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# The Amplified Crisis: Assessing Negative Social Amplification and Source of a Crisis Response

Erika J. Schneider , Courtney D. Boman ,  
& Heather Akin 

*Extending the situational crisis communication theory, this research evaluates how the consequences of a crisis extend to social media and how using internal and external sources influence crisis response processing. A structural equation model assessed the conceptual link between organizational reputation and the negative amplification of a message on social media using data derived from an online experiment. Findings contextualize crisis communication to suggest source and social amplification could lead to a vanguard of future SCCT research that guides researchers and professionals in optimizing a crisis response.*

**Keywords:** Crisis Management; Organizational Reputation; Situational Crisis Communication Theory; Social Amplification

Crisis communication involves the exchange of important information to protect public safety during adverse events. New media has evolved the crisis communication landscape, enabling organizations to quickly and directly communicate emergent information with stakeholders. To strategically optimize social-network tools, research must account for affordances that prolong the lifespan of crisis responses through online interactions. This research extends the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to understand how perceptions of reputation affect social amplification in a 3 (cluster: accidental, preventable, victim) x 3 (source type: organization, CEO, third-party news source) experimental study (Coombs, 2019). It explores how perceptions of a source delivering a crisis response affect the likelihood responses are accepted and perceived positively. Structural equation modeling

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is used to assess the effects of crisis response sources and the link between reputation and social amplification during a fictitious bank crisis. The banking industry continues to be classified as crisis-prone and these crises (e.g., intentional mismanagement, money laundering, unanticipated data breaches) can result in burdensome outcomes such as legal fees, loss of customers, and reputational threats requiring consultation with crisis management specialists (Cyber Talk, 2021; ICM, 2019; Rocca, 2021). Findings aim to provide practical guidance and empirical support for strategizing message sources to mitigate reputational damage and prepare for negative social media engagement that perpetuate a crisis.

### *Crisis and Reputation Management*

When an organization experiences a crisis, which is a sudden and unpredictable event, it heightens the potential for adverse organizational, such as damaging relationships with stakeholders that may negatively affect reputational assessments (Coombs, 2019; Fombrun, 1997). Crisis communication research has developed content and source strategies to maintain and restore a favorable reputation. Prior theoretical assertions suggest that when an organization releases a statement, compared to traditional news media, the organization controlling the narrative is perceived more positively (Coombs, 2019; Spence et al., 2014). However, testing the impact of sources within the SCCT clusters has yet to be empirically examined.

SCCT provides a conceptual link between crisis response strategies and organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Crisis management scholars have developed evidence-based guidance, such as SCCT, for organizational decision-making to manage uncertainty and protect reputation using post-crisis communication. According to SCCT, the extent of reputational threat is based on how stakeholders attribute crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Responsibility is categorized into one of three clusters: preventable, accidental, or victim (Coombs, 2019). Each crisis cluster has a set of “matched” response strategies that allow organizations to react quickly by categorizing and responding based on level of responsibility. When a crisis is considered preventable, there are strong attributions of crisis responsibility, such as human-error accidents and organizational misdeeds. During preventable crises, SCCT advises the organization to respond with rebuilding strategies, such as an apology. Less controllable crises ascribe organizations to the victim cluster where there are minimal attributions of crisis responsibility. The crisis responses matched to this cluster include denial strategies, such as scapegoating. In between these bookends is the accidental cluster. An organization that faces an accidental crisis is advised to respond with diminishment strategies, such as justification. When an organization provides a matched response, it appropriately categorizes the crisis and provides a response associated with the cluster to mitigate negative effects on reputation (Coombs, 2019).

Organizational reputation is an intangible asset resulting from an aggregate evaluation of how stakeholders perceive the organization meets their expectations (Bryson, 2004; Wartick, 1992). If the organization meets stakeholders' needs, its reputation may be perceived favorably and attract customers, employees, and investment interest (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). Reputation summarizes assessments of stakeholders' confidence in an organization's product or service and is affected by an organization's actions (Fombrun, 1997). In crisis management, a change in reputation provides a measurable way to determine if reputation was damaged, maintained, or reestablished post-crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Scholars have produced communication strategies to repair or prevent reputational damage, such as message timing (Coombs & Holladay, 2006) and content strategies for navigating different crisis responsibility levels (Coombs, 2019). When an organization is perceived as minimally responsible for a crisis, it faces little threat to reputation and is advised to respond with strategies such as scapegoating. When an organization appropriately assigns the level of responsibility with matched crisis response, its reputation may be protected (Coombs, 2007).

It is essential to examine reputation to assess the factors contributing to an effective crisis response. Guided by prior studies that utilize SCCT in reputation management, the following hypothesis is posed:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Individuals who receive the matched response to the victim crisis will have greater organizational reputation compared to the accidental and preventable crises.

### *Social Amplification in Public Relations*

People no longer seek crisis information solely from traditional media but actively get it via information and communication technology, such as social media (Brynielsson et al., 2018). With an average of 1.82 billion daily active users, Facebook has become an essential tool for organizations (Statista, 2020). Social media gives organizations the ability to directly inform, interact, and seek input from relevant publics (Hand & Ching, 2011) by quickly distributing information (Jin et al., 2014). However, the affordances of social media do not come without consequences. It has contributed to an increased circulation and abundance of misinformation and fake news (Islam et al., 2020). Although the benefits of social media are recognized in public relations research, such as open dialogue during crises, there is a need for theory-driven research to transition the strategic integration of social media into crisis communication research (Wang & Dong, 2017).

In the context of a crisis, social amplification refers to the potential for a crisis message to perpetuate on social media through online interactions (Strekalova, 2017). Stemming from the social amplification of risk framework, the concept of amplification is rooted in social experience and explains the process of how information can start with one source and become dramatized as it is shared (or amplified) by others (Chong & Choy, 2018; Kasperson & Kasperson, 1996). This type of social media engagement is significant to the spread of information because it



**Figure 1** Hypothesized model of predicting negative social amplification with clusters.

creates the capacity to reach a larger audience and generates traction that may either hurt or benefit an organization (Breland et al., 2017; Pidgeon et al., 2003). For example, Dijkmans et al. (2015) proposed a model that accounts for customer and non-customer differences in social media interactions with an organization and perceptions of reputation. The researchers found a positive association between reputation and social media engagement, especially among customers rather than non-customers.

While the amplification of information can be in favor of an organization (i.e., positive social amplification), there can also be negative social amplification where users express an opinion that conflicts with an organization's goals and extends negative online engagement (e.g., posting a comment with negative sentiment or using an "angry" Facebook reaction, which is a graphic depiction of an angry face emoticon; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Facebook emoticons, such as the "angry" reaction, provide cues that express emotion and the interaction indirectly shares the post with a user's network where it becomes visible on a Timeline (Al-Rawi, 2019). A post with negative information may further perpetuate networks, as Al-Rawi (2019) found that negative news generated more emoticon reactions on a social media post than positive news. While crises are inherently negative, emotional events, this presents an opportunity to understand how social amplification applies to the profession using SCCT. To test the relationship between organizational reputation and the potential for negative social media behavioral intentions applying the SCCT framework, the following hypotheses are posed (see Figure 1):

- H<sub>2</sub>:** Organizational reputation significantly predicts negative social amplification.
- H<sub>3</sub>:** Individuals who receive the matched response in the victim crisis cluster will have the least negative social amplification when mediated by organizational reputation.

### *Connecting SCCT through Source Strategy*

As with matched messaging, organizations are afforded a small amount of control in message delivery while experiencing a crisis. This study evaluates how the source packaging the message impacts stakeholder perceptions. Prior research suggests messages received directly from the organization are generally perceived more positively than the same message released from external message sources (Coombs, 2019; Spence et al., 2014), but this has had minimal exploration using all crisis clusters.



**Figure 2** Hypothesized model of response strategy predicting reputation and negative social amplification.

To understand why internally released responses may be perceived more positively, the researchers look to the concept of stealing thunder. Taken from law literature, it has been found that when information comes from “your” side instead of an opposing counsel, damaging information can do less harm to your case (Coombs, 2019). Internal spokespersons, including company leaders or figureheads, are in the foreground during crises (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). Spokespersons, such as Chief executive officers (CEOs), are often relied on to speak on behalf of organizations as they are perceived as the key decision-makers in organizations (Bertrand, 2009). Alsop (2004) addresses how an organization’s reputation can partially be attributed to its CEO. As some organizations utilize company Facebook pages to communicate crisis responses, it also is common for organizations to communicate through their CEOs, such as Steve Forbes and Mark Zuckerberg.

Traditional media also can play an essential role in this process of attribution and judgment formation by covering and interpreting the crisis, thereby shaping public opinion about the company and its leaders. Third-party media outlets can become an important source of initial crisis information while filling an information vacuum (Institute for Public Relations, 2014). Crisis communication scholars have studied how organizations, news media, and CEOs respond. Based on previous research, there is an opportunity to understand how these sources compare within the SCCT framework. To examine the effects, the following question is posed (see Figure 2):

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** When mediated through organizational reputation, does the type of source used in an SCCT crisis response affect negative social amplification?

### *Method*

A 3 (crisis cluster: accidental, preventable, victim) x 3 (source type: organization, CEO, third-party news source) between-subjects factorial experiment was conducted to establish how a source, when paired with a crisis-matched response, affects post-crisis organizational reputation and negative social amplification (Figure 3).

A total of 623 participants were recruited from a paid Qualtrics panel. Qualtrics provided a sample that mirrored census representation for descriptive statistical analyses (Qualtrics, 2021). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 85 ( $M = 43.00$ ,  $SD = 16.81$ ) living in the United States. Of those, 53.93% identified as male ( $n = 336$ ) and 46.07% as female ( $n = 287$ ). The majority of participants were White ( $n = 453$ , 72.71%), followed by Black ( $n = 77$ , 12.36%), Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 45$ , 7.22%), Asian/

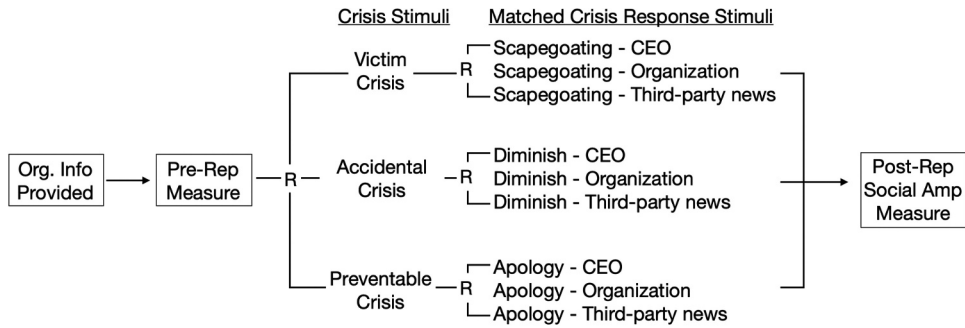


Figure 3 Design experiment flow.

Pacific Islander ( $n = 30$ , 4.82%), Other ( $n = 10$ , 1.61%), and Native American ( $n = 8$ , 1.28%).

### Procedure

After participants read the IRB-approved informed consent script, a fictitious organization was introduced. The participants were given directions and proceeded as though they had a bank account with this company. A pre-crisis reputation measure asked participants about their perception of Bank Your Way. Participants were randomized into one of nine conditions. Afterward, they received the dependent measures of post-crisis reputation and social amplification, demographic questions, and then debriefed statements.

### Manipulations

The stimuli manipulated the source of information disseminating Bank Your Way's crisis response while controlling for the crisis type. A bank crisis was selected as the banking industry is a leading crisis-prone industry (ICM, 2019). To avoid confounding effects, a fictitious bank (Bank Your Way) was used (Keller & Aaker, 1992). Hypothetical situations were acceptable to tightly control an experiment intended to test a theoretical extension (Stacks, 2010).

To enhance ecological validity, the fictitious crisis was modeled after real banking crises, and the crisis responses mimicked language utilized by banks. The crisis scenario was derived from a real crisis to produce more applicable findings for professionals. The preventable crisis, matched with an apology, presented information about an employee releasing personal account information causing a security breach. The accidental crisis, matched with justification, was a technical security issue with the website. The victim crisis, matched with scapegoating, was caused by an external hacker.

The crisis responses were presented to participants as Facebook posts without any existing likes, comments, or shares. Post-crisis response sources included Bank Your

Way's Facebook account, Bank Your Way CEO's Facebook account, or *The New York Times* (NYT) Facebook account. The bank was differentiated from the CEO by the label that indicated ownership of the post (e.g., "Tom Hill – CEO of Bank Your Way"), profile thumbnails, and an introductory message stating who published each post.

### *Manipulation Check*

A manipulation check was conducted with a separate sample to determine whether respondents reported the expected differences between clusters. Crisis responsibility was measured with five items (e.g., "The cause for the crisis was something the organization could have controlled") on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*,  $\alpha = 0.90$ ; Coombs, 2007). The results from an ANOVA found the clusters were statistically significantly different ( $F(2, 56) = 53.13, p < .001$ ) with the organization in the victim crisis perceived least responsible ( $M = 1.76, SD = 0.83$ ) and the preventable crisis most responsible ( $M = 4.98, SD = 0.68$ ).

### *Measurements*

#### *Organizational Reputation*

The reputation of the organization prior to the crisis was measured using a five-item measure (e.g., "The organization is concerned with the well-being of its publics") adapted from the organization reputation scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). An ANOVA was performed to ensure there were no statistically significant differences in the organization's pre-crisis reputation between the conditions ( $F(1, 621) = 1.03, p = .21$ ; pre-crisis:  $M = 3.67, SD = 0.79, \alpha = .89$ ; post-crisis:  $M = 3.53, SD = 0.99, \alpha = .93$ ).

#### *Social Amplification*

To evaluate the potential for negative social amplification, an adapted three-item measure (Bobkowski, 2015; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013) asked participants on a five-point scale (1 = *extremely unlikely* to 5 = *extremely likely*) if they would interact negatively with the post (e.g., post a negative comment, leave an "angry" emoticon reaction;  $M = 2.84, SD = 1.17, \alpha = .86$ ).

## **Results**

An ANOVA was conducted to test  $H_1$ , which predicted that individuals receiving the matched victim response would have greater organizational. The ANOVA found statistically significant differences in the organization's reputation between the conditions ( $F(1, 621) = 9.42, p < .01$ ). Individuals who received the victim crisis response had the greatest perceptions of reputation ( $M = 3.75, SD = 0.93$ ), followed by the



accidental response ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ), and the preventable response ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). Thus,  $H_1$  was accepted.

To test  $H_2$  and  $H_3$ , path analyses were conducted to examine how the source was a conduit to reputation and social amplification (Figures 4 and Figures 5). The analyses used structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation with the Lavaan package in R Studio (Rosseel, 2012). Following Kline’s (2016) two-step process, a measurement model was fit to verify the factor structure of the three

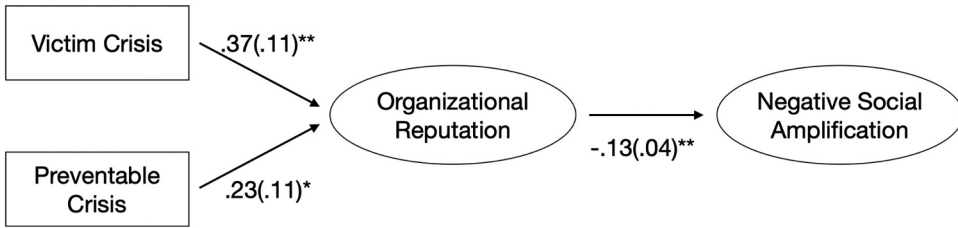


Figure 4 Results of path analysis.

Notes. Path coefficients are unstandardized with standard errors in parentheses. Accidental crisis was used as the referent condition.\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

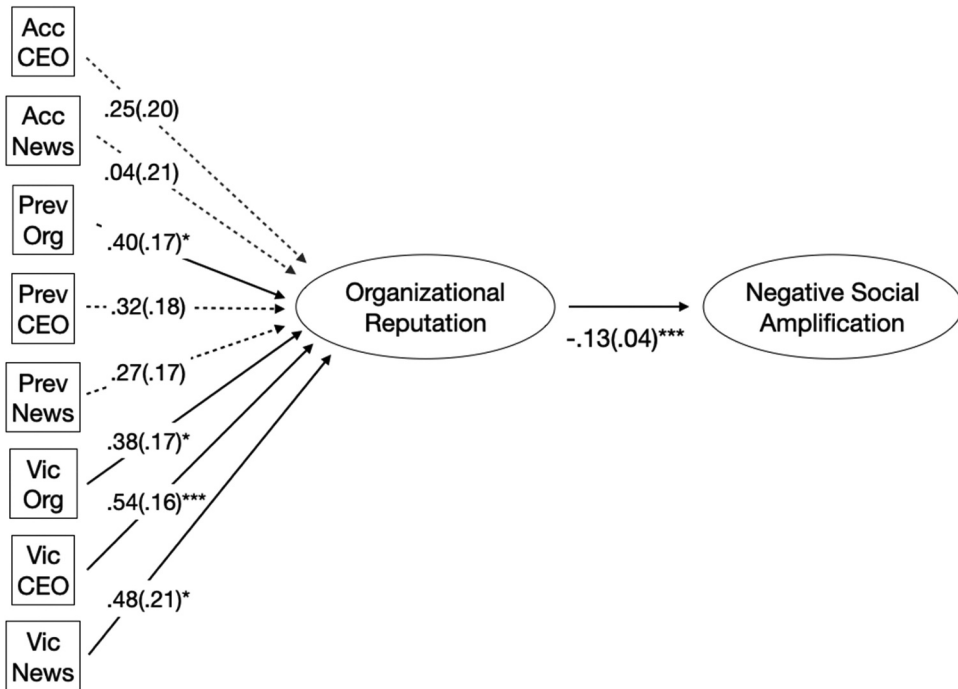


Figure 5 Results of path analysis examining response strategy.

Notes. Path coefficients are unstandardized with standard errors in parentheses. Accidental matched response (justification) using organization as sender was used as the referent condition.\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

multi-item variables (i.e., pre-and post-crisis organizational reputation, social amplification). To test the hypotheses, the organizational response using justification was the referent. Thus, all results represent outcomes as compared with this referent group. The accidental cluster was selected as the referent due to its position falling between the victim and preventable crisis types, which has been accepted as a midpoint in crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2019).

The model was fit with dummy variables for two treatment conditions (preventable and victim clusters), controlling for pre-crisis reputation. Model fit was adequate based on the criteria from Hu and Bentler (1999),  $\chi^2(116) = 190.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .04, 90% CI = [.03, .05], robust CFI = .98, robust NNFI/TLI = .98, SRMR = .05. With reputation explaining 40% of the variance, the effect of crisis type was analyzed. All path coefficients are unstandardized. The victim cluster predicted the greatest positive change in reputation when compared to the referent (victim:  $B = 0.37$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , preventable:  $B = 0.23$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p = .04$ ).

The structural equation modeling results showed that the victim crisis had the greatest positive change in organizational reputation when compared to the accidental and preventable clusters. H<sub>2</sub>, stating reputation would significantly predict negative social amplification, was accepted: Higher post-crisis reputation associated with less negative social amplification ( $B = -0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). H<sub>3</sub>, which predicted the victim crisis cluster would have the least negative social amplification when mediated by organizational reputation, was also accepted. The victim crisis cluster was associated with greater reputation ( $B = 0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $p = .02$ ) compared to the preventable and accidental crisis and had a significant indirect effect of decreasing the amount of negative social amplification [90% CI =  $-0.03$ ,  $-0.01$ ].

To understand the role of sources, RQ<sub>1</sub> asked if source type affected negative social amplification when mediated through organizational reputation. A second model fit with dummy variables for the eight conditions and a referent condition was deemed adequate:  $\chi^2(200) = 301.78$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .03, 90% CI = [.03, .04], robust CFI = .98, robust NNFI/TLI = .98, SRMR = .04 (see Figure 5).

Within the victim cluster, the CEO providing a crisis matched response scored greatest in organizational reputation ( $B = 0.54$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .001$ ) compared to the referent condition. There was a significant indirect effect of the CEO's matched response to the victim crisis, which decreased negative amplification [90% CI =  $-0.07$ ,  $-0.03$ ]. The matched message sourced by the third-party news media also was significant ( $B = 0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and had a significant indirect effect in decreasing intentions to negatively amplify the message [90% CI =  $-0.06$ ,  $-0.02$ ]. For the victim cluster, the organizational message had a significant indirect effect ( $B = 0.38$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p = .02$ ) on reputation with an indirect effect in decreasing amplification [90% CI =  $-0.05$ ,  $-0.02$ ]. In addition to the significant paths from the victim cluster crises, the preventable crisis with the organization providing a matched response of apology was significant ( $B = 0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p = .02$ ), with an indirect effect on decreasing amplification [90% CI =  $-0.05$ ,  $-0.02$ ].

## Discussion

Providing further context to crisis outcomes, this research advances SCCT's prescriptive content strategies to include source type and social amplification in addition to the traditionally examined organizational reputation. It finds that the source posting the crisis response has a significant impact on organizational reputation when looking at victim and preventable crises. Depending on the crisis type, organizations should strategically prepare not only messaging, but a trained spokesperson to speak on behalf of the organization. The victim cluster provides the most clarity of potential strategy effects, with all source types having significant positive effects on reputation and decreasing negative amplification. When organizations face a victim crisis, findings support the use of an internal spokesperson for the most positive outcomes. As the source becomes salient, appointing and preparing an internal spokesperson may contribute to crisis recovery, and professionals must consider crisis response strategy in its entirety (e.g., source and delivery platform) rather than just the message content.

In addition, this research contends that negative social amplification is a valuable variable that assists in explaining post-crisis organizational outcomes. When used with SCCT, scholars and professionals can anticipate the reactions of stakeholders and the threat of further perpetuating a crisis online. Social amplification research describes audiences as communication "stations" that contribute to amplifying information (Chong & Choy, 2018; Pidgeon et al., 2003). As amplifiers, social media users have power with the ability to create and engage with posts, such as tagging or commenting to expose a message to greater networks (Novak et al., 2015). Facebook reactions, such as the "angry" emoticon, illustrate how behaviors can trigger a damaging mechanism that may enforce pressure, informal sanctions, and conformity, such as through cyber-trolling and doxing (Sibai et al., 2015). Observing how social media users interact with platform features, such as Facebook's "angry" emoticon, may reveal the facilitation of aggressive and controversial behaviors, as well as publicly displayed negative sentiment toward a message.

### *Implications for Practice*

Historically, SCCT research advises communication managers to use response strategies that match the specific crisis cluster (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). These findings provide more evidence to assist communicators as they strategize crisis responses, enhancing the prescriptive nature of the theory. Specifically, these findings show that messages disseminated by an internal spokesperson can bolster reputation, illustrating the importance of preparing an appropriate leader in crisis response training. In addition to constructing messages, the organization must round out preparation efforts by assembling a response team and designating a representative to communicate the information to stakeholders.

Previous research finds that social media can be used by organizations to diffuse a crisis and reduce offensiveness (Benoit & Pang, 2008), and positive online engagement contributes to an increase in revenue (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Findings from this

study show the importance of using social media as a tool to respond to stakeholders and illustrates how Facebook interactions can draw negative attention to an organization. The social amplification of a message is important to monitor because a negatively amplified message reaches greater audiences and can prolong or escalate the crisis. As users interact with the message through sharing, reacting, or commenting, this may cause users' networks to become exposed to the message, increasing the relevance through impressions (Strekalova, 2017). By providing empirically tested, prescriptive strategies, professionals are better able to understand the potential for messaging to circulate online and use social media as a tool to address stakeholders' concerns.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

There were several limitations. Common weaknesses in experimental studies are the artificial situation, which can raise concerns about external validity. Although decisions were made to enhance generalizability, this was a controlled experiment with a fictitious organization. Future research utilizing actual organizations, rather than fictitious, may enhance ecological validity (Lyons & Cameron, 2004). While a pretest confirmed that the crises had the desired effect on perceived crisis responsibility, future research can replicate this study with a control condition for each crisis to anchor individual effects. With the successful pretest, it appears that the source response strategy aids in bolstering the organization's reputation post-crisis, and future research should investigate what contributes to the effects of source strategy, such as credibility. This shows a promising future for organizations to not only mitigate adverse outcomes but improve circumstances and achieve a post-crisis reputation that exceeds the pre-crisis reputation. Future research may further assess the interaction of source type and other features of social media that enable users to interact with crisis messaging.

### **Conclusion**

Organizational communication on social media is widely accepted and expected by stakeholders, especially during crises. This experimental design study explores how perceptions of a source delivering the crisis response affects perceived organizational reputation and the potential for the response to be amplified negatively on social media. A structural equation model provides findings that address the conceptual link between reputation and social amplification, which helps practitioners understand how perceptions translate into online behavioral intentions. Applying SCCT content strategies in a realistic context provides more accurate assessments of stakeholder perceptions and advocates for continued scholarship that understands the dimensions of an effective crisis response.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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