In Search of a Scapegoat: Exploring the Role of Framing and Emotions in Multi-Actor Crisis

Master Thesis
Public Summary

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1. Topic of the thesis

The thesis used a health equipment contract crisis that happened in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as the case study. A multinational corporation focuses on healthcare technology was accused of failing to deliver health equipment ordered by a government body in the United States. This health equipment contract triggered conversations on social media as various media outlets framed the US government and the healthcare technology company were responsible for the crisis, especially when global demands for medical equipment were increasingly surged to help patients battling COVID-19. The crisis resulted in the government terminating the contract and put the company's financial performance at risk.

This study seeks to explore the interaction of frames, crisis responsibility, and emotions by investigating messages from three different unit analyses, namely (1) news reports released by a non-profit media outlet based in United States as media depiction, (2) people's responses on Twitter as public depiction, and (3) the company's corporate communications as organization depiction. This study investigated how media and organizations frame and attribute crisis responsibility, how this attribution of responsibility triggers emotional responses of the public, as well as how the interaction between framing, attribution of responsibility, and emotions influence the public's interpretation of the crisis event. In addition, to verify current findings of crisis management in online settings, this study tries to discover how a crisis evolves in a situation in which two actors are perceived as responsible and the inevitable COVID-19 might have a potential role as an additional actor that could be responsible for the crisis. This research bridges the gap between corporate and political crisis communication as the two areas differ in the conceptualization and application of crisis communication strategies despite sharing some similarities (Coombs, 2011). Practically, this study yields implications for crisis managers in managing public trust during a politically charged crisis in an online environment.

2. Research Questions

RQ1: How did the media and the organization frame the crisis of a health equipment contract?

RQ2: How did the public attribute the responsibility of the crisis of a health equipment contract?

RQ3: How did the media and the company use crisis emotions in addressing the crisis of a health equipment contract?

RQ4: How did the public express crisis emotions in responding to the crisis of a health equipment contract?

3. Theoretical Framework
3.1. Crisis Communication

A crisis is defined as an unpredictable event that threatens the expectancies of an organization's stakeholders that has the potential to generate negative outcomes which in turn can seriously impact the organization's performance (Coombs, 2011). Crisis communication refers to the organization's effort in collecting, processing, and disseminating information to address the issue (Coombs, 2010). When a crisis hit, organizations have three types of information that could serve as a crisis response to stakeholders; (1) instructing information to inform the stakeholder of how to protect themselves from the crisis, (2) adjusting information by explaining the crisis or expressing sympathy, and (3) internalizing information to formulate a certain image about the organization (Sturges, 1994).

3.1.1. Crisis communication from the organizational perspective

As a crisis poses both financial and reputational threats (Coombs, 2007), an organization needs to determine how to communicate the crisis with its various stakeholder. Corporate communication during and after a crisis is one of the most important factors in determining the crisis outcome (Coombs, 1999). In most cases, the organization utilizes corporate communication of press releases to provide interpretation of events in such a way that minimizes reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). However, since social media is widely used by the public to share crisis information (Liu et al., 2011), the organization also needs to reinforce their perceived desired image by being proactive with participants using a dialogic platform provided by social media (Spence et al., 2016). Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) of Coombs (2007) provided a foundation for crisis managers to formulate their crisis responses based on the crisis clusters as presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Crisis response strategies based on crisis type (Claeys et al., 2010; Coombs, 2007)

Crisis Type	Crisis response strategies	
Victim cluster	Deny	
Natural disaster Rumor	Attack the accuser	Confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization
Workplace violence	Denial	Asserts there is no crisis
Product tampering	Scapegoat	Blames some person or group outside the organization for the crisis
Accidental cluster	Diminish	
Challenges Technical-error accidents	Excuse	Minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events which triggered the crisis
Technical-error product harm	Justification	Minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis
Preventable cluster	Rebuild	
Human-error accidents	Compensation	Offers money or other gifts to victims
Human-error product harm Organizational misdeed with or without injuries Organizational misdeed management misconduct	Apology	Indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholder for forgiveness
Secondary crisis response strategies	Bolstering	
	Reminder	Reminds stakeholder about the good work the organization has done in the past
	Ingratiation	Reminds stakeholder about the good relationship that the organization and stakeholder have in the past
	Victimage	Reminds stakeholder that the organization is also the victim of the crisis.

3.2 Framing used to address a crisis

As the public is exposed to the crisis issue, the way a crisis is framed shapes how the public defines the issue, the causes of problems, determine the party who is deemed to be responsible for the crisis, and solutions to the problems (Cooper, 2002). In investigating how the media frame a crisis, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) provide five news frames that have been identified in earlier crisis studies, presented in Table 2.

Table 2

News frames used in media coverage (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000)

Frame	Explanation
Conflict frame	Emphasizes the conflict between actors identified in crisis event as a means of capturing audience interest
Human interest frame	Presents human face or emotional angle to capture the event by personalizing or dramatizing the issue
Economic frame	Reports how the event has economic consequences on individual, group, institution, or country
Morality frame	Puts the event in the context of religious belief or moral prescriptions
Responsibility frame	Presents the event by attributing responsibility of its cause or solution to a certain individual, group, or institutions

3.3. Crisis Emotions

Scholars have noted that emotions are one of the main factors shaping the public's interpretation of crisis situations (Jin, Pang & Cameron, 2010). Dominant emotions elicited by media coverage will likely influence the public's information processing regarding the crisis (Nabi, 2003). Many studies started to focus on how emotion determines the evolution of the crisis and how crisis managers can streamline crisis response strategies by addressing the public's specific emotional needs (Yoe et al., 2019). Jin et al. (2014) provides a scale of crisis emotions by understanding how the public will generate emotions in crisis situations by surveying their attribution of crisis responsibility as presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Type of crisis emotions (Jin et al., 2014)

Crisis emotion	Explanation
Anxiety	Facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming danger (Lazarus, 1991).
Fear	Facing an uncertain and existential threat (Lazarus, 1991).
Sympathy	Awareness of others' suffering (Salovey & Rosenhan, 1989).
Apprehension	Anxiety or fear that something bad or unpleasant will happen (Kagita, 2018).
Anger	Demanding offense, against "me" and "mine" (Lazarus, 1991).
Sadness	Experience of an irrevocable loss (Lazarus, 1991).
Disgust	The feeling of repulse by something or someone (Ekman et al., 1991).
Embarrassment	The feeling of abashed chagrin triggered by a situation that threatens individual's desired image (Buck, 1999; Miller, 1996).
Contempt	The feeling of morally superior or better than the other (Ekman et al., 1991).
Guilt	Negative feeling occurred after evaluation of one's self-observed behavior (Lewis, 1971).
Shame	The feeling occurred when one belief of being worthless, powerless, small, and inferior (Lewis, 1971).

It is important to investigate how the media and the organization use different frames in addressing the crisis, as the way this message is being received by the public is critical in influencing the public's evaluation of organizational responsibility during the crisis event (Cho & Gower, 2006). In addition to framing, understanding how the media and the organizations use crisis emotions in their message is also crucial as Jin & Pang (2010) argued that emotions are one of the factors influencing the public's interpretation of the crisis. Therefore, this study investigated the role of framing end emotions in a crisis event by using a case study of health equipment contract crisis.

4. Research Design
4.1. Research Context: Case Study

In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a non-profit media outlet based published a report accusing the company of a 10,000 health equipment delivery failure as ordered by a government body in United States. The company had been reported for selling higher-priced versions of health equipment to other clients around the world, instead of producing the low-cost health equipment as requested by the U.S. government. The contract which had been signed five years ago expected the company to deliver 10,000 health equipment that could be stockpiled for national emergencies. However, the report claimed the company had not delivered any of the health equipment on time while the country was in desperate need of this particular health equipment as the pandemic continues to spread across the globe. In response to the crisis, the company released a total of 8 corporate communications, claiming to fully commit to delivering the health equipment by the agreed deadline. The company explained it hired dozens of new workers to meet the deadline and emphasized the importance of international collaboration. Eventually, the company denied the accusation report and argued that the new agreed price reflects a discount. The company then announced the termination of the contract and admit its consequences on the company's financial performance.

4.2. Data Collection
4.2.1. Media Depiction

Since the study focuses on crisis communication in online settings, prior online media monitoring was conducted. Using a Customer Experience Management (CXM) tool named Sprinklr, a dashboard that automatically picks up all news articles circulated online mentioning Coronavirus and the company was created. From the total of 2.790 news articles found during the crisis period, 272 news articles reporting on the crisis of health equipment delivery were identified and 48 of the unique narratives were found. Out of all 48 news articles, 21 of them were linked back to the non-profit media outlet's news reports, as it was the first media outlet to break the story. Due to these reasons, the unit analysis of media depiction is only limited to a news report published by this particular non-profit media outlet. In addressing the crisis, the media outlet has released a total number of five news, which were chosen to represent the media depiction of the crisis (N=5).

4.2.2. Organizational Depiction.

The crisis responses of the organization were all garnered from the healthcare technology company's Global News Center. During the crisis period, a total of 107 messages all written in English were published on the website. The researcher scanned all the articles manually to find messages which specifically addressed the crisis with the criteria of (1) the message mentioning the specific health equipment type, (2) the message mentioning the U.S. government, and (3) the message mentioned the company's production site. Eight messages with various types were found within these criteria. To simplify the term, the eight messages are categorized into a type of corporate communication and were chosen as unit analyses to represent the organizational crisis responses (N=8).

4.2.3. Public Depiction.

The conversation trend during the crisis period revealed that 89% of conversations were found on Twitter. As Twitter was chosen, the researcher manually scanned through all the tweets in the range of crisis timelines to determine the period of data crawling. Conversations that happened before the date of the first release of media report were found to be not related to the crisis and few to no conversations regarding the crisis occurred after the contract termination was announced. Therefore, the released date of the first media report and the date of contact termination announcement was chosen as the timeline for tweets crawling.

After the timeline for data crawling was developed, the researcher exported the tweets found in this period. A total of 5076 tweets were retrieved. Since the study focuses on the non-profit media outlet as a media depiction, the public's response to this media outlet's news reports was chosen as the criteria for the unit analysis. Therefore, a keyword filter of the media outlet's name was employed, leaving the database with 4049 tweets. The second data crawling looked into five news reports published by the media outlet which links were shared on Twitter. After manually going through all the media outlet's tweets in the crisis timeline, 70 tweets that referred to the five news reports links were identified. Using Socialex, a SaaS offering that combines user interface crawling results with connections to the official Twitter API to capture a complete dataset of Tweets, all replies and retweets to these 70 tweets were retrieved. Then, the first database and the second database were compared and compiled while removing the duplicates found. This data crawling process generated 4740 tweets chosen as a public depiction of the crisis (N=4740).

4.3. Data Analysis

4.3.1. Media and Organizational Depictions

Manual content analysis was applied to the media's news reports and the company's corporate communications to explore the difference between media and organization in framing the crisis. To analyze the media coverage and corporate communications, a coding procedure using the instructions of Van Gorp (2010) was conducted to investigate striking news frames that were used by the stakeholders in addressing the crisis. The open coding also resulted in additional questions as some elements were found to be frequently mentioned. Under responsibility frames, additional questions of attribution of responsibility and perceived crisis type were added based on the direction towards which actor (the company or US government). Additional questions were also added to determine each actor's crisis response strategies. Descriptive statistics were conducted to answer Research Question 1 to investigate the framing used by media and organizations. Since the study also explored the crisis emotions elicited by media and organizations, a section on crisis emotions was added to the codebook. Descriptive statistics were then conducted to investigate the use of crisis emotions based on the direction found in media and organizational depiction to support Research Question 3 finding. Table 4. provides the operational definitions used as a guideline to determine the emotions elicited in the unit analyses as well as the quoted examples found in the media and organizational depictions.

Table 4.

Operational definitions and examples of emotions found in media and organizational depiction

Crisis emotion	Definition	Quoted examples
Anger	Demanding offense, against "me" and "mine" (Lazarus, 1991).	…"This kind of profiteering — paying four times the negotiated price — is not only irresponsible to taxpayers but is particularly offensive when so many people are out of work ," said *the government assistant secretary*…
Contempt	The feeling of morally superior or better than the other (Ekman et al., 1991).	…"No American who needed a health equipment was denied one, and no American who needs a health equipment in the future will be denied one. *The administration* should be ashamed of themselves for this misleading and inaccurate report."…
Sympathy	Awareness of others' suffering (Salovey & Rosenhan, 1989).	…It means *the company* is hiring dozens of new manufacturing workers in Pennsylvania alone to meet the need. And it means current employees are working harder than ever to make a difference…

For the intercoder reliability test, a second coder analyzed two random samples of media coverages which represented 20% of the total unit analysis for media depiction (n=1). Samples were subjected to an intercoder reliability test and achieved a Cohen Kappa's score of 0.68. The second coder also applied the codebook to analyze two random samples of corporate communications which represented 25% of the total unit analysis for organizational depiction (n=2). The reliability values for the intercoder reliability test of organizational depiction achieved a Cohen Kappa score of 0.71. The results of the intercoder reliability test fell in the range of sufficient value of 0.60-0.79 (Landis & Koch, 1997), therefore consistency among raters was achieved.

4.3.2. Public depiction

The Public's responses to the media outlet's news expressed in tweets were chosen as the unit analysis of public depiction. Since users who retweet are also likely to share similar sentiments as the original poster (Brady et al., 2017), each retweet will be counted as one unit and will be given the same values as its original tweet. All 4740 tweets were manually coded based on the presence of attribution of responsibility and crisis emotions. For tweets with an expression of attribution of responsibility, each tweet will be coded based on the blamed party. To determine the

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type of crisis emotion expressed in a tweet, the researcher examines the text, terms, phrases, punctuation, and use of emojis that are commonly used by English speakers. For example, the use of keywords such as "horrible", "furious" as well as capitalized words and vulgarities were commonly used to express anger (Yeo et al., 2019). Table 5 provides the examples of emotions found in Tweet.

Table 5.

Examples of emotion expressed in the crisis

Emotions	Direction	Tweet examples: anger
Anger	The company	*@company @company* What's going on with the *health equipment*? #COVID19
Contempt	No clear direction	*@cornpopsmoke @mediaoutlet* Health care is a public good and to make it a marketplace commodity is immoral.
Disgust	No clear direction	*@mediaoutlet* @eclecticbrotha My eyes just popped out of my head. I am so disgusted.
Sad	U.S. government	Shocking waste and loss of life

After coding 100% of the full set of tweets, with 95% confidence level and 5% of margin error, a size sample of 343 random tweets was generated (n=343). The 343 sample tweets were systematically selected based on every 9th tweet to get all tweets throughout all crisis periods and subjected to an intercoder reliability check. The intercoder reliability check for tweets generated an average value of Cohen Kappa score of 0.71, indicating a substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1997). After interrater agreement is achieved, descriptive statistics were used to answer Research Question 2 and Research Question 4 to determine the public's perceived crisis responsibility and crisis emotions expressed in the tweets.

5. Result

5.1. Frame used by media coverages and corporate communications

The media and the company used different frames in addressing the crisis of health equipment delivery. Two distinct frames were dominant in the media: the responsibility frame and the economic frame. Two dominant frames were used by the company in addressing the crisis, which are the human interest frame and the economic frame as presented in Table 6.

Table 6.

Use of frames in media and organizational depiction

Frame	Media depiction	Organizational depiction
Responsibility frame	100%	0%
Economic frame	100%	37.5%
Morality frame	20%	0%
Human interest frame	0%	62.5%
Total (N)	5	8

In addressing the crisis, media coverages and corporate communications attributed the crisis in different approach. Using responsibility as one of its dominant frames, the media attributed the crisis responsibility both to the company and the U.S. government. Contrary, the company did not mention any attribution of responsibility in their corporate communications.

Table 7.

Perceived crisis responsibility in media coverages and corporate communications

Crisis responsibility	Media coverages	Corporate communications
No Attribution	0%	100%
attribute the responsibility to the company	100%	0%
attribute the responsibility to US government	80%	0%
	N= 5	N= 8

5.2 Public's perceived crisis responsibility

The Public's response on Twitter showed that 73% of the public attributed the crisis responsibility to the US government and only a small portion of the public perceived the company was responsible for the crisis. The public's attribution of responsibility was also found to be changing over the course of the crisis period as presented in the Figure 1.

Table 8.

Public's perceived crisis responsibility

Attribution of responsibility	Percentages
No attribution	23.7%
The company	2.3%
US Government	73.2%
The company and US Government	0.8%
Total (N=4740)	100.0%

The chronological timeline analysis found that the public's perceived crisis responsibility shifted throughout the crisis period. At the beginning of the crisis, the public was divided into groups that perceived the company was responsible and groups that perceived the U.S. government was responsible. However, towards the end of the crisis, this segregation was slowly blurred, and the majority of the public attributed the crisis responsibility to the U.S. government.

Figure 1

Public's shift in crisis attribution throughout the crisis period
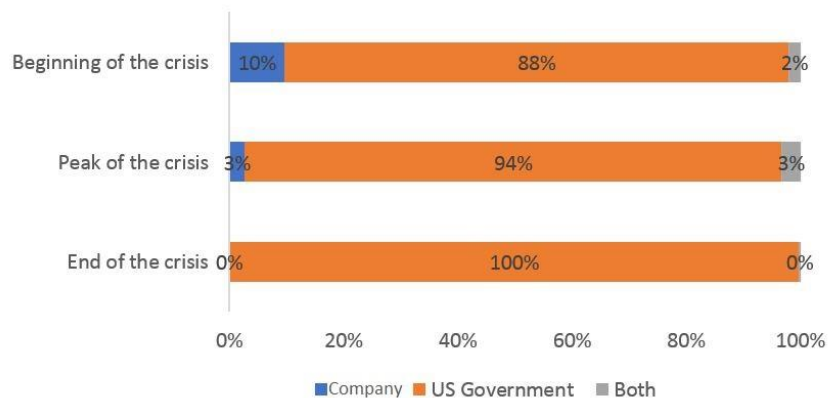
5.3. Crisis emotions elicited by media coverages and corporate communications

In addressing the crisis, the media always tried to elicit emotions by using certain adjectives in their news reports. Anger was a dominant emotion that the media tried to elicit in their news. Conversely, the company consistently used sympathy as an emotion they tried to elicit.

Table 9.

Crisis emotions elicited by media coverages and corporate communications

	Media depiction	Organizational depiction
No emotions	0%	12.5%
Sympathy towards the company	0%	87.5%
Anger towards the company	80%	0%
Disgust towards the company	20%	0%
Anger towards US Government	100%	0%
Total	N=5	N=8

5.4. Crisis emotions expressed by the public

In responding to the crisis, the majority of the public expressed their emotions on Twitter. Anger, contempt, and disgust were three dominant emotions that belonged to negative valence expressed by the public. The finding also found some negative emotions were expressed without any clear direction as presented in Table 10.

Table 10.

Crisis emotions expressed by the public

Emotions	Percentages
No emotion	33%
Emotions towards US Government	61%
Sympathy	0%
Apprehension	1%
Anger	55%
Sad	0%
Disgust	0%
Contempt	4%
Emotions towards the company	2%
Sympathy	0%
Apprehension	0%
Anger	2%
Sad	0%
Contempt	0%
Emotions towards the company and US Government	1%
Apprehension	0%
Anger	1%
Disgust	0%
Contempt	0%
Emotions with no clear direction	3%
Apprehension	0%
Anger	2%
Sad	0%
Disgust	1%
Contempt	0%

A chronological timeline analysis found that there was a shift in emotion expressed by the public throughout the crisis period as presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Distribution of emotions expressed in tweets throughout crisis period
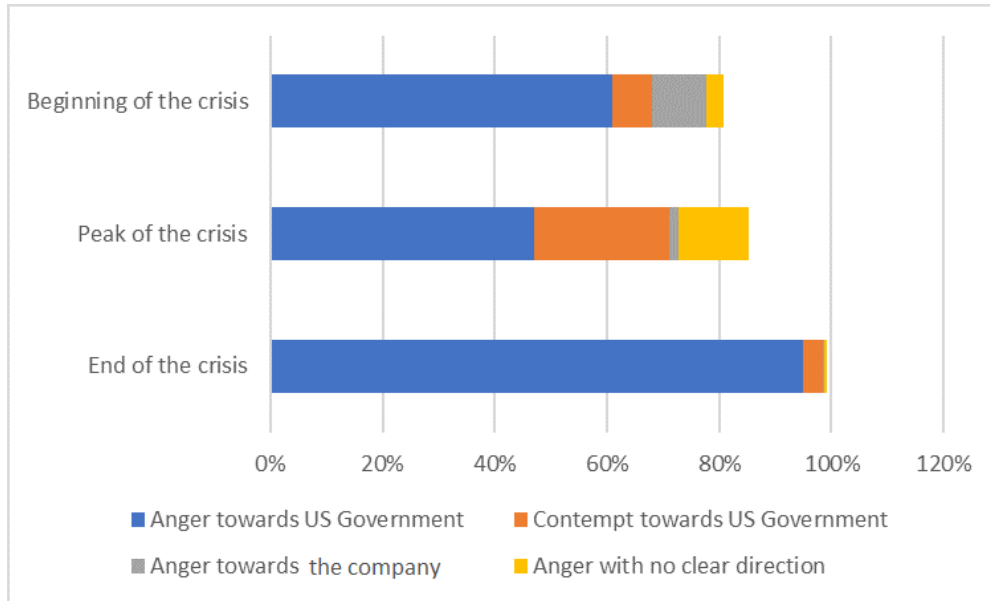
5.4.1. Emotions expressed by attribution of crisis responsibility

The study confirmed the previous finding that there is a relationship between anger and attribution of responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). However, the analysis showed an interesting finding that the public expressed emotions of anger, disgust, and contempt without a clear direction of blame.

Table 11.

Emotions expressed by attribution of responsibility

Emotions	Attribution of responsibility			
	Not Present		Present	
	Count	%	Count	%
Anxiety	0	0.0%	2	0.1%
Fear	0	0.0%	3	0.1%
Sympathy	2	0.2%	1	0.0%
Apprehension	7	0.6%	50	1.4%
Anger	114	10.1%	2677	74.0%
Sad	2	0.2%	8	0.2%
Disgust	33	2.9%	18	0.5%
Contempt	23	2.0%	228	6.3%
Total	1124	100.0%	3616	100.0%

6. Discussion

The case study of the health equipment contract explored how a crisis can evolve in a dynamic manner when two parties were deemed to be responsible and how the development of a crisis can differ based on certain stakeholder perspectives. Comparing the framing between media and organizational depiction, the study found a clear difference in how the two stakeholders address the same event of a crisis. The chronological timeline analysis revealed that the media did not adopt any of the frames used by the company in their corporate communications. This finding confirmed that the media frame a crisis significantly more often in terms of responsibility and economic consequences compared to corporate communication (Nijkrake et al., 2014). The difference between frames used in media and organizational depictions also confirmed the previous finding by Coombs (2007) which suggested that while crisis managers may take advantage by establishing a frame that favors their reputation, news media may reject the crisis manager's frame and continue with a different frame. Since there were two actors in the crisis, attribution of responsibility became one of the main elements in this study. The finding showed that there was a shift of attribution of responsibility in the media coverage. This shift showed that attribution of crisis responsibility in media coverage is dynamic, depending on how the crisis unfolded.

In the analysis of public depiction, the study found that 73% of the public attributed the crisis responsibility to the US government. Despite the media's attribution of responsibility shifted throughout the crisis period, no significant dynamic change shift was found in public responses. The lack of shift in the attribution of crisis responsibility could be explained by the assumptions that users, or the public depiction in this study, who interacted with the media outlet's tweets have the same political leaning as the media. Therefore, this study found that in a politically charged crisis, attribution of responsibility is heavily affected by the political leaning held by the public.

In the terms of crisis emotions, the study found that despite the company's effort in eliciting sympathy, until the end of the crisis, the public consistently adopted the same emotion elicited by the media. This finding confirms the previous study by Kim & Cameron (2011) which suggested that as a consequence of consuming anger-inducing news, individuals form a negative attitude towards the organizations and this attitude might lead them to be skeptical about emotional triggers that the organizations tried to elicit. The chi-square analysis of the correlation between attribution of responsibility and emotions also supported the previous finding but the study found that a small

portion of the public expressed their emotions with no clear attribution of crisis responsibility. One possible explanation for this finding was that the public does not passively react to crisis information, instead, they actively engage in a variety of coping strategies, ranging from emotional (seek emotional support or vent emotion) to rational coping (take action or seek instrumental support) (Jin, 2009), hence the emotions with no clear direction found could be public's effort of emotional venting. Therefore, it can be concluded that attribution of crisis responsibility generates a strong feeling of anger which was expressed in a different form by the public as their coping mechanism to the crisis.

Since the crisis involved the US government as one of the parties that are deemed responsible, it is difficult to separate the country's political climate at the time of the crisis. The content analysis found that 26% of tweets mentioned the president who was in power at the time of the crisis with over half of them (56%) containing negative emotions of anger, contempt, disgust, or apprehension. This finding showed that there was a significant spillover effect from a political leader's reputation on the image of the country he or she represents (Ingenhoff & Klein, 2018). It can be assumed that dominant negative feelings expressed in the tweets could be the result of the president's prior bad reputation as a bad pre-crisis reputation serves as a velcro effect that intensifies negative organizational evaluations (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

The current study contributed to the exploration of the role of framing and emotions when more than one actor is involved in the crisis. Future research can dig deeper into how emotions can be expressed without direction by the public as coping strategies as found in this study. This study also yields practical implications for crisis managers. Since framing plays a significant role in crisis evolution (Schultz et al., 2012), crisis managers should proactively establish and reinforce the organization's desired frames that benefit the reputation, in competition with frames provided by the media. Crisis managers may even consider proactively presenting their desired frame to the media report itself by engaging in interviews or giving out public statements in press conferences, as opposed to only publishing crisis responses through internal channels. In a multi-actor crisis, it is beneficial for crisis managers to take into account the other actor's prior reputation. In the event of other actors holding a prior negative reputation, crisis managers can formulate responses magnifying this prior negative reputation to influence the shift of blame in public.

Finally, this study showed that framing used by the media and the organization plays important role in influencing the public's attribution of responsibility and emotions which in turn affects the public's overall perception of reputation towards stakeholders involved. In a multi-actor crisis, the attribution of responsibility and emotions are found to be dynamically changing as the crisis unfolded. In addressing the crisis, the public express emotions following their perceived attribution of responsibility and as coping strategies. This study constitutes a need for future research to explore crisis communication when more than one actor is involved and demonstrates how crisis managers can benefit from the dynamic of blames received by the actors involved.

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