason which resulted in this accident was incorrect instalment by the user. So the product itself does not carry any potential safety risks.

Shortly after this, the fictitious company shared a crisis response message to cope with this situation and reduce crisis damage and save its corporate reputation (see Appendix A for the full text). A total of four crisis response messages were applied in two crisis responsibility situations respectively. Below 2 example texts are presented:

Condition: Non-humorous response, personal identity (post from CEO and founder of AAA Group, Mr. Smith), responsible crisis situation:

> *"Recently a serious safety accident occurred with a cabinet produced by our company AAA Group. The final investigations revealed that, our product design indeed exists safety risks. We sincerely apologize to all victims and our customers who have supported us over the years We guarantee that we will take all responsibilities, accept all due punishments, we will work hard to correct any mistakes and enhance our product safety standards and quality in the future. Hope for your support and forgiveness."*

Condition: Humorous response, organizational identity (AAA Group's official social media account), non-responsible crisis situation:

> *"As everyone knows, AAA group is facing a product-harm accident, the entire company are totally freaked out these days after accident, especially Product Safety Dep.! they almost wrote "love and peace, flashy and safe" on their face to prove innocence, Fortunately, the truth didn't punch on their face! Haha, and luckily, we hadn't had time to throw all this kind of cabinets out as the trash, suddenly a little thanks for our "efficient" departments. Anyways, we feel so sorry for any inconveniences, we will do better, we promise."*

3.5 Measures

In the main experiment, respondents were asked to assess the organization in crisis regarding several constructs, including organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication, secondary crisis reaction. Organizational reputation was measured using a shortened version of the Reputation Quotient, consisting of four 7-point disagree to agree Likert-type items (α =.75; example item: "I have a good feeling about this company").

Second, secondary crisis reaction (purchase intention) was measured using a four-item scale adopted from Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999), (α =.70; example item: "I will definitely purchase AAA's products in the near future."). Third, secondary crisis communication (word-of-mouth (WOM)) was measured using a four-item scale by Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron and Marticotte (2010); α =.75; example item: "I will recommend AAA's products to a friend or a colleague if it were in the marketplace today". A factor analysis with varimax rotation on all 12 items was performed confirming the correct loadings on the respective constructs, see Table 4.

Table 4
Factor analysis of all items

	Item	Component		
		1	2	3
1	"I have a good feeling about AAA group."	.788		
2	"I admire and respect AAA group."	.813		
3	"I trust AAA."	.805		
4	"AAA group has a good overall reputation."	.795		
5	"I will recommend AAA's products to a friend or a colleague if it were in the marketplace today."		.850	
6	"I will speak of AAA's products' good sides."		.791	
7	"I am proud to say to others that I am AAA's customer."		.842	
8	Which item here?		.844	
9	"I will definitely purchase AAA's products in the near future."			.771
10	"I intent to purchase AAA's products in the near future."			.733
11	"It is likely that I will purchase AAA's products in the near future."			.844
12	"I expect to purchase AAA's products in the near future."			.810

In order to ensure that the entire measurement was reliable, Cronbach's Alpha values were then calculated via SPSS. Cronbach's alpha scores can be considered reliable when the score is equal or more than .70 (Gidron, 2013). All in all, the analysis shows that all three variables are reliable, see Table 5.

Table 5

Results of the reliability analysis

	Cronbach's Alpha value	N of Items

Organizational reputation	.914	4
Secondary crisis communication	.914	4
secondary crisis reaction	.875	4

3.6 Manipulation checks

As mentioned earlier, some manipulation check questions were added to the questionnaire. One question was included to check identity types. After participants read the news article and response message, they were asked: "Who did respond to this product-harm crisis presented in the preceding article?" The cases with incorrect responses to this question were excluded from the sample. Regarding response subject identity there is a significant difference between the two conditions (F=2.298, p<.000): personal identity (M=1.88, SD=.323) and organizational identity (M=1.08, SD=.28661) respectively.

Perceived humour was assessed with a semantic differential scale developed by Nabi et.al. (2007) and included seven items (not funny/funny, not amusing/amusing, not entertaining/entertaining, not humorous/humorous). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.76. A t-test was executed and the results show that there is a significant difference between the humorous response condition (M=4.96, SD=1.07) and the non-humorous response condition (M=2.41, SD=1.06), *F=1.071, p<.000.*

Finally, organizational responsibility for the crisis was measured using the two-item seven-point Likert scale from the work of Griffin, Babin and Darden. (1992) (e.g., "How responsible was the organization with respect to the crisis?"). Regarding the manipulation of crisis responsibility, the results indicate that the non-responsible (M=3.0, SD=1.02) and responsible crisis situation (M=5.38, SD=1.18) are significantly different from each other (F=6.44, p<.000).

To conclude, this experiment manipulated response message type, response subject and crisis situations successfully.

4. Results

This research aims at investigating the (combined) effects of message type, crisis responsibility and response subjects on organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction. In the following sections, the results are displayed for the several main effects and interaction effects.

4.1 **Main and interaction effects on overall organizational reputation**

First of all, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with three fixed factors was used to examine their main effects on organizational reputation. Table 6 shows the means and standard deviations of the organizational reputation scores for eight experimental conditions. The overall Mean of organizational reputation is 3.62 (N=245, SD=1.266). As we can see in table 6, there is no outliers among for three factors, almost all Mean value are between 3.0 and 4.0. Compared with humorous response condition, the values of non-humorous conditions are generally higher than ones.

Table 6

Data of organizational reputation Mean and SD on message type, crisis responsibility and response subject

		Mean	N	SD
Message type	*Humour*	3.23	123	1.314
	Non-humour	4.01	122	1.087
Crisis responsibility	*Non-responsible*	3.63	121	1.266
	Responsible	3.60	124	1.271
Response subject	*Organizational*	3.54	125	1.244
	Personal	3.69	120	1.289

 As shown in table 7, only the main effect of response message type on reputation is significant (F= 22.805, p-value<.000). The mean value of reputation in the humour response condition is 3.46 (SD=1.304), while the mean in non-humorous response condition is 3.79 (SD=1.157). The effects of crisis responsibility (F=.042, p=.570) and response subjects (F=.564, p=.316) on reputation are not significant and no interaction effects were found.

Table 7

Results of ANOVA for the main effects and interaction effects on overall organizational reputation

	F	df	Sig.
Crisis responsibility (non-res vs. res)	.042	1	.838
Message type (hum vs. non-hum)	22.805	1	.000
Response subjects (personal vs. organizational)	.564	1	.453
Crisis responsibility *Message type	1.306	1	.254
Message type*Response subjects	.014	1	.907
Response subjects * Crisis responsibility	.266	1	.607
Crisis responsibility*Message type*Response subjects	.374	1	.542

4.2 Main and interaction effects on secondary crisis communication

Next, in order to explore the main and interaction effects on secondary crisis communication, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with three fixed factors was conducted. Detailed descriptive statistics about means and standard deviation for secondary crisis communication as a function of the levels of the three factors are shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Data of Mean and SD on secondary crisis communication on message type, crisis responsibility and response subject

		Mean	N	SD
Message type	*Humour*	3.23	123	1.298
	Non-humour	3.72	122	1.121
Crisis responsibility	*Non-responsible*	3.70	121	1.224
	Responsible	3.25	124	1.209
Response subject	*Organizational*	3.39	125	1.230
	Personal	3.56	120	1.239

There were significant main effects of crisis responsibility (F=7.77, p=.006) and response message type (F=6.59, p=.011) on secondary crisis communication The effect of response subjects (F=.741, p=.390) on secondary crisis communication is not significant and also no interaction effects were found (see in Table 9)

Table 9

Results of ANOVA for the main and interaction effects on secondary crisis communication

	F	df	Sig.
Crisis responsibility	7.77	1	**.006**
Message type	6.59	1	**.011**
Response subjects	.741	1	.390
Crisis responsibility *Message type	1.107	1	.294
Crisis responsibility*Response subjects	.845	1	359
Message type*Response subjects	.323	1	.570
Crisis responsibility *Message type*Response subjects	.000	1	.995

4.3 **Main and interaction effects on secondary crisis reaction**

The third dependent variable is secondary crisis reaction. In order to test whether there are any effects of three factors on it, we did the mean test and ANOVA on it. The detailed descriptive statistics for secondary crisis reaction under different conditions can be seen in the table 11 below. The Mean of secondary crisis reaction in humour response condition is 3.33 (SD=1.206), while the mean in non-humorous response condition is 3.85 (SD=1.024). We still noticed that the mean of secondary crisis reaction with humour response is lower than non-humour response.

Table 10

Data of Mean and SD on secondary crisis reaction among eight experimental conditions

		Mean	N	SD
Message type	*Humour*	3.33	123	1.206
	Non-humour	3.82	122	1.024
Crisis responsibility	*Non-responsible*	3.63	121	1.087
	Responsible	3.50	124	1.197
Response subject	*Organizational*	3.41	125	1.091
	Personal	3.73	120	1.178

Next, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the three fixed factors, which was used to examine their main and interaction effects on secondary crisis reaction (see Table 11). As can be seen, there was a significant main effect of response message type on secondary crisis reaction (F=7.278, p=.007). The effects of crisis responsibility (F=.886, p=.348) and response subjects (F=.2829, p=.094) on secondary crisis reaction are not significant and also no interaction effects were found.

Table 11

Results of ANOVA for the main and interaction effects on secondary crisis reaction

	F	df	Sig.
Crisis responsibility	.886	1	.348
Message type	7.27	1	**.007**
Response subjects	2.89	1	.094
Crisis responsibility *Message type	.330	1	.566
Crisis responsibility *Response subjects	.308	1	.579
Message type*Response subjects	.096	1	.756
Crisis responsibility*Message type*Response subjects	.040	1	.842

4.4 Linear relationship between perceived reputation and secondary crisis communication and reaction

For testing the last hypothesis, a correlation analysis was performed to test whether any correlations exist between overall reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction. From the data as shown in Table 12, it can be seen that they are indeed correlated with each other. The Pearson correlation value s of Secondary crisis communication with reputation is .717 (p-value<.000), and Secondary crisis reaction with reputation is .724 (p-value<.000), meaning that both are positively related to reputation. In addition, we can see that there is also a positive relationship between secondary crisis and secondary crisis communication (Pearson Correlation =.811, p-value<.000).

Table 12

Results of correlations for reputation, secondary crisis communication and reaction

		Organizational reputation	Secondary crisis communication	Secondary crisis reaction
Organizational reputation	Pearson correlation	1		
	Sig.			
Secondary crisis communication	Pearson correlation	.717	1	
	Sig.	.000		
Secondary crisis reaction	Pearson correlation	724	.811	1
	Sig.	.000	.000	

4.5 **Overview of the results and the tested hypotheses**

In the previous sections, all potential relationships between the independent and dependent variables were displayed. This leads to the overview presented in Table 13 when it comes to accepting or rejecting the hypotheses.

Table 13

Overview of the results of the tested hypotheses

	Hypothesis	**Result**
H_1	*Organizational reputation is positively related to both secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction.*	*Accepted*
H2	*A humorous framed crisis response message leads to a higher organizational reputation compared to a non-humorous response message.*	*Rejected*
H3	*A crisis response message sent as a personal identity leads to a higher organizational reputation compare to a message sent as an organizational identity.*	*Rejected*
H4a	*A humorously framed crisis response message sent as a personal identity leads to a higher organisational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message sent as personal identity.*	*Rejected*

H4b	*A humorously framed crisis response message sent as an organizational identity to a lower organizational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message sent as organizational identity.*	*Rejected*
H5	*A crisis response message sent in responsible crisis situation damages the organizational reputation more a crisis response message sent in a non-responsible crisis situation.*	*Rejected*
H6$_a$	*In the case of non-responsible crisis situation, a humorously framed crisis response message leads to a higher organisational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message*	*Rejected*
H6$_b$	*In the case of responsible crisis situation, a humorously framed crisis response message leads to a lower organisational reputation compared to a non-humorously framed crisis response message.*	*Rejected*
H7a	*In the case of non-responsible crisis situation, a crisis response message sent as a personal identity leads to a higher organisational reputation compared to a crisis response message sent as an organizational identity.*	*Rejected*
H7b	*In the case of responsible crisis situation, a crisis response message sent as an organizational identity leads to a higher organisational reputation compared to a crisis response message sent as a personal identity.*	*Rejected*

5. Discussion

In this study, the initial object was to explore the effect of humorous crisis response on organizational reputation and its influential factors such as crisis responsibility and response subjects. An online experiment was conducted for find out the answers of our research questions. Based on them, nine main hypotheses were established. Contrary to expectations, only two of them are supported and the other hypotheses are rejected, hence, except message type, the observed effects on organizational reputation among response subjects and crisis responsibility and their interaction were not significant.

5.1 Main findings

Based on the conclusions of previous literature review, people tend to value humour which might play an important role in increasing organizational reputation when it is used as a crisis response style. If it is applied in a proper situation, humorous crisis responses might have more advantages than traditional serious crisis response. The results of this experiment show that, when it comes to the effects of humour, the difference between a non-humorous crisis response and a humorous response message is indeed statistically significant.

However, hypothesis 2 was rejected, since the test evidence proved that a non-humorous response is better than a humorous response when it comes to organizational reputation. This finding is completely opposite to most previous studies, like Xiao et al. (2018) who mentioned that a humorous message contributes to higher acceptance of the crisis response because it is closer to "human voice". Also, some studies illustrated that in social media contexts the use of informal language is preferred, including humour, to build a conversation-like communication (Kelleher, 2009; Kim et al., 2016). The results of this study however revealed that in a crisis, Chinese respondents prefer a non-humorous crisis response. Humour framed crisis response decrease the organizational reputation they are perceived, regardless of the crisis situation or who is the response sender. It is a remarkable finding that humour is not the best choice for the corporation/organization to cope with crises in Chinese social media environment.

A possible explanation for the interpretation of humour is different in China. Compared with western people, the attitude of Orientals turns out the be not so positive towards humour. More specifically, for instance, due to the effect of traditional Confucianism in Chinese culture, some Chinese people still consider humour as an undesirable personality trait, they used to devalue humour but stress self-restriction and a sense of seriousness (Rudowicz & Yue, 2002). Thus, there is an ambivalent attitude existing in Chinese culture nowadays. The negative side of humour in Chinese cultural context was confirmed in this study. We also could hazard a guess that it could be attributed to the design of our study in which there is no distinction made about the types of humour, humour in this study was only discussed generally.

Besides, this study considered the crisis responsibility and response subjects as relevant variables at the same time. This research indicates that there are no main and interaction effects found on crisis responsibility and response subjects. Therefore, the effective of humour in crisis communication is not affected by different degrees of crisis severity or various response subjects. This result is totally different from prior studies, example of article from Kim et al., 2016 or Vigsø, 2013, in which they concluded that humour is suggested to use when the crisis severity is perceived as low.However, in our case, the audience did not care about these two elements in a crisis, whereby the crisis seems to have no effect, these three factors are three different independent variables.

A crisis response by the CEO does not lead to a higher organizational reputation, in comparison with the organization response message. The different levels of crisis responsibility are also not the root cause on organizational reputation. It makes sense potentially. In Verhoeven et al. 's study (2012), the crisis is perceived as a "collective organizational problem" instead of blaming the CEO. Van Vuuren & Cooren (2010) also considered it as the depersonalization of accountability of accountability, crisis responsibility shifts from individual to the organization or environment.

Besides, the background of this experiment was based on Chinese social media, but Chinese social media environment is also different from the western. There are some unique features

about Chinese cultural background. Firstly, Chinese social media is localized and even fragmented. In the past decades, till now, China never uses international social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, instead developing its own social media tools and creating its special Internet ecosystem. It means there is a big difference between Chinese and western social media environment. Secondly, As the social media environment is getting localized and fragmented, its contained limitations become prominent increasingly. For instance, Chen and Cheng (2019) mentioned that, in China, misinformation and false information spread widely and quickly on social media, public get more mistrust for organizations and government, as well as institutions, which is affected disruptively by the post-truth era. Thirdly, since China is a collectivistic country, the government and organizations tend to have stronger power than the normal citizens. When the company realized they are in a crisis or scandal, they are used to try to use their power to cover up it and prevent the eruption of social media, and even release false information or delete any negative publicity online, such as the food safety case in Sanlu which occurred in 2008, and the arch-manipulator was the CEO of Sanlu company (Veil and Yang, 2012). So their prior perceived trust is not good enough. In the research by Cheng and Lee (2019), they illustrate that Chinese society constituted its unique cultural, political and media characteristics, which must impact Chinese online crisis communication practice.

Moreover, the expectations from this study were based on the theories of SCCT and IRT. These traditional theories still dominate the current crisis communication strategies and are used widely and frequently. However, they are all originally developed in western social contexts. There is not enough evidence to prove they also work in Chinese social context. It might also lead to most of hypotheses are rejected in this study.

Lastly, this study finds a significant positive relationship between secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction. This result is consistent with prior studies (e.g., Vassilikopoulou, Siomkos, Chatzipanagiotou & Pantouvakis, 2009). A higher level of secondary crisis communication might result in higher level of secondary crisis reaction because social media tools make it easier for the audience to trigger "secondary crisis reaction" behaviours by sharing and reposting the post, news, comments and so on. On the

other hand, according to cognitive dissonance theory, people do not like to have attitudes and behaviour in conflict, which causes dissonance. Through secondary crisis communication, once customers convey the positive perceptions about the firm and its products, they may make positive secondary crisis reaction as well to ensure consistent behaviour eventually (Yi & Baumgartner 2004).

All in all, most of the final results are not in line with our expectations except hypothesis 1 and 2.

5.2 Limitations and future research

One limitation of the research design presented in this study is that it did not do a contrast experiment to compare the difference and explore the effect of different crisis strategies in multiple cultural contexts, so it lacks reference. This experiment only collected data form the respondents who have a Chinese cultural background. Thus, this research result might not be completely comprehensive and generalized.

Secondly, this research did not distinguish different humour styles, like self-deprecating humour and aggressive humour styles, or other humour framing styles. Various expressions of humour in crisis communication might have different effects on organizational reputation. Hence, it would be valuable to take multiple humour framing styles into account.

Thirdly, the stimulus material of this experiment employed a fictitious case, so the participants did not know enough background information about the organization in crisis, such as its prior reputation or its CEO personal reputation, or even their crisis history. These potential elements might affect the audience's attitudes to the organization and its products to some extent. For instance, a high prior reputation may decrease the negative outcome of the crisis, no matter what crisis response the organization made. Therefore, future research should not ignore these kind of factors and fully consider more details, so that experiment designs can be more comprehensive.

Lastly, although this study tried to pay attention on the representative reflection of the society, the main respondent group is the young, especially the student. This point should be improved in the future research.

6. Conclusion

In sum, after the data analysis, the following three research questions can be answered.

> *RQ1: What are the main and interaction effects of a humorous crisis response strategy, crisis responsibility, and response subject on organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reactions in the Chinese context?*
>
> *RQ2: What is the relationship between secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction?*
>
> *RQ3: Is organizational reputation influenced by a three-way interaction among message type, crisis responsibility and message subjects?*

These findings have shown a main effect of message type (humorous & non-humorous) on organizational reputation. And there is a positive relationship between secondary crisis communication and secondary crisis reaction. But organizational reputation is not influenced by all factors.

These comprehensive causes about Chinese culture and society were considered as the possible explanation for the findings in this study. Therefore, it requires that the corporate, especially for multinational companies which doing business in China, must pay more attention to observe the tendency of local social media environment, and keep cultural sensitivity. Humour is not proper to be used as crisis communication strategy. The interpretation of humour is totally different from Chinese public's perception, the organization should be aware that it is a risk that it can cause misunderstandings and backfire. Furthermore, the organizational reputation is not influenced by the level of crisis responsibility and spokesperson, hence, once the organization comes across any crises, they should focus on identifying out the problems and finding solutions first, these are way more important things for the organizations and their stakeholders. Always being sincere to the public is the best crisis communication strategy.

In conclusion, this finding filled some gaps in this aspect and added the new perspective of crisis communication in Chinese cultural background. More multinational companies could have more powerful evidence to make better communication strategies in Chinese market.

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Appendix A

The materials of experiment

- The scenario of the crisis event

1. Responsible Crisis Situation

AAA Group is a world-famous Furniture manufacturing brand, which owns thousands of stores in many countries around the world. AAA Group is known for its good product quality and excellent social responsibility reputation. However, recently, a customer posted a negative comment on Weibo after having bought a cabinet from AAA. This customer complained that the cabinet has serious safety risks, because the cabinet tipped over when her kid was playing in front of it. Furthermore, the customer was sure that her kid did not touch the cabinet, indicating the cabinet not being stable and it could tip over by itself easily. The complaint caused a vast number of responses on social media and attracted much public attentions resulting in in a serious product safety crisis for AAA Group. Many challenged its authority and asked AAA Group to provide the proof of safety of its products as soon as possible and remove this cabinet from their stores.

Soon afterwards, more users reported that the product they bought caused similar accidents, and even it injured people. After a series of investigation and tests, AAA Group admitted that this cabinet has some potential safety risks due to its design and materials. The cabinet cannot stand stably if it carries too heavy stuff into it. Turns out they took into account its aesthetics especially and ignored its safety and practical functions.

Therefore, AAA Group apologised to the public and responded on the social media platform. The content of apologies and response is shown in the Appendix B.

2. Non-responsible Crisis Situation

AAA Group is a world-famous Furniture manufacturing brand, which owns thousands of stores in many countries around the world. AAA Group is known for its good product quality and excellent social responsibility reputation. However, recently, a customer posted a negative comment on Weibo after having bought a cabinet from AAA. This customer complained that the cabinet has serious safety risks, because the cabinet tipped over when

her kid was playing in front of it. Furthermore, the customer was sure that her kid did not touch the cabinet, indicating the cabinet not being stable and it could tip over by itself easily. The complaint caused a vast number of responses on social media and attracted much public attentions resulting in a serious product safety crisis for AAA Group. Many challenged its authority and asked AAA Group to provide the proof of safety of its products as soon as possible and remove this cabinet from their stores.

After a series of investigations and tests, evidence proved that the root reason which resulted in this accident was incorrect instruction installment by the users showing the product itself does not carry any potential safety risks.

The content of apologies and response is shown in the Appendix B.

Appendix B

Four ways of crisis responding – in Responsible crisis situation

AAA group took a series of actions to solve problems:

1. Announced Recall alert.

2. Made compensation to all victims.

    a. Non-humorous response – personal identity (CEO and founder of AAA Group, Mr. Smith)

"Recently a serious safety accident occurred with a cabinet produced by our company AAA Group. The final investigations revealed that, our product design indeed exists safety risks.
We sincerely apologize to all victims and our customers who have supported us over the years We guarantee that we will take all responsibilities, accept all due punishments, we will work hard to correct any mistakes and enhance our product safety standards and quality in the future. Hope for your support and forgiveness."

Chinese version:

"最近，我公司 AAA 集团生产的橱柜发生了一起严重的安全事故。现已调查清楚，此次事件是由于用户安装不当导致而偶然发生，并不是产品质量等原因导致。

对此造成的不便我们深感抱歉，感谢大家对 AAA 的关注和支持。我们保证将不断提高产品的安全标准，在未来提供更好更优质的服务和使用体验！"

    b. Non-humorous response – organizational identity (AAA Group's official Weibo account)

"Recently a serious safety accident occurred with a cabinet produced by our company AAA Group. The final investigations revealed that, our product design indeed exists safety risks.
We sincerely apologize to all victims and our customers who have supported us over the years We guarantee that we will take all responsibilities, accept all due punishments, we will work hard to correct any mistakes and enhance our product safety standards and quality in the future. Hope for your support and forgiveness."

Chinese version:

"最近，我公司 AAA 集团生产的橱柜发生了一起严重的安全事故。现已调查清楚，此次事件是由于用户安装不当导致而偶然发生，并不是产品质量等原因导致。

　　对此造成的不便我们深感抱歉，感谢大家对 AAA 的关注和支持。我们保证将不断提高产品的安全标准，在未来提供更好更优质的服务和使用体验！"

  c. Humorous response – personal identity (CEO and founder of AAA Group, Mr. Smith)

"As everyone knows, AAA group is facing a product-harm accident, the entire company is totally freaked out these days after accident, especially Product Safety Dep., they almost wrote "love and peace, flashy and safe" on their face, but the truth still punched on their face so hard in the end and it hurts so much. Please be niceeee. All unqualified products will be removed from the shelves as planned, they need to be crushed and remake.

Anyways, we deeply apologize to all victims and the customers, we will do better, we promise."

Chinese version:

　"大家都知道，AAA 公司近期在面临一个产品质量危机，全公司都吓坏了，尤其是我们的产品安全部门，就差把"我们是美貌与实力并存"几个大字写在脸上以证清白。结果还是被啪啪打脸了，打得可太疼了，大家手下留情。

　　这类橱柜产品会按原计划全部下架销毁回炉重造，对于所有受害者还有消费者们，我们深感歉意，我们会做得更好的，我们保证。"

  d. Humorous response –organizational identity (AAA Group's official social media account)

"As everyone knows, AAA group is facing a product-harm accident, the entire company is totally freaked out these days after accident, especially Product Safety Dep., they almost wrote "love and peace, flashy and safe" on their face, but the truth still punched on their face so hard in the end and it hurts so much. Please be niceeee. All unqualified products will be removed from the shelves as planned, they need to be crushed and remake.

Anyways, we deeply apologize to all victims and the customers, we will do better, we promise."

Chinese version:

"大家都知道，AAA 公司近期在面临一个产品质量危机，全公司都吓坏了，尤其是我们的产品安全部门，就差把"我们是美貌与实力并存"几个大字写在脸上以证清白。结果还是被啪啪打脸了，打得可太疼了，大家手下留情。

这类橱柜产品会按原计划全部下架销毁回炉重造，对于所有受害者还有消费者们，我们深感歉意，我们会做得更好的，我们保证。"

Four ways of crisis responding – in non-Responsible crisis situation:

AAA group took a series of actions to solve problem:

1. Announced stop selling this type of cabinet.

2. Redesign and improve product, simply its installation procedure and steps.

    e. Non-humorous response – personal identity (CEO and founder of AAA Group, Mr. Smith)

"Recently a serious safety accident occurred with a cabinet produced by our company AAA Group. The final investigation reveals that it was a mere accident due to incorrect instruction installation. Many thanks for your attention, and sorry for any inconveniences, we guarantee that we will enhance our product safety standards and provide a better using experience in the future. We really appreciate your support and understanding."

Chinese version:

"最近，我公司 AAA 集团生产的橱柜发生了一起严重的安全事故。现已调查清楚，此次事件是由于用户安装不当导致而偶然发生，并不是产品质量等原因导致。

对此造成的不便我们深感抱歉，感谢大家对 AAA 的关注和支持。我们保证将不断提高产品的安全标准，在未来提供更好更优质的服务和使用体验！"

    f. Non-humorous response – organizational identity (AAA Group's official Weibo account)

"Recently a serious safety accident occurred with a cabinet produced by our company AAA Group. The final investigation reveals that it was a mere accident due to incorrect instruction installation. Many thanks for your attention, and sorry for any inconveniences, we guarantee that we will enhance our product safety standards and provide a better using experience in the future. We really appreciate your support and understanding."

Chinese version:

　　"最近，我公司 AAA 集团生产的橱柜发生了一起严重的安全事故。现已调查清楚，此次事件是由于用户安装不当导致而偶然发生，并不是产品质量等原因导致。

　　对此造成的不便我们深感抱歉，感谢大家对 AAA 的关注和支持。我们保证将不断提高产品的安全标准，在未来提供更好更优质的服务和使用体验！"

g. Humorous response – personal identity (CEO and founder of AAA Group, Mr. Smith)

"*As everyone knows, AAA group is facing a product-harm accident, the entire company are totally freaked out these days after accident, especially Product Safety Dep.! they almost wrote "love and peace, flashy and safe" on their face to prove innocence, Fortunately, the truth didn't punch on their face! Haha, and luckily, we hadn't had time to throw all this kind of cabinets out as the trash, suddenly a little thanks for our "efficient" departments.*
Anyways, we feel so sorry for any inconveniences, we will do better, we promise."

Chinese version:

　　"大家都知道，AAA 公司近期在面临一个产品质量危机，全公司都吓坏了，尤其是我们的产品安全部门，就差把"我们是美貌与实力并存"几个大字写在脸上以证清白。还好没被打脸啊！差点这款橱柜就销毁回炉重造了，还得感谢我们有些部门的"略显稳重"的办事速度啊。
　　　不管怎么样，我们还是为我们带来的不便感到抱歉，我们保证，我们会做的更好。"

h. Humorous response –organizational identity (AAA Group's official social media account)

"*As everyone knows, AAA group is facing a product-harm accident, the entire company are totally freaked out these days after accident, especially Product Safety Dep.! they almost wrote "love and peace, flashy and safe" on their face to prove innocence, Fortunately, the truth didn't punch on their face! Haha, and luckily, we hadn't had time to throw all this kind of cabinets out as the trash, suddenly a little thanks for our "efficient" departments.*
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