



BSc Thesis Communication Science

HELP! WE DID NOT PROVOKE THIS!?

The effects of crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages on consumer attitudes towards affiliated organizations embroiled in unprovoked organizational crises

Dion te Lintelo – s2392267

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Supervisor

Drs. M.H. Tempelman

Department of Communication Science
Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences at the University of
Twente

ABSTRACT

In recent years, incidents of (sexual) harassment within organizations have been a frequent topic in the media. Although these incidents are usually carried out by one person, they can have a major impact on all organizations involved in the crisis event. Even affiliated organizations that could not have prevented or done anything about the incident. Indeed, previous research indicates that even when an organization is indirectly related to the crisis event, some responsibility is still attributed by stakeholders to an organization when there is an association with the offender charged. Consequently, these organizations are obliged to respond to the crisis incident in order to maintain or improve their relationships with stakeholders. To find out how affiliated organizations can best respond to an unprovoked crisis event to improve stakeholder attitudes, this study examines the possible effects of two independent variables that can be relevant in crisis communication: crisis fit (low versus high) and crisis response motive (value-driven versus strategic-driven). Thereby, the purpose of this study is to gain more insight into the effects of the crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages on consumers' attitudes such as trust, credibility, attitude and perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization that is embroiled in an organizational crisis situation. Furthermore, personal levels of empathy are considered as a possible moderator for the effect of crisis response motives on consumer attitudes. Value-driven motives exhibit affections of empathy through which personal levels of empathy can reinforce consumer attitudes. For the data collection, a quantitative research method was chosen in which data were gathered by means of an online questionnaire. In order to measure the effects, a 2 (crisis fit: high versus low) by 2 (crisis response motive: value driven versus strategic driven) experimental, randomized between-subjects design was used. Results of the data analysis show that there are no significant effects between crisis fit, crisis response motives, personal empathy levels and consumer attitudes. Regarding practical implications,

this study contributes to the crisis communication domain by introducing a new concept in crisis communication called ‘crisis fit’. Participants in the study recognized the difference between a high crisis fit and a low crisis fit, therefore the concept of crisis fit could be considered for inclusion in the crisis communication process. However, for efficient application of the concept, more practical future research is needed.

Key words: corporate sexual harassment, affiliated organizations, crisis communication, crisis fit, crisis response motive, crisis response messages, consumer attitudes

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1. INTRODUCTION

A wave of reports of harassment in recent years has led to the deposition of high-ranking men and women in entertainment, sport, politics and business (Does, Gundemir & Shih, 2021).

With many women and men finally coming forward with their stories of harassment, the barrier to victims' opening their mouths has become more and more apparent. Even though this is a positive development, the problem, however, is that as a result of the occurrence of cases of harassment, the reputation of organization's involved, also known as affiliated organizations, in these industries can be tarnished. Or to put it in other words, they can end up in an organizational crisis with all the internal and external consequences this entails.

Recent examples of crisis situations involving harassment are the Voice of Holland scandal and Lil'Kleine's partner-abuse scandal. In January 2022, news emerged that several men that were working for the Dutch television programme The Voice of Holland had sexually harassed women. An incident that quickly followed was Lil'Kleine's partner-abuse scandal. In February 2022 camera footage was leaked showing Dutch rapper Lil'Kleine assaulting his girlfriend by wedging her head between the door of his car. Short after these incidents, the persons involved were immediately cancelled by the public, however, affiliated organizations, such as television company Talpa and music company Sony, also came under public fire.

A similar incident central to this thesis is the Marc Overmars case. Marc Overmars is a well-known person in the football world. Until recently, Marc Overmars worked as director of football affairs at the Dutch football club Ajax but has shortly been appointed as the new director of football affairs at the Belgian football club Royal Antwerp FC. His appointment at Antwerp, however, evoked many confusing reactions among the public. Namely, Overmars is alleged to have sent sexually explicit messages to female colleagues at Ajax. Moreover, at the time of his appointment at Antwerp, he is still the subject of an independent investigation in

the Netherlands about these allegations. As a reaction to the appointment of Overmars, affiliated sponsor organizations of Royal Antwerp FC indicated that they are withdrawing from the sponsor relationship with the football club.

The reason for their withdrawal might be to indicate the seriousness of the situation, which is an ethical violation. However, another reason could be to improve and maintain stakeholder relationships. Indeed, previous research shows that even when an organization is indirectly related to the crisis event, some responsibility is still attributed by stakeholders to an organization when there is an association with the offender charged. When responsibility is attributed to the affiliated sponsor organization, they are practically forced to respond to the situation in order to maintain stakeholder relationships and thus save their organizational image (Guth, 1995). Accordingly, research in crisis communication indicates that for affiliated organizations that unintentionally get embroiled in crisis situations, distancing in combination with non-existent and suffering strategies is the strongest option to protect the organization's reputation (Coombs, 1995).

Affiliated organizations can respond to the crisis incident by means of crisis response messages, such as press releases or online social media posts. This study examines the effects of two independent variables entangled in crisis response messages that may improve stakeholder attitudes towards affiliated organizations when distancing from an unprovoked crisis situation.

The independent variables that are being examined are crisis fit and crisis response motives. Crisis fit has not yet been mentioned before in the domain of crisis communication and indicates the perceived fit between an affiliated organization's core activities and the crisis topic. Crisis response motives are the reasons why an affiliated organization decides to take action in response to a crisis incident. The conditions that are researched in this study are high crisis fit versus low crisis fit and value-driven motives (focused on norms and values)

versus strategic-driven motives (focused on business aspects). The stakeholders that are considered in this research are the ‘consumers’ of an affiliated sponsor organization. Thereby, the purpose of this study is to gain more insight into the effects of the crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages on consumers’ attitudes such as trust, credibility, attitude and perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization that is embroiled in an organizational crisis situation. Furthermore, personal levels of empathy are considered as a possible moderator for the effect of crisis response motives on consumer attitudes. Value-driven motives exhibit affections of empathy through which personal levels of empathy can reinforce consumer attitudes (Xie, Bagozzi, & Grønhaug, 2019). A 2x2 experimental, randomized between-subjects design will be used to answer the research question:

RQ: How do crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages effect consumers' attitudes such as trust, credibility, attitude and perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization that is embroiled in an ethical crisis situation?

This study has two contributions in the domain of crisis communication. Firstly, the new concept of crisis fit will be introduced and studied. A set-up will be made for further research into the concept. Secondly, the research can identify which crisis response motives can be best implemented to enhance consumer attitudes as crisis response to a crisis situation involving ethical violation. All in all, crisis managers can use the results of this study to respond quickly and appropriately to unprovoked crisis situations their organization has become unexpectedly embroiled in.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section will substantiate all aspects covered in this study. First, an introduction to Corporate Sexual Harassment (CSH) will be elaborated, substantiating definitions of CSH and CSH as organizational crisis. Next, organizational crisis communication will be explained, elaborating on consumer attitudes as organizational trust, credibility, attitude and perceived reputation. This paragraph is followed by an explanation of the independent variables crisis response motives and crisis fit. Lastly, a possible moderator is explained.

2.1 CORPORATE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Corporate sexual harassment scandals, like the Marc Overmars case, have been a common topic of conversation for the past decades. As a result of the #MeToo movement in 2006, many victims of sexual harassment have come forward with their experiences and stories about sexual assault in the workplace (Does, Gundemir & Shih, 2021). The improvement in awareness has led to a surge in reports of sexual harassment on women and men working in the entertainment, sports, political and business sectors, causing high-profile, influential managers and CEOs to lose their jobs (NPR, 2018; Does et al., 2021). Even though this is a good thing, such a scandal leaves quite an impact on all involved inside and outside the organization, ranging from employees to affiliated organizations such as sponsors. However, in order to make sense of the consequences of a corporate sexual harassment incident, it is important to have a clear understanding of what the concept exactly entails.

2.1.1 CORPORATE SEXUAL HARASSMENT DEFINED

Corporate sexual harassment, also known as sexual harassment at the workplace, has several definitions that stem from their own perspectives. Borelli-Kjaer, Moehl Schack and Nielsson (2021) define sexual harassment at the workplace as corporate wrong-doing, which entails “a set of questionable, unethical and/or illegal actions performed by a person within an organization in a capacity of employment” (p. 3). Additionally, Burke (1995) states that sexual harassment is a form of social-sexual behavior, which can be defined as behavior that is not work-related and has a sexual content, such as inappropriate flirtation attempts and sexually oriented jokes (Gutek et al., 1990). Furthermore, Sierra et al. (2008) distinguish two types of sexual harassment in the workplace: *quid pro quo harassment* (QPQ) and *hostile environment harassment* (HE). QPQ harassment is also known as a "this for that" compromise; it implies that one's terms and conditions of employment (e.g., promotions, compensation) depend on the extent to which the victim complies with sexual requests or grants sexual favors (Siuta & Bergman, 2019; O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2009). HE harassment occurs when unwanted sex-related verbal conduct, such as gender and sexualized jokes or comments, interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an abusive or offensive work environment (Siera et al., 2019; O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2009). Additionally, Siuta and Berman (2019) describe HE harassment as if intimidation is "in the air" within an organization.

According to Gautam and Tewari (2021), sexual harassment at the workplace “in its varied forms of hostility against any gender is a social complex issue” (p.73). They declare that sexual harassment at the workplace is about dominance and powerplay, and differs from other kinds of sexual assaults, which is, most of the time, about sexual gratification. This makes that corporate sexual harassment scandals evoke a lot of angry feelings among people, with all the ensuing organizational effects.

2.1.2 CORPORATE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AS ORGANIZATIONAL CRISES

Once corporate sexual harassment cases become public, they turn into a scandal, after which public outcry is directed against the organization in question (Guth, 1995). From this moment, an organization ends up in organizational crisis (Borelli-Kjaer et al., 2021; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) define a crisis as “an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole of an organization” (p. 34). Additionally, Barton (1992) describes an organizational crisis as “a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results” (p.2). Examples of these potentially negative results include reputational and financial damage, possible deterioration of stakeholder interactions and disruption of an organization’s on-going operations (Coombs, 2007; Dowling, 2000; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Regarding sexual harassment scandals, previous research has shown the negative organizational consequences after cases of sexual harassment in organizations were publicly exposed.

Borelli-Kjaer et al. (2021) studied the impact of reported sexual harassment on firm value. They found that the average effect of a corporate sexual harassment incident in organizations is "significantly negative and robust, with around 1.5% abnormal decrease in market value over the event day and the following trading day" (p. 1). Moreover, they state that when a scandal involves the engagement of a CEO and a lot of media attention, the effect is significantly strengthened.

Sierra et al. (2008) examined the effects of perceived corporate sexual harassment in a sales-oriented workplace, on attitudes toward the brand, brand image, and intentions to work, of future job solicitants. They found cautious evidence that perceived corporate sexual harassment has a negative impact on brand development and recruitment.

Another significant, not to be neglected, factor affected by a corporate sexual harassment scandal is an organization's stakeholders (Fortunato, 2016). Stakeholders can be defined as any group or individual who can be impacted by the actions of an organization (Davies et al., 2003; Stephens, Malone & Bailey, 2005). Examples of stakeholders are consumers, employees, suppliers, or investors and shareholders (Neville & Menguc, 2006). Stakeholders play a major role when it comes to organizational crises (Davies et al., 2003). Namely, stakeholders' perceptions can help indicate the severity of a crisis (Brown, Brown & Billings, 2015). Fortunato (2016) states that "if the stakeholders view the event as a crisis, the leaders of the organization must define it as such and respond accordingly to the level of the stakeholders' expectations" (p. 70). When the reputation of an organization is damaged due to a corporate sexual harassment scandal, stakeholders of this organization will change the way they interact with it (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). This also applies for the sponsor organizations of Royal Antwerp FC, which form an essential stakeholder group of the football club (Fortunato, 2016).

In practice, a total of five sponsors, withdrew from the partnership in response to the appointment of Marc Overmars as the new director of football affairs at Royal Antwerp FC. One of the withdrawn sponsors publicly emphasized that respect for women is very important but did not want to communicate about the withdrawal any further (Sporza, 2022). Another sponsor responds by reporting that the reason for withdrawing is because the appointment of Overmars goes against the norms and values of their organization (Haverkamp, 2022). By publicly stating these reasons, the sponsors imply the seriousness of the situation surrounding Marc Overmars and Royal Antwerp FC and identify the situation as an organizational crisis concerning ethical violation. However, this might not be their only intention regarding their withdrawal. Another intention could be that they wish to distance themselves from the situation in order to remain and improve the attitudes of their own stakeholders towards their

organization. Indeed, earlier research indicates that even when an organization is indirectly related to the crisis event, some responsibility is still attributed by stakeholders to the organization when there is an association with the offender charged. Accordingly, this applies to all affiliated organizations that unintentionally become embroiled in a crisis incident (Benoit, 1995). Affiliated organizations can be defined as organizations that are connected to a larger organization, such as foundations or sponsors (Collins, 2022). In order to prevent perceived reputational damage and maintain or possibly improve stakeholders' attitudes, affiliated organizations can make use of the aspects of organizational crisis communication.

2.2 ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The withdrawal by an affiliated sponsoring organization from its sponsoring relationship with another organization, due to its involvement in an unexpected crisis situation, functions as a crisis-response strategy (Coombs, 1995). The establishment of crisis-response strategies is an aspect of crisis communication. Crisis communication is a part of Public Relations (PR) and mainly focuses on the dynamic between “crisis situations, communication strategies and public perceptions” (p. 527) (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Overall, crisis-response strategies can be implemented by crisis managers to repair, control or prevent damage to an organization's corporate image and reputation after or during crises (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). During an organizational crisis, communication functions as an important asset to change stakeholder's perceptions (Stephens et al., 2005). Fortunato (2016) argues that “a crisis response is necessary because some responsibility for the crisis occurring is being attributed to the organization” (p. 70). This means, as mentioned earlier, that even when an organization is indirectly related to the crisis event, some responsibility is still attributed by stakeholders to the organization when there is an association with the offender charged (Benoit, 1995).

The way an organization communicatively responds (to its stakeholders) in times of crisis affects the extent of organizational damage; well-managed crisis response can significantly limit the damage of a crisis, while poorly managed crisis response can dramatically increase the damage of a crisis (Fortunato, 2016). This is reflected by Coombs (2006) who states, “the key to protecting the organizational reputation is to select the appropriate crisis response strategy(ies)” (p. 246). For affiliated organizations that unintentionally get embroiled in crisis situations, distancing in combination with non-existent and suffering strategies is the strongest option to protect the organization’s reputation (Coombs, 1995). Coombs (1995) refers to this as *distance strategies*. Moreover, affiliated organizations cannot change much about the crisis situation; the only thing they can do to minimize damage to their organizational image is to react to the situation (Stephens et al., 2005).

Reacting to the situation can be done by means of crisis response messages, which can be implemented through several media, such as (online) press releases or social media posts. Announcing that you are withdrawing as an affiliated sponsoring organization by means of a crisis response message can be seen as the first step in responding to an unexpected crisis situation. However, the way stakeholders react to these crisis responds can depend on different factors. The factors that are being studied in this research concern: crisis response motives and the extent of sponsor organizations’ fit with the crisis topic, also called crisis fit. Up till now little till no research can be found on these two factors with regard to crisis response messages and their influence on stakeholder attitudes. Furthermore, the focus of this study will lie on the attitudes of one of the most important external stakeholders of an affiliated sponsoring organization: consumers. Namely, organizations cannot survive without consumers; they generate income and are the main source of demands for all the goods and services of an organization (Seth, 2015). Overall, there exist various consumer attitudes. In

this study, common consumer attitudes as: attitude, corporate credibility, organizational trust and perceived reputation will be investigated and are considered as the dependent variables.

Attitudes can be described as the consumer's ongoing internal evaluations (i.e., favorable or unfavorable, likeable or unlikeable) and emotional feelings towards an organization (Tsang et al., 2004; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Attitudes can be a useful tool for organizations to better understand their relationship with customers (Fullerton, 2005).

Newell and Goldsmith (2001) define corporate credibility as “the extent to which consumers feel that the firm has the knowledge or ability to fulfil its claims and whether the firm can be trusted to the truth or not” (p. 235). According to several academics, in times of crisis, corporate credibility exists of two dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001; Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2017). Trustworthiness indicates the honesty and reliability of the source and is the organization's benevolence towards or concern for its (business) relations. Expertise is about the competent knowledge of an organization; an expert organization will appear effective and capable and is equipped with the knowledge about the crisis issue (Kouzes & Posner, 2011; Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2017).

Organizational trust can be defined as the extent to which consumers feel secure about the actions of an organization, based on the expectation that the organization is trustworthy and responsible for the consumer's interests and welfare (Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Alemán & Yagüe-Guillén, 2003). Seppänen and Blomqvist (2006) state that trust “is seen to facilitate information sharing, open communication, commitment, long-term orientation and conflict management, and to increase predictability, adaptability and strategic flexibility” (p. 182). Furthermore, in times of organizational crisis, the maintenance of trust is necessary for

an organization to implement corrective action and create a feeling of honesty with its stakeholders (Appelbaum et al., 2012).

Perceived reputation is about how the public perceives the overall performance of the organization (Rindova et al., 2005). Jamal and Abu Bakar (2017) describe perceived reputation as a set of assumptions about an organization's abilities, aspirations, and mission that are integrated into a network of multiple stakeholders.

2.3 CRISIS RESPONSE MOTIVES

As mentioned earlier, once corporate sexual harassment cases within an organization become public, the organization and its affiliated organizations are practically forced to publicly respond by means of crisis response messages in order to minimize organizational damage and maintain stakeholder relationships (Guth, 1995). In order to distance themselves from the crisis situation, an affiliated organization can implement intrinsic motives (ethical/ altruistic) or extrinsic motives (self-focused/self-serving) in their crisis response message (Graafland & Mazereeuw-Van der Duijn Schouten, 2012). This study will focus on crisis response messages included with value-driven motives, which are covered by intrinsic motives, and strategic-driven motives, which are covered by extrinsic motives. Crisis response motives are the first independent variable of this study and are anticipated to examine the differences in effects between value related crisis response and business-related crisis response.

Value-driven motives reflect beliefs that the crisis issue is inconsistent with an organization's moral, ethical and social ideals and standards (Ellen et al., 2000; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Through value-driven motives, an organization's practices symbolize the social good that the organization wants to contribute to society (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

Consumers thereby believe that an organization is acting out of its true feelings, cares about the cause and is genuinely concerned with the social problem (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

Strategic-driven motives refer to beliefs that the organization can achieve its business goals, such as creating a positive brand image, by supporting a social cause (Marín, Cuestas & Román, 2016; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Organizations who use this crisis-response motive, set strategic objectives in order to stay in business by engaging in socially responsible behavior (Ellen et al., 2006; de Jong & van der Meer, 2015).

Previous research examined the effects of value-driven and strategic-driven crisis response motives on consumer attitudes. According to Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013), crisis responses that incorporate value-driven motives are more likely to be positively embraced by consumers, as these motives are more aligned with the organization's true feelings and dispositions (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Strategic-driven motives often arouse mixed feelings among the public; on the one hand, they understand the economic viability of an organization, on the other hand, they get the idea that the interest of business profits outweighs the moral and reasonable importance by the organization (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Moreover, organizations that imply value-driven motives are perceived as more empathic towards crisis victims than organizations that imply strategy-driven motives (Xie, Bagozzi, & Grønhaug, 2019). Empathy is seen as the phenomenon of 'caring for others'. The primacy of values shows that an organization cares about people and their rights, which leads to a strengthening of consumer attitudes towards the organization (Xie et al., 2019).

Based on the research described above, crisis response messages containing a value-driven crisis response motive will result in a more positive consumer attitude towards an affiliated organization than crisis response messages containing a strategic-driven crisis response motive. With regard to an affiliated sponsor organization which is embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation, it is thus expected that consumers have more

positive feelings about organizational trust, corporate credibility, attitudes and the perceived reputation of this organization. Therefore, the second hypothesis reads as follows:

H1: Crisis response messages with a value-driven crisis response motive will result in more positive consumer responses on a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation, as compared to crisis response messages with a strategic-driven crisis response motive.

2.4 CRISIS FIT

Consumers will always have certain expectations of an organization. This also applies when an organization ends up in organizational crises. Consumers might expect an affiliated organization to respond to the crisis and make a particular statement regarding the crisis incident. Differences in these consumer-held expectations may depend on the perceived congruence between an affiliated organization's core activities and the crisis event, also called 'crisis fit'. Crisis fit is a concept that has not yet been mentioned before in organizational crisis communication theory and can roughly be defined as the perceived fit between an organization's core activities and the crisis topic. An organization's core activities include specialized practical activities that are implemented by an organization through which they can distinguish themselves from competitors (Linman, 2022). Crisis topics are types of crises ranging from environment-related topics to ethics-related topics and so on (Coombs, 2007). Previous research substantiates the theory behind the aforementioned aspects.

Kim and Choi (2016) studied the congruence effects in post-crisis CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) communication. CSR can be defined as activities that appear to

promote a social good that goes beyond an organization's interests and legal requirements (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Despite the fact that the current study does not focus on CSR activities, consumers may perceive the crisis response of the affiliated sponsor organizations as a social good. This, since the organizations shed light on an ethical violation by withdrawing from the sponsorship cooperation. Kim and Choi (2016) state that when CSR activities of an organization are congruent with consumer-held expectations, consumer attitudes are positively affected, as the consumer perceives the CSR activities as logical and appropriate. To translate this into organizational crises context; it can be perceived that when crisis response activities of an organization, such as distancing from a crisis situation, are congruent with consumer-held expectations, consumer attitudes are positively affected as the consumer perceives the crisis response activities as logical and appropriate. Now, this is where crisis fit comes to light. Namely, consumer-held expectations can depend on the perceived fit between the crisis issue topic and the organization's core activities.

To explain this further an example will be given, describing two affiliated sponsor organizations, including a human resource organization (HR) and an energy company that are embroiled in an organizational crisis involving ethical violation. In general, core activities of a human resource organization include the business of personnel matters. Moreover, core activities of an energy company involve supplying and sustaining energy. As mentioned, the crisis topic in this case implies ethical violation. With regard to crisis fit, it can be concluded that there exists a higher congruency, so a higher perceived crisis fit, between the human resource organization and the crisis topic 'ethical violation', because HR organizations are focused on personnel values and norms. Regarding the crisis fit for ethical violation and the core activities of an energy company, the perceived congruency might be lower. The company probably also cares about the standards and values of personnel; however, their core activities have nothing to do with this topic.

As mentioned above, consumer-held expectations can depend on the perceived crisis fit of affiliated organizations. With respect to an HR sponsor organization involved in an organizational crisis involving ethical violation, consumers might be more likely to expect a public crisis response from this kind of organization than they would expect for organization in the energy sector. Regarding the Marc Overmars case, when the HR sponsor organization would withdraw from the relationship with the organization that provoked the crisis situation, consumer attitudes will be more positive since consumers assume the crisis response as more logical and appropriate than for the energy company. It can thus be speculated that when the crisis fit between the core activities of an organization and the crisis topic is high, consumer responses are more positive than when the crisis fit is low. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H2: Crisis response messages communicated by an affiliated organization with a high crisis fit will result in more positive consumer responses on a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation, as compared to an affiliated organization with a low crisis fit.

2.5 MAIN EFFECTS

Earlier research can be found on the effects of crisis response motives on consumers' attitudes. However, no research has been done on the effect of the degree of crisis fit on consumers' attitudes. Moreover, there is little knowledge about the main effect between crisis response motives and an organization's degree of crisis fit. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the main effect of these two variables on the consumer attitudes: trust, credibility, attitude and perceived reputation.

2.5.1. MAIN EFFECT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS RESPONSE MOTIVES AND CRISIS FIT

Based on the aforementioned information about effects in crisis fit and crisis response motives stated in the previous sections, assumptions can be made about the effects of both crisis fit and response motives on consumer attitudes. For crisis response messages communicated by affiliated organizations with a high crisis fit that are embroiled in an organizational crisis situation involving ethical violation, value-driven crisis response motives can result in the most positive consumer attitudes. Conversely, most negative consumer attitudes can result from affiliated organizations with a low crisis fit that would use strategic-driven crisis response motives in the crisis response message. However, due to a lack of academic research in regard to these two concepts, there is no proved main effect between crisis fit and crisis response motives. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of the degree of crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages on consumer attitudes towards an affiliated organization embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation. Therefore, an exploratory research question is formulated in order to investigate this main effect:

RQ: How do crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages effect consumers' attitudes such as trust, credibility, attitude and perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization that is embroiled in an ethical crisis situation?

2.6 PERSONAL EMPATHY LEVELS AS MODERATOR

To better understand the effectiveness of communicated crisis response messages by affiliated sponsor organizations, personal empathy levels will be explored as a possible interfering variable. As aforementioned, two different crisis response motives are being analyzed in this study. Personal empathy levels could be a possible moderator for the independent variable crisis response motives, since organizations that imply value-driven motives are perceived as more empathic towards crisis victims than organizations that imply strategy-driven motives (Xie, Bagozzi, & Grønhaug, 2019). By mentioning value-driven aspects for withdrawing from the sponsorship cooperation with Royal Antwerp FC, an affiliated sponsor organization shows that they care about others and that they put ethical values first. Xie et al. (2019) state that when an organization takes an action that is seen by consumers as an ethical good, personal levels of empathy can ensure that attitudes towards the organization are reinforced. Based upon this statement, in this study, it is expected that higher personal levels of empathy can results in more positive attitudes towards the sponsor organization. Therefore, the third hypothesis is stated as follows:

H3: The effect of crisis response motives on consumer attitudes; a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation is positively moderated by personal empathy levels.

Figure 1 *Research Framework*

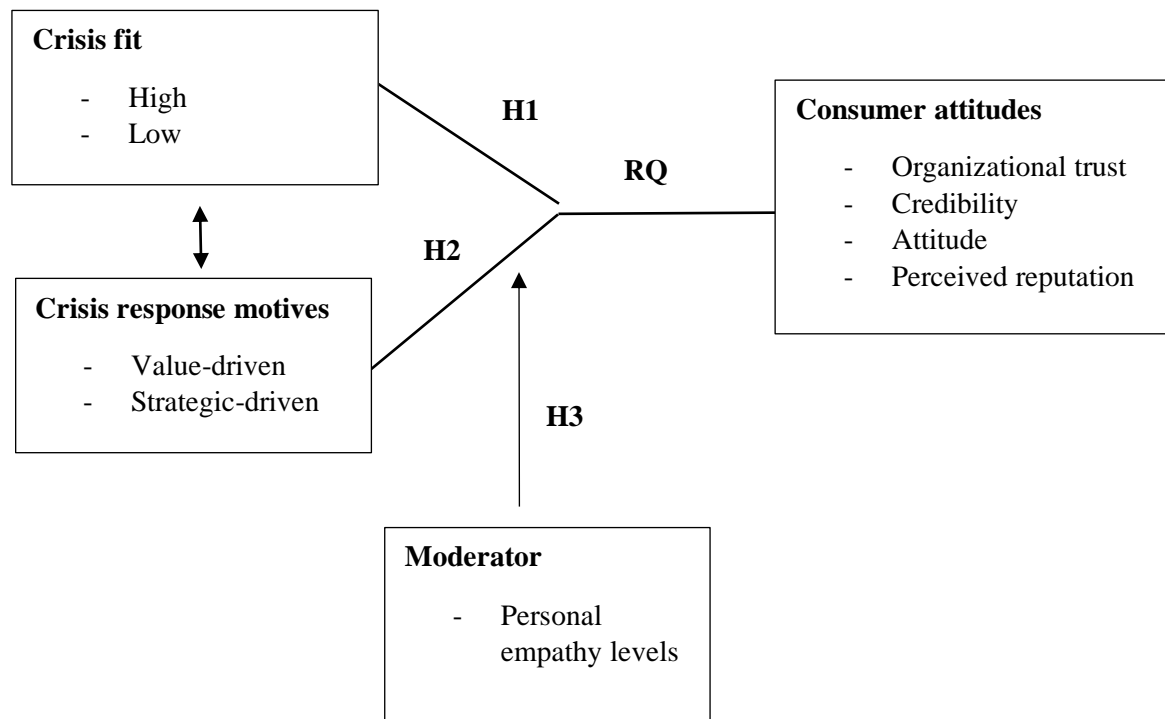


Table 1 *Hypotheses*

Hypothesizes
<p>H1: Crisis response messages with a value-driven crisis response motive will result in more positive consumer responses on a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation, as compared to crisis response messages with a strategic-driven crisis response motive.</p> <p>H2: Crisis response messages communicated by an affiliated organization with a high crisis fit will result in more positive consumer responses on a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation, as compared to an affiliated organization with a low crisis fit.</p> <p>H3: The effect of crisis response motives on consumer attitudes; a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation is positively moderated by personal empathy levels.</p>

3. METHOD

This section discusses the research method used in this study. First, the research design is described, including the Marc Overmars case. This paragraph is followed by the elaboration of the stimulus material in which the pre-test and the stimulus design are described. Thirdly, the measures used are discussed. Next, the research procedure is described. And finally, the last section discusses respondents with included sampling characteristics.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Before starting the research design process, the study was reviewed and ethical approval was granted by the BMS ethics committee. After the ethical approval, the research design for the study was developed. In order to test the effects of crisis fit and crisis response motives a 2 (crisis fit: high versus low) by 2 (crisis response motive: value-driven versus strategic-driven) experimental, randomized between-subjects design was used. This resulted in four experimental conditions in which each participant was exposed to one press release. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four press releases in order to eliminate the selection bias (Suresh, 2011). Figure 1 shows the research design.

Figure 2 Research design

		Crisis fit	
		High crisis fit	Low crisis fit
Crisis response motives	Value-driven	<i>Stimuli highfit*valuedriven</i>	<i>Stimuli lowfit*valuedriven</i>
	Strategic-driven	<i>Stimuli highfit*strategicedriven</i>	<i>Stimuli lowfit*strategicedriven</i>

3.1.1 The Marc Overmars Case

As mentioned earlier, this study is based on the situation concerning Marc Overmars, Royal Antwerp FC and affiliated sponsor organizations. In reality, several sponsors withdraw from the sponsorship cooperation with Royal Antwerp FC as a result of Overmars' appointment at the football club. In order to outline a realistic situation, the design of the research is based on two sponsor organizations that are comparable to some of the real sponsors that react to the crisis situation. In reality the sponsor organizations also react by means of a press release. Furthermore, in the design the sponsor organizations are presented as fictitious, as is the content of the press release. Fictitious sponsor organizations were chosen so that the outcomes could not be influenced by former crises or existing beliefs of the organization (Coombs, 2004).

3.2 STIMULUS MATERIAL

In this study, four fictitious press releases were used as stimulus material to manipulate crisis fit and crisis response motives. On beforehand of the design process of the stimulus material, a pre-test was conducted to evaluate whether participants were able to recognize created stimuli for the independent variables. Accordingly, based on the results of the pre-test the recognized stimuli were implemented in the final stimulus materials. Moreover, all stimulus material were presented in English, because Royal Antwerp FC is an international football club.

3.2.1 Pre-test

In order to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire instruments before their final distribution, a pre-test was carried out. In total 24 participants (N=24) completed the pre-test. The pre-test can be found in Appendix A.

In the pre-test, the participants were first briefly introduced by stating what they could expect in the pre-test. After that, two texts were presented in succession. One text in which norms and values (value-driven) were central and one text in which business interests (strategic-driven) were central. These stimulus texts were used to pre-test value- and strategic-driven motives. The pre-test sentences for crisis response motives can be found in Table 2.

For both texts, participants were asked to indicate on a bipolar seven-point Likert scale (anchored by 1= "mainly about norms and values" and 7= "mainly about business interests") to what extent they thought was central to the message they read. Both items were recognized by the participants, as a significant difference was found between the item for the value driven motive (M=2.88, SD=1.60) and the item for the strategic driven motive (M=5.00, SD=2.04).

Next, participants were shown a short prime video with fragments of news clips reporting and informing about the situation at Ajax caused by Marc Overmars followed the appointment of Overmars at Royal Antwerp FC. The prime video was provided with English subtitles so that all participants could follow the information presented. Moreover, the prime video functioned as an introduction to the Marc Overmars case.

After the short prime video, the participants were told that the crisis situation in this case involved ‘violation of women’s rights’. This information was then used to pre-test the fit of four fictitious sponsor organizations (two perceived low crisis fit versus two perceived high crisis fit) that were involved in the crisis situation of violation of women’s rights. These sponsor organizations were randomly presented to participants one by one. Subsequently, the participants were asked to indicate to what extent they thought the sponsoring organization could be effected by a crisis situation involving violation of women's rights, ranging from 1=Not at all effected till 7=Very much effected. These questions resulted in finding differences in average scores between the human resource consultancy organization (M=5.50, SD=1.6), the health insurance organization (M=5.00, SD=1.8), the energy company (M=3.42, SD=1.6), and the constructions company (M=4.00, SD=1.9).

Table 2 Sentences pre-test variables for crisis response motives

Value driven	Strategic driven
<i>"is in direct conflict with the employee values and standards of our organization"</i>	<i>"is not in the best interest for our organization's business relations"</i>
<i>"the current course of events does not match with our core values"</i>	<i>"the current course of events does not match with our business philosophy"</i>

3.2.2 Stimulus design

As mentioned above, four fictitious press releases were used to manipulate crisis fit and crisis response motives. A two-step scenario involving fragments of crisis response motives for withdrawing from the sponsorship cooperation and a description of the missions of one of the presented fictitious sponsor organizations. Based on the results of the pre-test, the fictitious energy company 'EnergyToday' and the fictitious human resource consultancy organization 'Ewolv' were implemented in the study. By means of the missions of the sponsor organizations the core activities could be derived by the participants in order to manipulate crisis fit. Before participants were presented with a press release, they were first shown a short prime video introducing the situation surrounding Marc Overmars. The link for the prime video can be found in Appendix B. This was followed by an announcement that the participant should carefully read the press release including the sponsor's mission statement. In the press release, participants first read the crisis response motive for withdrawing from the cooperation (step 1), this text is then followed by the mission of the sponsoring organization (step 2). Figure 2 shows one of the stimulus materials for a sponsor organization with a high crisis fit (Ewolv) that uses a value-driven motive. The rest of the press releases can be found in Appendix C.

Step 1: Crisis response motive: value driven vs. strategic driven

In the press releases, the participants were first introduced to the fact that the sponsor organization was extremely surprised by the appointment of Marc Overmars as the new technical director at Royal Antwerp FC. This was followed by a paragraph in which the sponsor organization reacted by means of a crisis response message to the situation. The sponsor indicates in both stimulus material for crisis response motives to withdraw from the sponsorship relationship with the football club. Furthermore, the message presented to the participants contained either a value-driven or a strategic-driven motive for withdrawing from the sponsorship relationship. Based on the results of the pre-test, the same sentences for the crisis response motives were implemented in the final stimulus materials. Thus, the value-driven motives indicate that the crisis issue, which is ethical violation, is inconsistent with the sponsor organization's ethical ideals and standards (e.g., "the current course of events does not match with our core values") (Ellen et al., 2000; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Whereas concerning the strategic-driven motives the withdrawal from the sponsoring cooperation is used as a social good in order to maintain business relations or achieve business goals (e.g., "we have therefore decided to withdraw from our sponsorship relation with the football club as the current course of events does not match with our business philosophy.") (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

Step 2: Crisis fit: low fit vs. high fit

After reading the sponsor organization's response message, the participants had to read the mission of the sponsor organization. A mission is one of the core business factors of an organization and indicates which core activities an organization performs (de Jong & van der Meer, 2015). Crisis fit is the perceived fit between an organization's core activities and the

crisis topic. In this study, the crisis topic concerns ethical violation. Accordingly, based on the results of the pre-test, the energy company 'EnergyToday' was used as the organization with a perceived low crisis fit. EnergyToday's mission entailed: "affordable and sustainable energy solutions for everyone". For the organization with a perceived high crisis fit, the human resource consultancy organization 'Evolv' was chosen. The mission of sponsor organization Evolv entailed: "at Evolv we dedicate ourselves to people and organizations every day. Through the right combination of personal attention and professional expertise, we strive to improve personal well-being and facilitate organizational growth".

Figure 3 *Stimuli highfit*valuecdriiven*

SPONSORSHIP DEFEAT FOR ROYAL ANTWERP FC AFTER APPOINTMENT MARC OVERMARS

TOP SPONSOR 'EWOLV' ENDS COOPERATION RAFC

Press release updated: March 26, 2022

ANTWERP, March 26th 2022 – Ewolv announced yesterday that they are extremely surprised by the decision of Royal Antwerp FC to appoint Marc Overmars as the new technical director of the football club. The organization responded to the situation with the following message:

"The decision to appoint Marc Overmars, who has recently been accused of repeated transgressive behavior and is currently the subject of an independent investigation in the Netherlands, is in direct conflict with the employee values and standards of our organization. We as a Human Resource Consultancy organization, being one of the top five sponsors of Royal Antwerp FC, have therefore decided to withdraw from our sponsorship relation with the football club as the current course of events does not match with our core values."

Ewolv is a Human Resource Consultancy organization located in Antwerp, Belgium. Ewolv's mission includes: "At Ewolv we dedicate ourselves to people and organizations every day. Through the right combination of personal attention and professional expertise, we strive to improve personal well-being and facilitate organizational growth".

More information? Check the website www.ewolv.be.



3.3 MEASURES

Regarding the measurement of the dependent variables and moderators, modified and drafted scale items from previous researchers were used.

3.3.1 Reliability of dependent variables and moderator

In order to measure the organizational trust, message credibility, attitude and perceived reputation, respondents were presented with different statements. The respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the different statements. Attitude towards the sponsor organization was measured by means of a bipolar seven-point Likert. The rest of the dependent variables organizational trust, message credibility and perceived reputation were measured with five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1=strongly disagree till 5=strongly agree.

To measure attitudes towards the sponsoring organization, a bipolar seven-point Likert scale consisting of five adjectives was used (Spears & Singh, 2004). These adjectives are unappealing/appealing, bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, unfavorable/favorable and unlikeable/likeable. These items were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .93.

To measure message credibility, scale items were derived from Flanagin and Metzger's (2000) scale to measure message credibility in an online environment. The items used to measure respondents' perceptions were: (1) the sponsor's message is believable; (2) the sponsor's message is accurate (3) the sponsor's message is trustworthy; (4) the sponsor's message is not biased; (5) the sponsor's message is complete. These items were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .84.

Organizational trust was assessed by a 4-item index based on five-point ratings of agreement retrieved from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). To measure organizational trust the following four statements were used: (1) I feel like I can trust this sponsor organization; (2) I feel like I can rely on this sponsor organization; (3) I feel like this is an honest sponsor organization; (4) I feel like this sponsor organization is safe. These items were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .87.

Perceived reputation was measured by means of the short 4-item measure of corporate reputation retrieved from Ponzi et al. (2011), of which the following three statements were included: (1) I have a good feeling about this sponsor organization; (2) I will admire and respect this sponsor organization; (3) I expect that this sponsor organization has a good overall reputation. These items were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .87.

In order to measure personal empathy levels, 4 items were derived from the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (Ayub & Khan, 2017). These items were as follows: (1) I am interested in how other people feel; (2) it upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully; (3) I enjoy making other people feel better; (4) when I see someone being treated unfairly, I feel very much pity for them. The items for the personal level of empathy were measured with five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1=strongly disagree till 5=strongly agree. Furthermore, these items were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .74.

3.3.2 Validity of dependent variables and moderator

In order to measure the validity of the dependent variables and moderator, a factor analysis was performed. However, the factor analysis did not succeed, therefore the validity was derived from existing measurements. Validity was found to be favorable for all measures.

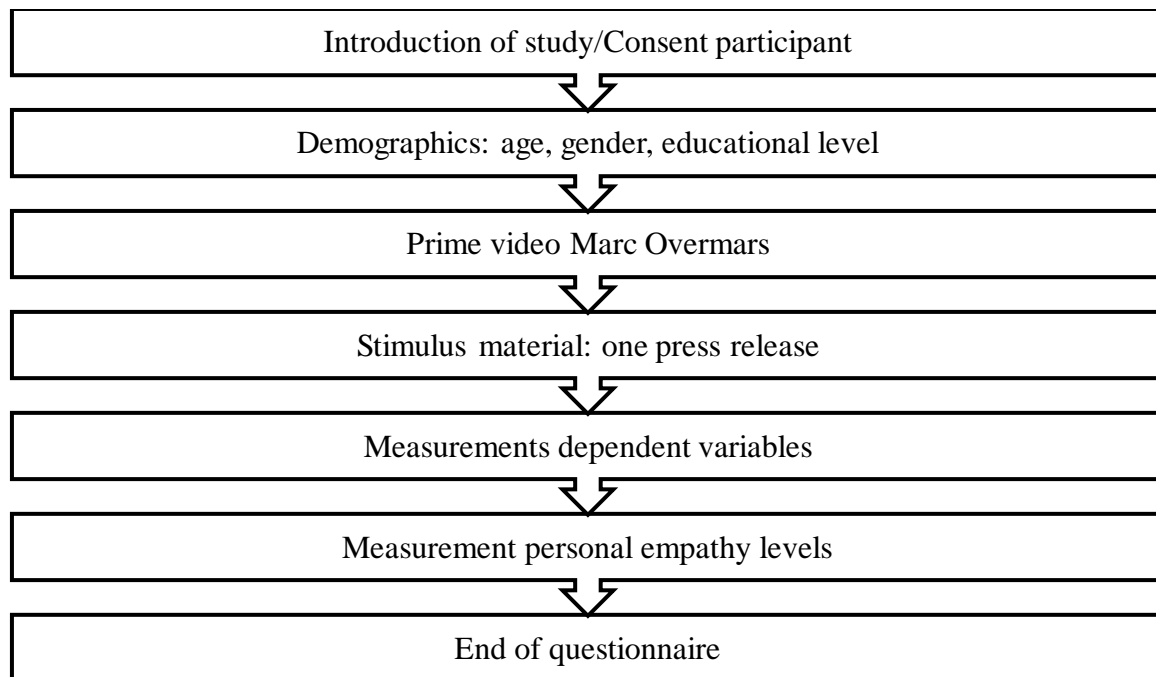
3.4 PROCEDURE

After developing the research design, an online questionnaire was created including four scenarios, manipulation checks and questions to measure the dependent variables and demographics. The questionnaire was created via the software company Qualtrics. Subsequently, the questionnaire was distributed among university students and acquaintances of the researcher.

Before starting the questionnaire respondents had to read a short introduction. The introduction described what they could expect from the questionnaire, that their answers would be treated anonymously and confidentially and that they had the possibility to withdraw from the research at any time. After the introduction, respondents were asked to fill in the first part of the demographics, such as their age, gender and highest achieved level of education. After that, they were asked to watch a short video clip that would introduce them to the topic surrounding Marc Overmars, Ajax and Royal Antwerp FC. Then, respondents were informed about the withdrawal of sponsorship organizations and were asked to carefully read a following press release of one of the two sponsorship organizations, which were either the human resource consultancy organization or the energy company.

After reading the press release, respondents were asked to fill in the questions to measure the dependent variables. Finally, respondents had to indicate their personal empathy levels. In the questionnaire, between each question a page break was placed, so that participants weren't able to adjust the answers to the statement later on. The research procedure is illustrated in Figure 4. Additionally, the lay-out of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Figure 4 *Research procedure*



3.5 RESPONDENTS

Respondents were approached through various social media channels and were asked to complete an online questionnaire. The channels through which most respondents were collected include Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn. Furthermore, two other methods were used to gather respondents, these were snowball sampling and convenience sampling.

Through snowball sampling the online questionnaire was forwarded to various WhatsApp groups via the researcher and contacts in the personal network of the researcher. Convenience sampling was applied by asking random people to complete the questionnaire on two different locations. The data collection period lasted from 11 June 2022 till 29 June 2022. In total there were 192 respondents that started the questionnaire. After filtering out the missing values, 107 respondents completed the questionnaire and thus formed a useful sample for this study. The average age of the sample was $M=28.87$ (12.95). The sample consisted of 66 women and 41

men. The distribution of the four condition resulted in: highfit*strategic driven (n=25), highfit*valuedriven (n=28), lowfit*strategicdriven (n=32), lowfit*valuedriven (n=22). On average each condition should contain a minimum of 25 respondents, so the condition lowfit*valuedriven with only 22 respondents deviates. Furthermore, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for age and two chi-squared tests for both gender and education were conducted to check whether there were significant differences between the four conditions. No significant differences were found on age ($F(107)=.36$, $p=.784$), gender ($X^2(3, N=107)=1.560$, $p=0.668$) and education ($X^2(12, N=107)=6.091$, $p=0.911$). Table 3 illustrates the exact distribution of age, gender and education over the four experimental conditions.

Table 3 *Distribution of gender, age and education for each of the conditions and in total (N=107)*

Crisis fit		High crisis fit		Low crisis fit		Total
Crisis response motive		Value driven	Strategic driven	Value driven	Strategic driven	
Gender	Male	11	11	6	13	41
	Female	17	14	16	19	66
Age	Mean	30.50	29.64	28.32	27.22	28.87
	SD	14.52	13.23	13.49	11.21	12.95
Education	HAVO	1	2	0	3	6
	VWO	6	7	4	7	24
	MBO	1	1	0	1	3
	HBO	7	7	6	10	30
	WO	13	8	12	11	44
	Total	28	25	22	32	107

4. RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study. Firstly, the results of the manipulation check will be presented. This paragraph is followed by the correlation analysis of the dependent variables and the moderator. Subsequently, descriptive statistics for the main effect are presented and finally the (main) effect(s) of the independent variables and possible moderator are being discussed.

4.1 MANIPULATION CHECK

In order to check whether the independent variables were manipulated as presented, a manipulation check was performed. The manipulations were checked by means of an Independent Sample T-Test.

A manipulation check of the degree of crisis fit was included to assess whether the participants recognized the manipulation. Organizational crisis fit was measured by a one-item bipolar seven-point Likert scale. Participants had to indicate the extent to which they think the core activities of the sponsor are concerned with the management of employee values and standards, ranging from 1=Not at all till 7=Very much. After conducting an Independent Sample T Test, a significant difference was found between the high ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.4$) and low ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.4$) crisis fit condition ($t(105) = 2.085$, $p = 0.04$).

Crisis response motive was also checked by a one-item bipolar seven-point Likert scale. Participants had to indicate, based on the contents of the press release, what they thought the company wants to communicate about, ranging from 1=Addressing employee values and standards till 7=Protecting their business interests. After conducting an Independent Sample T-Test, a non-significant difference was found between the value-driven

(M= 4.22, SD= 1.7) and strategic-driven (M= 4.42, SD= 1.9) condition ($t(105)=-.578$, $p=0.57$).

4.2 CORRELATIONS ANALYSIS

In order to determine which test to use for the data analysis of the main effect, a bivariate correlations analysis was performed. The results in Table 4 show that the dependent variables and moderator correlate positively with each other, meaning that for the main effect a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) can be used.

Table 4 *Bivariate correlations analysis for the dependent variables and possible moderator*

Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Measures</i>					
1 Mean Trust	1				
2 Mean Credibility	0.770**	1			
3 Mean Attitude	0.609**	0.645**	1		
4 Mean Reputation	0.724**	0.815**	0.652**	1	
5 Mean Empathy	0.344**	0.230*	0.256**	0.277**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

To infer whether there are differences in the means per condition, an analysis of the descriptives was carried out. The distributions of the descriptives indicate that there are differences between the dependent variables for each of the four conditions. The descriptives can be found in Table 5.

Table 5 *Descriptive statistics for main effect crisis fit*crisis response motives*

Descriptive statistics of the dependent variables		<i>High crisis fit</i>		<i>Low crisis fit</i>		Totals	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<i>Value-driven motive</i>							
	Trust ^{a)}	3.91	0.89	3.70	0.79	3.82	0.85
	Credibility ^{b)}	3.55	0.98	3.31	0.69	3.44	0.87
	Attitude ^{c)}	4.99	1.43	4.94	1.01	4.97	1.25
	Reputation ^{d)}	3.88	1.03	3.68	0.72	3.79	0.91
<i>Strategic-driven motive</i>							
	Trust ^{a)}	3.95	0.88	3.76	0.72	3.84	0.79
	Credibility ^{b)}	3.74	0.77	3.49	0.75	3.60	0.76
	Attitude ^{c)}	5.29	1.01	5.22	1.01	5.25	1.00
	Reputation ^{d)}	3.88	0.73	3.61	1.03	3.73	0.91
Totals							
	Trust ^{a)}	3.93	0.88	3.74	0.75		
	Credibility ^{b)}	3.64	0.88	3.42	0.73		
	Attitude ^{c)}	5.13	1.25	5.10	1.01		
	Reputation ^{d)}	3.88	0.89	3.64	0.91		
^{a)} 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree / 5=strongly agree)							
^{b)} 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree / 5=strongly agree)							
^{c)} Bipolar 7-point Likert scale:							
	i. Unappealing/Appealing						
	ii. Bad/Good						
	iii. Unpleasant/Pleasant						
	iv. Unfavorable/Favorable						
	v. Unlikeable/Likeable						
^{d)} 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree / 5=strongly agree)							

4.4 MAIN EFFECTS ON CONSUMER ATTITUDES

Based on the results from the previous two sections, it can be concluded that the dependent variables and the moderator are positively correlated. Furthermore, an analysis of the descriptive statistics showed that differences were found between the dependent variables per condition. Accordingly, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to measure whether these differences are significant, and whether effects could be found for the independent variables (crisis fit and crisis response motives), dependent variables (trust, credibility, attitude and reputation) and moderator (personal empathy levels).

Results of the MANOVA showed that there were no significant multivariate differences between consumer attitudes in the high crisis fit condition compared to the low crisis fit condition. Moreover, no significant multivariate differences were found between consumer attitudes in the value-driven motive condition compared to the strategic-driven motive condition. According to these results H1 and H2 are not supported.

Regarding the effects of the moderator, also no significant effects were found for crisis response motives*personal empathy levels and consumer attitudes. Therefore, it can be concluded that H3 is not supported.

Lastly, no significant main effects were found for crisis fit, crisis response motives and the crisis fit*crisis response motive interaction. Table 6 illustrates an overview of the results of the MANOVA.

Table 6 *Multivariate Analysis of Variance (N=107)***Multivariate test for variance (GLM / MANOVA)**

Multivariate Tests		<i>F-value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<i>Wilks' Lambda</i>			
	Crisis fit	1.11	0.36
	Crisis response motives	2.37	0.06
	Crisis response motives * Personal empathy levels (interaction)	0.66	0.62
	Crisis fit * Crisis response motives (interaction)	0.14	0.97
Test of between subjects design effects		<i>F-value</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<i>Crisis fit</i>			
	Trust ^{a)}	1.15	0.29
	Credibility ^{b)}	2.91	0.09
	Attitude ^{c)}	0.04	0.85
	Reputation ^{d)}	1.77	0.19
<i>Crisis response motives</i>			
	Trust ^{a)}	0.01	0.92
	Credibility ^{b)}	1.18	0.28
	Attitude ^{c)}	1.35	0.25
	Reputation ^{d)}	0.21	0.65
<i>Crisis fit * Crisis response motives (interaction)</i>			
	Trust ^{a)}	0.02	0.89
	Credibility ^{b)}	0.08	0.78
	Attitude ^{c)}	0.02	0.89
	Reputation ^{d)}	0.07	0.79
<i>Crisis response motives * Personal empathy levels (interaction)</i>			
	Trust ^{a)}	0.03	0.86
	Credibility ^{b)}	0.55	0.46
	Attitude ^{c)}	0.33	0.57
	Reputation ^{d)}	0.22	0.64

a) 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree / 5=strongly agree)

b) 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree / 5=strongly agree)

c) Bipolar 7-point Likert scale:

- i. Unappealing/Appealing
- ii. Bad/Good
- iii. Unpleasant/Pleasant
- iv. Unfavorable/Favorable
- v. Unlikeable/Likeable

d) 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree / 5=strongly agree)

In summary, it can be stated that there is no relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Therefore, hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 are not supported. Table 7 shows an overview of the non-supported hypotheses.

Table 7 *Overview of non-supported hypotheses*

Hypotheses	
H1: Crisis response messages with a value-driven crisis response motive will result in more positive consumer responses on a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation, as compared to crisis response messages with a strategic-driven crisis response motive.	Not supported
H2: Crisis response messages communicated by an affiliated organization with a high crisis fit will result in more positive consumer responses on a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation, as compared to an affiliated organization with a low crisis fit.	Not supported
H3: The effect of crisis response motives on consumer attitudes; a) trust, b) credibility, c) attitude, d) perceived reputation is positively moderated by personal empathy levels.	Not supported

5. DISCUSSION

The final sections present the discussion of this study. Firstly, the researched findings are being discussed. Secondly, the research limitations are being addressed. Next, recommendations for future research are presented, followed by the elaboration of practical implications. Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the previously discussed findings.

5.1 DISCUSSION ON THE RESEARCHED FINDINGS

Crisis fit is a concept that has not yet been mentioned before in organizational crisis communication theory. Based on previous research that substantiated this new concept, it was hypothesized that crisis response messages communicated by an affiliated organization with a high crisis fit would result in more positive consumer responses as compared to an affiliated organization with a low crisis fit. In order to measure this, a manipulation for crisis fit was used through which participants had to indicate the extent to which they thought the core activities of the sponsor organization were concerned with the management of employee values and standards. Results of the manipulation check indicate that there is a significant difference between high and low crisis fit. However, the MANOVA showed that no significant effect was found for crisis fit on consumer attitudes trust, credibility, attitude and reputation. This finding could be explained by the degree of consumer-held expectations. Namely, it was expected that for organizations with a perceived higher crisis fit, consumers, or in this case participants, were more likely to expect a public crisis response from this organization than for an organization with a perceived lower crisis fit. Moreover, it was expected that as a result, consumer attitudes would be more positive towards an affiliated sponsor organization with high crisis fit, because such a crisis response would then be more logical and appropriate, and meets the consumer-held expectations. An explanation for the

non-significant effect of crisis fit on consumer attitudes could be that the sample used for this study was not representative. Consumer-held expectations develop because consumers have experience in interacting with the (type of) organization (Kim, Choi & Atkinson, 2017). However, the sample used in this study probably contained few, if any, individuals who have experiences with the services of a human resources consultancy organization or energy company. As a result, there are few or no consumer-held expectations of the organization, which explains the non-significant effect of crisis fit on consumer attitudes.

Previous literature shows that value-driven response motives can result in more positive consumer attitudes, while strategic-driven response motives often result in divided consumer attitudes towards an organization (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Therefore, for the crisis response motive condition, it was hypothesized that crisis response messages with a value-driven crisis response motive would result in more positive consumer responses towards an affiliated organization embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation, as compared to crisis response messages with a strategic-driven crisis response motive. As with crisis fit, crisis response motives were manipulated and measured consequently. However, the manipulation check showed that there was no significant difference between value-driven motives and strategic-driven motives. Furthermore, the MANOVA findings also showed that no significant effect was found for crisis response motives on consumer attitudes. An explanation for this result could therefore be that the participants did not recognize the manipulations for the crisis response motives in the stimulus material. Meaning that the manipulation and measures for the manipulation were not clear and precise enough. By means of the manipulation check, a very small difference was found between the means of the value-driven condition ($M = 4.22$) and the strategic-driven condition ($M = 4.42$). To increase this difference in mean and significance, other, clearer, manipulations and measures could be applied for both conditions.

5.2 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

As with the majority of studies, the design of the current study is subject to limitations that can be improved in future research.

The first limitation for this study is that the independent variable crisis response motives was not properly manipulated. For crisis response motives, a non-significant difference was found, showing that people did not recognize the manipulations for the value-driven and the strategic-driven manipulations. For crisis fit, a significant difference was found between the high-fit and low-fit manipulations, however, the averages for the conditions of the degree of crisis fit appeared to be close to each other, meaning that respondents were still not completely able to separate the low-fit and high-fit condition from each other.

The second limitation concerns the elaboration likelihood of participants. The elaboration likelihood of participants indicates the degree of cognitive effort in thinking about and processing issue-related information mentioned in a message (Kitchen et al., 2014; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The elaboration likelihood depends on the connection the participant has with the crisis case used in this study; when a participant feels more personally connected to the crisis situation, he will be more motivated to evaluate relevant arguments that are in line with his attitudes (Kitchen et al., 2014).

Subsequently to the second limitation, the fact that the four conditions were presented as fictitious material could be assumed as a third limitation. In this study, the implementation of fictitious material was a well-considered choice; participants would not be influenced by knowledge of previous crises or knowledge of possible outcomes for the study (Coombs, 2004). However, when fictional material is used, participants may often detect the situations described as not real or not credible. As a result, participants may perceive the issue as less important and be less motivated to elaborate on their answers. This may have influenced the

outcomes, especially for organizational trust and the credibility of the sponsoring organizations.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the explanations described in the previous section, it can be recommended to adjust several aspects of this study in future research.

The first recommendation concerns the research design. For future research it is suggested to implement different manipulations for the conditions value-driven motives and strategic-driven motives. Regarding crisis fit, this concept could be examined with a different crisis topic than "ethical violation" and with other affiliated organizations in different contexts to gain more practical and theoretical knowledge about the concept. Furthermore, it might be interesting to investigate whether crisis fit only applies to the crisis communication domain for affiliated organizations.

A second recommendation for future research is to approach a more specific sample population in the study. As discussed in the limitations, the elaboration likelihood of a participant is increased when he feels more connected to the crisis case. Selecting participants who are more affected by the crisis topic can result in more reliable and adequate scores on consumer attitudes.

Finally, a third recommendation for future research is to measure whether participants recognize the case study as a crisis situation. Subsequently, it might be interesting to investigate whether it makes a difference for an affiliated sponsoring organization if they distance themselves from the crisis situation or not.

5.4 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research contributes to the field of crisis communication by introducing the new concept ‘crisis fit’. The significant difference between high and low crisis fit indicates that consumers recognize the perceived fit between an organization’s core activities and the crisis topic.

However, no significant effect was found for crisis fit on consumer attitudes. As explained in the ‘discussion on the researched findings’ section, this has to do with the lack of consumer experiences with the services of the used sponsor organizations. As a result, the participants have little or no consumer-held expectations of the sponsoring organizations. However, in reality, these consumer-held expectations are more contextual. For crisis managers, it is therefore important to take into account the extent to which their organization matches the crisis, as this is recognized by consumers. Plus, consumer-held expectations for responding to the crisis will be higher than presented in this study. In practice, crisis fit can therefore potentially have an effect on consumer attitudes towards an affiliated organization and could thus be taken into consideration in the crisis communication process.

5.5 CONCLUSIONS

Previous research indicates that even when an affiliated organization is not responsible for a crisis event, consumers still attribute some responsibility to this organization. As a result, they are practically forced to respond to the crisis situation. Affiliated organizations can do this by means of a crisis response message. How consumers respond to these crisis response messages can depend on different factors. In this study, two possible influential factors were being investigated: crisis fit and crisis response motives. Accordingly, the main objective of this study was to gain insight into the effects of crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages on consumers’ attitudes such as trust, credibility, attitude and perceived

reputation towards an affiliated organization that is unexpectedly embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation. Furthermore, the effect of the moderator 'personal empathy levels' on the effect of crisis response motives on consumer attitudes was studied.

From the results, it can be concluded that significant differences were found between the conditions for crisis fit. Concerning the conditions for crisis response motives, no significant differences were found. Meaning that participants were able to recognize high crisis fit and low crisis fit, but were not able to recognize value-driven and strategic-driven motives. Moreover, a positive correlation was found between the moderator 'personal empathy levels' and the dependent variables.

In conclusion, no significant main effects were found for crisis fit, crisis response motives, the interaction between crisis response motives and personal empathy levels and the interaction between crisis fit and crisis response motives. In order to answer the research question, it can thus be said there is no effect of crisis fit and crisis response motives in crisis response messages on consumers' attitudes such as trust, credibility, attitude and perceived reputation towards an affiliated organization unexpectedly embroiled in a crisis situation involving ethical violation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Pre-test

Q1 Thank you for participating in this pre-test!

This pre-test is conducted by bachelor thesis student Dion te Lintelo of the Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente.

In this pre-test, you will be presented with two short texts and a video, after which you are asked to answer a few statements.

The pre-test takes approximately 5-10 minutes. Your answers will be handled anonymously and confidentially. Your participation is voluntary, so if you no longer wish to participate, you can withdraw from the pre-test study at any time.

For questions or recommendations, please feel free to contact me via e-mail:
d.e.telintelo@student.utwente.nl!

By clicking on the proceed button, you agree to what is stated above.

Q2 In the next segment, two short texts will be presented. After each short text you will be asked to answer a question. Please read the short texts carefully.

Q5 Please read the below draft message carefully.

"The decision to appoint Mr. Dekker, who has recently been accused of repeated sexually transgressive behavior, is not in the best interest for our organization's business relations. We as a Human Resource consultancy organization, being one of the five top sponsors of FC G.O.A.L., have therefore decided to withdraw from our sponsorship relation with the football club as the current course of events does not match with our business philosophy."

Q7 Please state what you think this message is about.

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Mainly about norms and values	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mainly about business interests

Q8 Please read the below draft message carefully.

"The decision to appoint Mr. Dekker, who has recently been accused of repeated sexually transgressive behavior, is in direct conflict with the employee values and standards of our organization. We as a Human Resource consultancy organization, being one of the five top sponsors of FC G.O.A.L., have therefore decided to withdraw from our sponsorship relation with the football club as the current course of events does not match with our core values."

Q10 Please state what you think this message is about.

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Mainly about norms and values	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mainly about business interests

Q28 Some sponsors of Royal Antwerp FC decided to withdraw from sponsoring the football club, because of Marc Overmars being accused of violation of women's rights. They do this due to the possible effects this crisis situation may have on their organization.

Q29 To what extent do you think the six following organizations could be effected when being related to a crisis situation involving **'violation of women rights'**?

Q26 Health Insurance: All Good

"At All Good, people and their health are the focus. We believe that living healthily is more important than ever, no matter how difficult it may be at times."

Q30 To what extent do you think a **health insurance** organization could be effected when being related to a crisis situation involving 'violation of women rights'?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Not at all effected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much effected

Q29 Human Resource consultancy organization: Ewolv

"At Ewolv, we dedicate ourselves to people and organizations every day. We believe that everyone has the potential to become the best version of themselves."

Q34 To what extent do you think a **human resource consultancy organization** could be effected when being related to a crisis situation involving 'violation of women rights'?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Not at all effected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much effected

End of Block: Block 12

Start of Block: Block 11

Q30 Construction company: H.A. Janssen

"At H.A. Janssen constructions we like to think outside of the box: diversity and creativity in construction is what we strive for."

Q33 To what extent do you think a **construction company** could be effected when being related to a crisis situation involving 'violation of women rights'?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Not at all effected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much effected

End of Block: Block 11

Start of Block: Block 10

Q31 **Energy company: EnergyToday**

"Affordable and sustainable energy solutions for everyone is what we stand for at EnergyToday."

Q32 To what extent do you think an **energy company** could be effected when being related to a crisis situation involving 'violation of women rights'?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Not at all effected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much effected

End of Block: Block 10

APPENDIX B

Prime video Marc Overmars case

<https://youtu.be/0eBRWI9hxvg>



Press release 1: lowfit*valuedriven

SPONSORSHIP DEFEAT FOR ROYAL ANTWERP FC AFTER APPOINTMENT MARC OVERMARS

TOP SPONSOR 'ENERGYTODAY' ENDS COOPERATION RAFC

Press release updated: March 26, 2022

ANTWERP, March 26th 2022 – EnergyToday announced yesterday that they are extremely surprised by the decision of Royal Antwerp FC to appoint Marc Overmars as the new technical director of the football club. The company responded to the situation with the following message:

“The decision to appoint Marc Overmars, who has recently been accused of repeated transgressive behavior and is currently the subject of an independent investigation in the Netherlands, is in direct conflict with the employee values and standards of our organization. We as an energy company, being one of the top five sponsors of Royal Antwerp FC, have therefore decided to withdraw from our sponsorship relation with the football club as the current course of events does not match with our core values.”

EnergyToday is an energy company located in Antwerp, Belgium. EnergyToday's mission includes: “affordable and sustainable energy solutions for everyone”.

More information? Check the website www.energytoday.be.



SPONSORSHIP DEFEAT FOR ROYAL ANTWERP FC AFTER APPOINTMENT MARC OVERMARS

TOP SPONSOR 'ENERGYTODAY' ENDS COOPERATION RAFC

Press release updated: March 26, 2022

ANTWERP, March 26th 2022 – EnergyToday announced yesterday that they are extremely surprised by the decision of Royal Antwerp FC to appoint Marc Overmars as the new technical director of the football club. The company responded to the situation with the following message:

“The decision to appoint Mr. Overmars, who has recently been accused of repeated transgressive behavior and is currently the subject of an independent investigation in the Netherlands, is not in the best interest of EnergyToday’s business relations. We as an energy company, being one of the five top sponsors of Royal Antwerp FC, have therefore decided to withdraw from our sponsorship relation with the football club as the current course of events does not match with our business philosophy.”

EnergyToday is an energy company located in Antwerp, Belgium. EnergyToday’s mission includes: “affordable and sustainable energy solutions for everyone”.

More information? Check the website www.energytoday.be.



SPONSORSHIP DEFEAT FOR ROYAL ANTWERP FC AFTER APPOINTMENT MARC OVERMARS

TOP SPONSOR 'EWOLV' ENDS COOPERATION RAFC

Press release updated: March 26, 2022

ANTWERP, March 26th 2022 – Ewolv announced yesterday that they are extremely surprised by the decision of Royal Antwerp FC to appoint Marc Overmars as the new technical director of the football club. The organization responded to the situation with the following message:

“The decision to appoint Mr. Overmars, who has recently been accused of repeated transgressive behavior and is currently the subject of an independent investigation in the Netherlands, is not in the best interest of Ewolv’s business relations. We as a Human Resource Consultancy organization, being one of the five top sponsors of Royal Antwerp FC, have therefore decided to withdraw from our sponsorship relation with the football club as the current course of events does not match with our business philosophy.”

Ewolv is a Human Resource Consultancy organization located in Antwerp, Belgium. Ewolv’s mission includes: "At Ewolv we dedicate ourselves to people and organizations every day. Through the right combination of personal attention and professional expertise, we strive to improve personal well-being and facilitate organizational growth".

More information? Check the website www.ewolv.be.



APPENDIX D

Lay out questionnaire

Q2 Thank you for participating in this research study!

This study is conducted by bachelor thesis student Dion te Lintelo of the Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente.

In this study, you will be presented with a short video of news fragments and a press release, after which you are asked to answer a few statements and give your opinion.

The study takes approximately 5-10 minutes. Your answers will be handled anonymously and confidentially. Your participation is thereby voluntary, so if you no longer wish to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

By clicking on the proceed button, you agree to what is stated above.

Q3 What is your age?

Q4 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender (3)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (4)

Q5 What is your nationality?

☐ Dutch (1)

☐ Other: (2) _____

Q6 What is your highest achieved level of education?

☐ VMBO (1)

☐ HAVO (2)

☐ VWO (3)

☐ MBO (4)

☐ HBO (5)

☐ WO (6)

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Block 2

Q7 In the following segment, you will be presented with a few news fragments related to violations of women's rights by football celebrity Marc Overmars.

Overmars resigned as technical director of the Dutch football club Ajax in February 2022 after it was revealed that he had sent sexually offensive messages to female employees within Ajax over an extended period of time.

Less than 7 weeks after his resignation at Ajax, he started as the new technical director at Royal Antwerp FC. This happened without the management of RAFC having consulted the female employees within the football club. As a reaction, many media outlets are calling it a 'big middle finger to all women; a violation of women's rights.

Q17 Give your opinion on the following statements related to the sponsor organization presented in the press release.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I feel like I can trust this sponsor organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like I can rely on this sponsor organization (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like this is an honest sponsor organization (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like this sponsor organization is safe (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q18 Give your opinion on the following statements related to the message of the sponsor organization presented in the press release.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
The sponsor's message is believable (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The sponsor's message is accurate (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The sponsor's message is trustworthy (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The sponsor's message is not biased (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The sponsor's message is complete (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q19 Give your opinion on the following statements related to the message of the sponsor organization presented in the press release.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
I have a good feeling about this sponsor organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will admire and respect this sponsor organization (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I expect that this sponsor organization has a good overall reputation (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q20 Describe your overall feelings about the sponsor organization after the message you've read in the press release.

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Unappealing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Appealing
Bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Good
Unpleasant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Pleasant
Unfavorable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Favorable
Unlikeable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Likeable

Q21 Based on the contents of the press release, I think the message that the company wants to communicate is about:

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Addressing employee values and standards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Protecting their business interests

Q22 Based on the description of the sponsor in the press release, to what extent do you think the core activities of the sponsor are concerned with the management of employee values and standard:

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Not at all	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very much

Q23 How would you describe yourself when responding to below statements?

	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometime (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
I am interested in how other people feel (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy making other people feel better (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I see someone being treated unfairly, I feel very much pity for them (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>