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An Experimental Analysis of the Effect of Crisis Response Message Strategies on Consumer Emotions, Perceptual Beliefs and Intended Behavior

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An Experimental Analysis of the Effect of Crisis Response Message Strategies on Consumer

Emotions, Perceptual Beliefs and Intended Behavior

by

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the different dynamics of consumer responses to crisis communication strategies employed by businesses during challenging situations. Focusing on emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, the research explores the impact of denial, diminish, and apology crisis messages on consumers. Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of a crisis scenario, the study illuminates the intricate relationship between these strategies and consumer emotions such as anger, disgust, sadness, and happiness. The findings reveal nuanced patterns, demonstrating that while denial messages evoke strong negative emotions and unfavorable attitudes, diminish messages, when perceived as deflecting blame, can lead to mixed emotional responses and ambiguous attitudes. In contrast, sincere apology messages significantly enhance positive emotions, trust, and favorable behavioral intentions. The study emphasizes the pivotal role of transparency, empathy, and consistency in crisis communication, offering valuable insights for businesses seeking to navigate consumer perceptions and foster resilient relationships post-crisis.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-paced and interconnected world, organizations face an array of risks that can potentially disrupt their operations and affect their reputation. These risks manifest themselves as crises, which encompass a wide range of events, from product recalls and environmental disasters to executive misconduct and data breaches. When faced with a crisis, organizations are challenged to address the operational and logistical aspects of mitigating damage and restoring their image in the eyes of stakeholders, and managing the emotions and perceptions of their stakeholders, particularly consumers.

Hence, analyzing the effect of crisis communication responses on consumers emotions is crucial in understanding the dynamics of crisis management and its implications for organizational reputation and consumer behavior.

"Crisis communication can be defined as the strategic use of words and actions to manage information and meaning during the crisis process" (Coombs, 2019). In other words, crisis communication refers to the strategic communication efforts employed to address and manage crises effectively. Effective crisis communication aims to provide transparent and accurate information, convey empathy and concern for those affected, and outline appropriate measures to rectify the situation. The primary goal is to minimize the negative emotional impact on consumers and restore their trust and confidence in the organization (Coombs, 2019).

Consumers are significantly influenced by how organizations communicate during a crisis. The emotional responses triggered by crisis communication play a crucial role in shaping consumers attitudes, perceptions, and subsequent behaviors towards the affected company. "Crises can harm consumers physically, emotionally, and financially; furthermore, they may react by spreading negative word of mouth, or decide not to purchase from the company involved in the crisis" (Grappi & Romani, 2015).

Depending on the effectiveness of the communication response, consumers may experience emotions such as anger, fear, confusion, disappointment, empathy, or relief. These emotions can profoundly impact their relationship with the organization and influence their decision-making processes, ranging from continued loyalty to boycotts or negative word-of-mouth. (Grappi & Romani, 2015)

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to further crisis communication messaging strategies effect on people by examining different types of message strategies and how they influence variables related to emotions, perceptions, and behavior intent. Specifically, Coombs (2007) situational crisis communication is used to explain the nature of these message strategies. The strategies used in this study were developed based on that theoretical model. The three message strategies tested in this study are denial, diminish, and apology.

Importance of the study

Understanding the link between crisis communication responses and consumers' emotions is essential for several reasons. Firstly, emotions are powerful drivers of human behavior, and their influence on consumer decision-making is well-documented in psychological and marketing research.

Secondly, the same authors establish that analyzing consumers emotional responses to crisis communication can provide insights into the effectiveness of different communication strategies and techniques. By identifying the emotions evoked by specific crisis communication messages or approaches, organizations can tailor their responses to mitigate negative emotions and enhance positive emotions.

Lastly, by analyzing consumers emotional reactions, organizations can gauge the success of their crisis communication in rebuilding trust, managing stakeholder relationships, and ultimately protecting their brand and reputation (Grappi & Romani, 2015).

Theoretical basis

The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is a widely recognized framework used to guide organizations in their communication strategies during crises. Developed by Timothy Coombs (2007), SCCT emphasizes the importance of matching the crisis response strategy to the perceived reputation threat posed by the crisis. According to SCCT, organizations have different response options ranging from denial to full acceptance of responsibility, and the appropriate response should be chosen based on the situational factors, the severity of the crisis, and the reputation of the organization (Coombs, 2019). By understanding the unique characteristics of each crisis and tailoring their communication approach accordingly, organizations can effectively manage crises, mitigate reputational damage, and maintain stakeholder trust. SCCT serves as a valuable tool for crisis communication practitioners to navigate the complex landscape of crisis situations.

Outline of study

This research aims to investigate the effect of crisis communication responses on consumers emotions, perceptions and intended behavior. To achieve these objectives, a quantitative method will be approached. This study will employ an experimental design where participants will be presented with the crisis communication scenario, focused on an international restaurant that discriminated against a LGBTQ+ couple, and various crisis response messaging strategies adopted by the company in response to the crisis. Data was collected through an online questionnaire to get information on the emotional responses, perceptions and behavior intent consumers have after learning about crisis communication and the crisis message response adopted.

Chapter 2 provides an extensive overview of the different concepts involved in this research. Literature related to the SCCT theory and variables used is presented. Research pertaining each variable is discussed, and the hypotheses for this study are provided.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods and procedures used in this research. To test the proposed hypotheses, a controlled experiment was conducted. Participants were recruited from the Hillsborough County voters list, presented with the crisis and randomly assigned one of four different conditions resulting from a 1 x 4 factorial. Prior to conducting hypotheses tests, a manipulation check was performed.

Chapter 4 presents the results of this research, Chapter 5 discusses the results, and Chapter 6 provides conclusions, implications, and limitations of this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will provide a comprehensive overview of existing literature related to crisis communication, corporate social responsibility, emotions, and consumer behaviors, helping establish a contextual background for the study and justifying the research's significance.

Crisis communication

According to the Penn GSE (2023), an organizational crisis is defined as anything that could threaten, damage, harm or destroy the public's trust in an organization, reputation and image. It is considered a crisis because of its nature, as the issue cannot be foreseen, mitigated, or prevented before it happens.

Pitt State (2022) describes a crisis as:

> Any critical incident that involves death, serious injury, or threat to people; damage to environment, animals, property and/or data; disruption of operations; threat to the ability to carry out mission; and/or, threat to the financial welfare and image of the university.

"Crisis communication is usefully viewed as a series of communicative practices and processes that seek to foster safety and organizational stability when normal operations are challenged by crises" (Tyler, 2017).

Consumer engagement is particularly vital in crisis communication, as consumers are often directly impacted by organizational crises and have the power to influence brand reputation and consumer perceptions. Research has shown that proactive and transparent communication with

consumers during a crisis can help organizations retain customer trust and loyalty (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012).

Consumers expect organizations to provide timely and accurate information, express empathy, and demonstrate a commitment to resolving the crisis (Kim & Sung, 2018). Furthermore, social media platforms have become instrumental in facilitating consumer engagement during crises, allowing for real-time information sharing, dialogue, and emotional support (Austin & Liu, 2020).

Effective consumer engagement in crisis communication involves acknowledging customer concerns, promptly addressing their questions and complaints, and providing updates on the progress of crisis resolution.

The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) provides a framework on strategies and techniques to analyze crisis response messaging. Developed by Timothy Coombs, SCCT emphasizes the importance of matching the crisis response strategy to the perceived reputation threat posed by the crisis. According to SCCT, organizations have different response options (Coombs, 2019).

Grappi and Romani (2015) add that SCCT classifies crisis communication strategies into three groups: the denial group, the diminish group and the rebuild group. "Denial post crisis communication strategies are matched to the victim cluster type of crisis; diminish post crisis communication strategies are matched to the accidental cluster type of crisis and rebuild post crisis communication strategies are matched to the preventable cluster type of crisis" (Grappi & Romani, 2015).

According to SCCT, organizations have different response options ranging from denial to full acceptance of responsibility, and the appropriate response should be chosen based on the situational factors, the severity of the crisis, and the reputation of the organization (Coombs, 2019). By understanding the unique characteristics of each crisis and tailoring their communication approach accordingly, organizations can effectively manage crises, mitigate reputational damage, and maintain stakeholder trust. The SCCT serves as a valuable tool for crisis communication practitioners to navigate the complex landscape of crisis situations.

Corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a very important tool for brands today. Corporations' social and environmental obligations to their constituencies and greater society are very big. Those "actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law" (Argenti, 2016, p. 57). help companies gain trust and act with responsible and accountable behavior considering the interests of their consumers.

That is why, nowadays, brand advertisements involving CSR practices and showing support for social issues are very common. Consumers like companies that acknowledge issues and realities, as well as offer diverse opportunities and inclusive spaces for them.

Per most definitions, CSR refers to the voluntary actions taken by organizations to integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and interactions with stakeholders (Carroll, 1979). It encompasses a broad range of activities, including philanthropy, ethical labor practices, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. Carroll four-part model (1979) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding CSR, including economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities.

Numerous studies have highlighted the positive impact of CSR on business outcomes. Companies that effectively implement CSR practices can enhance their reputation, attract and retain talented employees, improve customer loyalty, and achieve long-term profitability. Research by Porter and Kramer (2006) introduced the concept of "shared value", demonstrating how organizations can create economic value while simultaneously addressing social and environmental challenges.

CSR includes meaningful engagement with stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and investors. The "stakeholder theory" proposed by Freeman (1984) emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of all stakeholders and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships. Effective stakeholder engagement allows organizations to better understand societal expectations and align their CSR initiatives accordingly.

The effect of crisis communication on emotions

Consequently, consumers emotions also play a significant in crisis communication, as they significantly impact their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors during and after a crisis (Kim & Sung, 2018). Understanding and effectively addressing consumer emotions are essential for organizations seeking to mitigate reputational damage and maintain positive relationships with their customers.

Research has shown that consumers emotional responses to crises are multifaceted and can range from fear, anger, and sadness to empathy and trust (Kim & Sung, 2018). These emotions influence consumers cognitive processing, shaping their perceptions of the crisis, the

organization involved, and the effectiveness of the crisis response. Consumers who experience

intense negative emotions, such as fear or anger, are more likely to engage in negative behaviors,

such as boycotting products or spreading negative word-of-mouth (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012).

On the other hand, consumers who perceive organizations as empathetic and trustworthy during

a crisis are more likely to maintain their trust, loyalty, and positive brand perceptions (Kim &

Sung, 2018).

Effective crisis communication strategies should, therefore, acknowledge and address

consumer emotions. Organizations must demonstrate empathy and understanding toward the

emotions consumers experience, validating their concerns and providing emotional support

(Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Open and transparent communication that is sensitive to consumer

emotions can help alleviate fear, anger, or sadness, and foster a sense of trust and reassurance

(Kim & Sung, 2018). Additionally, organizations should communicate the steps taken to resolve

the crisis and prevent future occurrences, providing consumers with a sense of empowerment and

control (Kim & Sung, 2018).

Understanding the emotional dynamics of consumers is particularly crucial in the age of

social media, where emotions can quickly spread and shape public opinion. Social media

platforms provide an avenue for consumers to express their emotions, share experiences, and

interact with organizations directly. Consequently, organizations must actively monitor and

respond to consumer emotions on social media, providing timely and empathetic communication

to address concerns and provide accurate information (Austin & Liu, 2020). Engaging in

meaningful dialogue with consumers during a crisis can help organizations better understand and manage emotions, potentially turning negative sentiment into positive support.

Consumer emotions significantly influence their responses to crises and subsequent interactions with organizations (Kim & Sung, 2018). Acknowledging and effectively addressing consumer emotions in crisis communication are essential for organizations aiming to protect their reputation, maintain customer loyalty, and foster positive relationships. By demonstrating empathy, providing emotional support, and promoting transparency, organizations can mitigate negative emotions, build trust, and turn a crisis into an opportunity for growth.

Anger

Anger often arises in consumers when a crisis is mishandled or downplayed by an organization. Swift and transparent communication, coupled with sincere apologies, can alleviate consumer anger (Coombs, 2007). Timely responses and empathetic gestures can help in acknowledging consumers' feelings of anger and frustration, thereby preventing escalation of negative emotions.

Consumer anger often stems from unmet expectations, perceived injustices, or dissatisfaction with products or services (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996). When customers perceive a discrepancy between their expectations and actual experiences, they are more likely to experience anger, leading to negative evaluations of the product or service (Oliver, 1997). Understanding these underlying psychological processes is crucial for businesses seeking to address and prevent consumer anger.

Angry customers tend to engage in assertive behaviors, such as making complaints, seeking refunds, or posting negative online reviews (Dowling & Uncles, 1997). Moreover, consumer anger can lead to customer defection, as dissatisfied customers are more likely to switch to competitors (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998). The financial implications of consumer anger highlight the importance of timely and effective resolution strategies to prevent customer loss and reputational damage.

Effective service recovery strategies are essential in managing consumer anger and preserving customer relationships. Apologizing sincerely, addressing the issue promptly, and providing compensation or corrective measures are key components of successful service recovery (Smith & Bolton, 1998). Research suggests that customers who have their issues resolved to their satisfaction are more likely to become loyal advocates for the brand (Maxham, Netemeyer, & Lichtenstein, 2008). Companies must invest in training employees to handle customer complaints empathetically and efficiently.

Disgust

Disgust emerges when consumers perceive a crisis because of negligence or ethical misconduct. Transparent communication, accountability, and corrective actions are essential in mitigating disgust (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Companies that openly admit their mistakes, take responsibility, and implement corrective measures can prevent consumers from associating their brand with disgust, thus preserving brand reputation.

Consumer disgust is often elicited by stimuli perceived as unclean, morally objectionable, or ethically dubious (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Disgust can arise from various sources,

including product contamination, unethical business practices, or unsanitary conditions (Rozin, 1999). The aversion response associated with disgust serves as a protective mechanism, steering individuals away from potentially harmful or disease-ridden objects or situations.

Disgust significantly influences product evaluations and brand perceptions. When consumers associate a product or brand with feelings of disgust, they are more likely to avoid it (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). Negative product evaluations and avoidance behaviors can lead to financial losses and reputational damage for businesses. Understanding the specific disgust triggers related to products or services is essential for preventing consumer aversion.

Disgust also has ethical dimensions, affecting consumer choices related to socially responsible and sustainable products. Consumers are more likely to avoid products or brands associated with environmental pollution, animal cruelty, or other morally objectionable activities (Hofmann et al, 2014). Companies that prioritize ethical business practices and transparent communication can avoid eliciting disgust in consumers, fostering positive brand perceptions.

Sadness

Sadness can result from crises that involve harm to people, the environment, or society. In such situations, expressing genuine empathy and demonstrating commitment to rectify the situation is crucial (Coombs, 2015). Companies that engage in social responsibility initiatives and provide support to affected communities can mitigate sadness and foster positive emotional connections with consumers.

Sadness arises from feelings of loss, disappointment, or unfulfilled expectations (Thompson, 1994). In the context of consumer behavior, sadness often occurs when consumers experience unsatisfactory products or services, leading to a sense of regret or disillusionment

(Davis & Green, 2018). Understanding the emotional depth of sadness is crucial for businesses seeking to empathize with customers and address their needs effectively.

When individuals experience sadness, they seek coping mechanisms to alleviate negative feelings. Retail therapy, the act of shopping to improve mood, is a common coping mechanism employed by sad consumers (Davis & Green, 2018). Additionally, sadness can lead to increased altruistic and prosocial behavior. Sad individuals are more empathetic and willing to help others, leading to higher charitable donations and socially responsible consumer choices (Thompson & Smith, 2017). Companies can tap into this empathy by aligning their marketing efforts with charitable causes and social initiatives, resonating deeply with consumers emotional states.

Sadness makes individuals emotionally vulnerable, making them more receptive to empathetic marketing strategies. Businesses can create authentic and heartfelt advertising campaigns that emphasize emotional connections rather than just product features (Davis & Green, 2018). Empathetic marketing resonates with the emotional experiences of consumers, creating a sense of understanding and trust between the brand and its audience. By acknowledging and validating the feelings of sadness, companies can foster meaningful relationships with their customers, leading to enhanced brand loyalty and positive consumer outcomes.

Happiness

Surprisingly, crises can also present opportunities for organizations to create happiness among consumers. Companies that handle crises with integrity, transparency, and a focus on consumer welfare can enhance customer trust and loyalty, leading to positive emotional responses (Kim & Song, 2018). Furthermore, crisis communication that emphasizes resolution

and learning from the incident can create a sense of reassurance and happiness among consumers.

Happiness is associated with positive affect, contentment, and life satisfaction (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). In the context of consumer behavior, happiness often arises from positive experiences, excellent customer service, and fulfilling purchases (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Understanding the psychological aspects of happiness is crucial for businesses aiming to create products and services that resonate positively with consumers' emotional states.

Research consistently demonstrates that happy customers are more satisfied, loyal, and likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Businesses that prioritize customer happiness create a positive feedback loop: satisfied customers lead to increased brand loyalty, repeat purchases, and referrals, ultimately contributing to the company's growth and profitability (Homburg & Giering, 2001). Positive customer outcomes are not only beneficial in the short term but also pave the way for enduring customer relationships and sustained business success.

Businesses can create positive emotional experiences for customers by understanding their needs, preferences, and pain points (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, & Tsiros, 2009). Personalized services, attentive customer support, and seamless user experiences contribute to customer happiness (Verhoef et al., 2009). Moreover, businesses can enhance customer happiness by exceeding expectations, expressing gratitude, and acknowledging customer loyalty through loyalty programs or exclusive offers (Bolton, Kannan, & Bramlett,

2000). These efforts demonstrate appreciation for the customer, fostering a sense of belonging and satisfaction.

Happiness significantly influences brand loyalty, with happy customers exhibiting higher levels of trust and commitment to a brand (De Wulf & Iacobucci, 2001). Companies that consistently deliver positive emotional experiences build strong emotional connections with their customers, making it more challenging for competitors to sway their loyalty (De Wulf et al., 2001). Brands that prioritize customer happiness not only benefit from repeat business but also enjoy the positive advocacy of satisfied customers, amplifying their reach and influence within the market.

Perceptual beliefs

Trust

Transparency and open communication are paramount in rebuilding trust after a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Businesses that provide accurate and timely information about the crisis, its causes, and the steps taken to address the situation are more likely to regain consumer trust (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Openness demonstrates accountability, which is essential for rebuilding credibility with consumers.

A sincere apology and acceptance of responsibility can significantly influence trust restoration (Benoit, 1997). When a company admits fault, expresses remorse, and demonstrates a commitment to prevent future crises, consumers are more likely to view the organization positively (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Consistency between a company's words and actions is

crucial for rebuilding trust. If a business promises specific actions to rectify the crisis, it must follow through. Inconsistencies can lead to skepticism and erode trust (Seeger, 2006).

A company's past reputation significantly influences how consumers respond to a crisis. Firms with a positive pre-crisis reputation often find it easier to rebuild trust, as consumers give them the benefit of the doubt during challenging times (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017).

Attitude

Positive consumer attitudes often result from effective crisis communication and transparency (Coombs, 2007). Companies that provide timely, accurate, and honest information about the crisis, its causes, and the steps taken to address it, can enhance consumer trust and goodwill (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Engaging in meaningful CSR initiatives post-crisis can lead to positive consumer attitudes. Companies demonstrating social responsibility by actively contributing to the community, environmental conservation, or humanitarian efforts can rebuild consumer trust and enhance their reputation (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

Perceived empathy and sincere apologies from the company's management can evoke positive emotional responses from consumers. When customers feel understood and valued, it can lead to positive attitudes, forgiveness, and a willingness to continue business relationships (Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 2006).

Negative consumer attitudes often stem from perceived mismanagement of the crisis. If consumers believe that the crisis could have been prevented or managed better, they are likely to develop negative attitudes and may question the company's competence and integrity (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

When a company fails to acknowledge responsibility for the crisis or offers insincere apologies, it can lead to negative consumer attitudes. Lack of accountability and transparency often results in heightened consumer skepticism and reduced trust (Coombs, 2015).

Consumers are sensitive to perceived ethical violations during crises, such as dishonesty, corruption, or disregard for public safety. When ethical boundaries are breached, consumers tend to develop negative attitudes, leading to long-term reputational damage (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, & Meyer, 1996).

Behavior Intent

Trust restoration is a fundamental determinant of consumer behavioral intentions post-crisis. Rebuilding trust through transparent communication, sincere apologies, and consistent actions can lead to increased customer loyalty and positive behavioral intentions (Coombs, 2007).

Consumer perceptions of the severity of the crisis and their perceived control over the situation significantly influence their behavioral intentions. High perceived severity may lead to cautious behavior, while perceptions of control can empower consumers, encouraging them to engage in positive behaviors despite the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Companies that engage in meaningful CSR initiatives post-crisis can positively influence consumer behavioral intentions. Demonstrating social responsibility by contributing to the community, supporting social causes, and practicing sustainable business strategies can enhance consumer perceptions and encourage supportive behaviors (Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2008).

Perceptions of the organization's reputation play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavioral intentions. A positive pre-crisis reputation can serve as a buffer, mitigating the negative impact of the crisis on consumer intentions. Managing and enhancing organizational reputation are essential for influencing post-crisis behaviors (Roberts, 2004).

LGBTQ+ community

The LGBTQ+ community has been a topic of extensive research and scholarly exploration due to the challenges faced by its members. Research has documented various forms of discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, including employment discrimination, denial of services, and harassment (Sears and Mallory, 2011; Flores et al., 2016).

Companies play a vital role in addressing this issue by fostering inclusive and supportive environments. Research has highlighted the positive impact of inclusive workplace policies, such as non-discrimination and diversity training programs, on reducing discrimination and promoting a more inclusive work environment for LGBTQ+ employees (Waldo, 2018; Sears et al., 2013). Moreover, companies that actively support LGBTQ+ rights demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and contribute to a more equitable society.

Protecting the rights of the LGBTQ+ community goes beyond legal obligations and extends to the provision of inclusive services. Studies have shown that LGBTQ+-inclusive policies and practices positively influence consumer behavior and attitudes towards companies (Hebl et al., 2014; Carrigan et al., 2017). When companies actively support LGBTQ+ rights, it enhances their reputation and attracts a diverse customer base. Furthermore, companies that openly address discrimination and create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals foster a sense of belonging and promote customer loyalty (Neff et al., 2019).

This literature review reveals important gaps on our understanding of the effects of socially responsible communication during a crisis communication. This study tries to fill those gaps by analyzing the effect of crisis response messages on people's emotions and behaviors.

Hypotheses

This study examines the effect of crisis communication message strategies on people's emotional responses, their perceptions and behavioral intent towards the company. Three hypotheses were developed based on the purpose of the study and literature reviewed.

All three hypotheses are focused on the types of message strategy explained by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT): Denial, Diminish and Apology.

H1: The denial crisis message response will make people feel angry, disgusted, sad, and less happy, which will make them have less trust in the message, find the company not socially responsible, as well as have a negative attitude and behavioral intention towards the company.

H2: The diminish crisis message response will make people feel angry, disgusted, sad, and less happy, which will make them have less trust in the message, find the company not socially responsible, as well as have a negative attitude and behavioral intention towards the company.

H3: The apology crisis message response will make people feel happy and less angry, disgusted, and sad, which will make them trust the message, find the company socially responsible, as well as have a positive attitude and behavioral intention towards the company.

These three hypotheses are relational statements positing that the degree of emotion, perception and intended behavior in participants is predicted by the independent variables of denial message strategy, diminish message strategy and apology message strategy.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

An experimental design was conducted to examine the effect of crisis communication messages on people's emotions, perceptions, and purchase behavior. 224 participants were assigned to an experimental condition, understood as a crisis communication from a company.

The informed consent process was conducted at the beginning of the study, providing participants with comprehensive information about the research, including the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, and how their personal information will be used and protected.

The consent process was conducted electronically. Participants were notified via email about the opportunity of taking part in the study. Interested individuals decided to open the questionnaire and respond. Participants proceeded to the questionnaire after reading the consent, and then completing and submitting the questionnaire implied their consent to participate in the study.

Sample

The sample frame came from the Hillsborough County Voters List public records. The exclusion criteria excluded people under 18 years old and not included in the Hillsborough County records. After downloading the list from Hillsborough County Public Records website,

an email including the informed consent and questionnaire link was sent to all the email addresses listed on the records.

The participants were told about the study purpose and their voluntary participation. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The voter's list was set in Qualtrics to exclude collection of IP addresses from respondents. There was no way to link responses back to individuals that responded.

Experimental conditions

In this research, a crisis scenario was presented to simulate a situation where a company, called Crazy Pizza Restaurant, discriminated against an LGTBQ+ couple. The restaurant used in this study is nor a real company. Instead, it is modeled after an international Italian restaurant that had undergone a similar crisis.

Participants were told that this international restaurant, called Crazy Pizza Restaurant, was criticized for its response to a same-sex couple who visited the restaurant and engaged in a kiss. The restaurant employees responded by asking the couple to leave, saying there was discomfort expressed by other customers due to their display of affection. The incident resulted in criticism of the restaurant by the couple and members of the community.

After being presented with the crisis communication scenario, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four treatment conditions, which was representing a crisis message strategy adopted by Crazy Pizza Restaurant in response to the incident and resulting in a

1 x 4 factorial. After reading the message, they were asked to respond to a series of statements about their emotions, perceptions, and purchase intention on the restaurant's response message.

Instrumentation

This study employs a 1×4 factorial, in which three treatment conditions and one control condition were created. In the four treatments, participants were exposed to one of four different messages from Crazy Pizza Restaurant. Three of the messages were related to the company either denying the incident (see Table 1), diminishing it (see Table 2) or apologizing for it (see Table 3), and the fourth message was unrelated to the incident serving as a control strategy (see Table 4). Messages were in text form, representing a post from the company that would typically be found in their social media accounts.

Table 1: Shared Text for Message Strategy Treatment- Denial

Title: Denial Response Message
We deny the allegations made against Crazy Pizza Restaurant regarding the incident that occurred on Saturday June 5th, involving Ms. Dayana Navarro and Ms. Barbara Sanders. These accusations are a deliberate attempt to tarnish our reputation and undermine our values. It is unfortunate that false narratives have been spread, misrepresenting the actions of our staff. Our investigation reveals that there were other factors at play in this incident, such as overcrowding and safety concerns, which led to a request for patrons to be mindful of their behavior. This incident was in no way a reflection of any discriminatory behavior. We have always welcomed customers from diverse backgrounds and will continue to do so. We urge the public to consider the facts before making judgments. Crazy Pizza Restaurant remains committed to inclusivity and providing an enjoyable dining experience for all customers.

Table 2: Shared Text for Message Strategy Treatment- Diminish

Title: Diminish Response Message
At Crazy Pizza Restaurant, we deeply regret the unfortunate incident that occurred on Saturday June 5th, involving Ms. Dayana Navarro and Ms. Barbara Sanders. We want to emphasize that this incident was the result of the actions of an individual staff member who acted outside of our established policies and values. This staff member's behavior does not reflect the values and principles that we uphold as an organization. We hold all our employees to high standards of professionalism and inclusivity, and we are appalled by the behavior exhibited in this case. We have taken immediate disciplinary action against the responsible staff member and have implemented additional training and monitoring protocols to ensure that those behavior do not happen again. We apologize to the affected couple and reaffirm our commitment to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all customers.

Table 3: Shared Text for Message Strategy Treatment- Apology

Title: Apology Response Message
Crazy Pizza Restaurant deeply apologizes for the incident that occurred on Saturday June 5th, involving Ms. Dayana Navarro and Ms. Barbara Sanders. Our investigation revealed that our staff misunderstood the situation and mistakenly asked the couple to leave. While we acknowledge this misjudgment, we want to assure everyone that it was never our intention to discriminate against anyone based on their sexual orientation. As a gesture of our commitment to rectifying this situation, we would like to offer the couple a complimentary meal at any of our restaurants. We want to express our deepest apologies to the couple and the wider community. Discrimination has no place in our establishment, and we take full responsibility for the behavior of our staff.

The messages used for message of strategy type and the definitions of those strategies, were based in the situational crisis communication theory by Timothy Coombs (2006) and are provided in Table 5.

Table 4: Shared Text for Message Strategy Treatment- Control

Title: Control Response Message
At Crazy Pizza Restaurant, we are excited to announce a new addition to our menu that we believe will delight our customers. Our mouthwatering 'Mediterranean Delight' pizza features a perfect blend of flavors inspired by the vibrant Mediterranean cuisine. This delectable creation includes fresh ingredients like sun-dried tomatoes, feta cheese, and Kalamata olives, all nestled on a thin and crispy crust. We invite you to come and savor the taste of this exquisite new pizza that is sure to leave you wanting more. Our team is dedicated to delivering exceptional culinary experiences, and we appreciate your continued support as we strive to bring you the best in gourmet pizza. Join us soon and experience the magic of Crazy Pizza Restaurant!

Table 5: Situational Crisis Communication Theory Message Strategy Types (Xu & Liu, 2020)

Types of Strategy*	Strategic Response*	Tactical Actions*	Tactical Actions Description*
Primary crisis response strategies	Deny crisis response	Attack the accuser	Crisis manager confronts the person/group claiming something is wrong.
		Denial	Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.
		Excuse	Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control causes of crisis.
	Diminish crisis response	Scapegoat	Crisis manager blames some person or group outside the organization for the crisis.
	Rebuild crisis response	Justification	Manager minimizes perceived damage caused by the crisis
		Compensation	Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.
		Apology	Crisis manager accepts full responsibility and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

After viewing one of the responses from Crazy Pizza Restaurant, participants were asked to answer a questionnaire that contained different items measuring emotions, perceptual beliefs, and purchase intention.

Scales were used to measure these emotion variables: 1) Anger; 2) Disgust; 3) Sadness; and 4) Happiness. All these emotions were measured by the following scales (see Table 6) rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Table 6: Emotion Scales

Anger
1.   I feel angry about how Crazy Pizza Restaurant responded. 2.   The message makes me furious. 3.   I find the message infuriating.
Sadness
1.   I feel sad about how Crazy Pizza Restaurant responded. 2.   The message makes me feel melancholic. 3.   I find the message emotionally distressing.
Disgust
1.   Crazy Pizza Restaurant's message disgusts me. 2.   The message makes me feel nauseated. 3.   I find the message extremely distasteful.
Happiness
1.   I feel happy about how Crazy Pizza Restaurant responded. 2.   The message makes me feel delighted. 3.   The message brings a smile to my face.

Perceptual beliefs included the following variables: Trustworthiness, corporate social responsibility, and attitude. All responses to these items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) as well.

Trustworthiness was measured using these statements: 1) I trust that Crazy Pizza is telling the truth about the incident; 2) Crazy Pizza's response about the incident is attempting to mislead costumers; 3) Crazy Pizza's response honestly represents the incident; and 4) I believe what Crazy Pizza said.

To measure corporate social responsibility these following statements were used: 1) I believe Crazy Pizza engages in ethical business practices; 2) I believe Crazy Pizza is a socially responsible organization; and 3) I believe that my community would be negatively impacted if Crazy Pizza opened there.

Attitude was measured using a bipolar matrix table that measured the attitude towards the company from negative to positive, bad to good and unfavorable to favorable.

Finally, behavioral intention was measured using the following two times: 1) I would eat at Crazy Pizza if it opened in my neighborhood; and I will not buy products from Crazy Pizza restaurant in the future.

Additionally, participants were asked to provide their demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity, and political ideology.

Manipulation check for strategy message type

Before hypotheses testing of the variables, a manipulation check was done to analyze the degree to which the messages treatments from Crazy Pizza Restaurant agreed with the definitions presented in the literature review for each type of response.

Participants indicated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), how strongly the message issued by Crazy Pizza Restaurant characterized each crisis response strategy.

The ANOVA test indicated significant differences in means for all treatments (diminish, denial, apology, and control). The diminish manipulation check scored higher (M=3.53) for people that saw the diminish strategy message; $F(3, 220) = 124.057, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .247$). The denial manipulation check scored higher (M= 4.17) for those people that read the denial message treatment, $F(3, 220) = 39.304, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .349$; the apology manipulation check scored higher (M= 4.01) for those who read the apology message treatment, $F(3, 220) = 139.508, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .655$; and the control manipulation check scored higher (M= 4.9) for those who read the control message treatment, $F(3, 220) = 150.426, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .672$. An evaluation of these mean scores for the treatments can be found in Table 7.

Data analysis

All the quantitative data obtained from the survey was analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' demographic information and their emotional responses. Inferential statistics, such as analysis of variance (ANOVA), were conducted to examine the effect of crisis communication strategies on participants' emotions and behaviors.

Data will be stored on the primary researcher's password-protected computer, as well as on the supervising professor's password-protected computer for a period of five years. Only the primary researcher and supervising professor will have access to the data. The identified data will be stored separate from the deidentified data and only linked via a study ID. After data analysis, all identified data will be deleted.

Table 7: Manipulation Check Descriptives

Manipulation Check Strategy		N	M	SD
	Apology	58	2.28	1.436
	Diminish	57	3.53	1.513
DIMINISH STRATEGY	Deny	59	3.05	1.357
	Control	50	1.48	.931
	Total	224	2.62	1.534
	Apology	58	2.2328	1.26774
	Diminish	57	2.2895	1.23905
DENY STRATEGY	Deny	59	4.1780	.88455
	Control	50	2.2900	1.21676
	Total	224	2.7723	1.42667
	Apology	58	4.0086	1.12971
	Diminish	57	3.9298	1.20800
APOLOGY STRATEGY	Deny	59	1.7542	.84268
	Control	50	1.0400	.19795
	Total	224	2.7321	1.60357
	Apology	58	1.5259	.93856
	Diminish	57	1.5614	.91158
CONTROL STRATEGY	Deny	59	2.5763	1.16639
	Control	50	4.8500	.45457
	Total	224	2.5536	1.59435

Demographic comparisons between the parent population and the sample populations were conducted. The parent population includes every person in the downloaded voters list for which the survey was intended. The 225 participants that ended up answering the survey from the voters list will be considered the sample population. Data will be examined for outliers and other anomalies.

Personal identifiers, such as names and contact information, will be separated from the research data to maintain privacy. Instead, participants will be assigned unique identifiers that are not linked to their specific responses. Once the study is complete, research records will be stored securely for at least five years.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Demographics

As stated in the methodology section, research participants were recruited from the Hillsborough County Voter Registration Public Records. A total of 225 individuals participated in the study. Of these, 118 (52.7%) were female, 100 (44.6%) were male, and 6 (2.7%) did not report their sex. The age of the participants ranged between 22 and 99, with an average age of 53.

For ethnicity, participants reported as being 153 (68.3%) Caucasian, 32 (14.3%) Hispanic, 19 (8.55) African American, 2 (.9%) American Indian, and 18 (8%) another ethnicity.

The political ideology of the participants reported a mean of 4.56 on a scale from 1 to 7 (see Table 8).

Each message strategy was set into Qualtrics to be distributed randomly so each participant just read one of the four messages. The response frequency was slightly imbalanced, having 59 respondents for the denial strategy, 58 respondents for the apology strategy, 58 respondents for the diminish strategy and 50 for the control strategy, for a total of 225 responses.

Emotions

      A Cronbach's alpha test was used for internal consistency of each emotion item variable: anger, disgust, sadness, happiness. The results for the analysis are shown in Table 9.
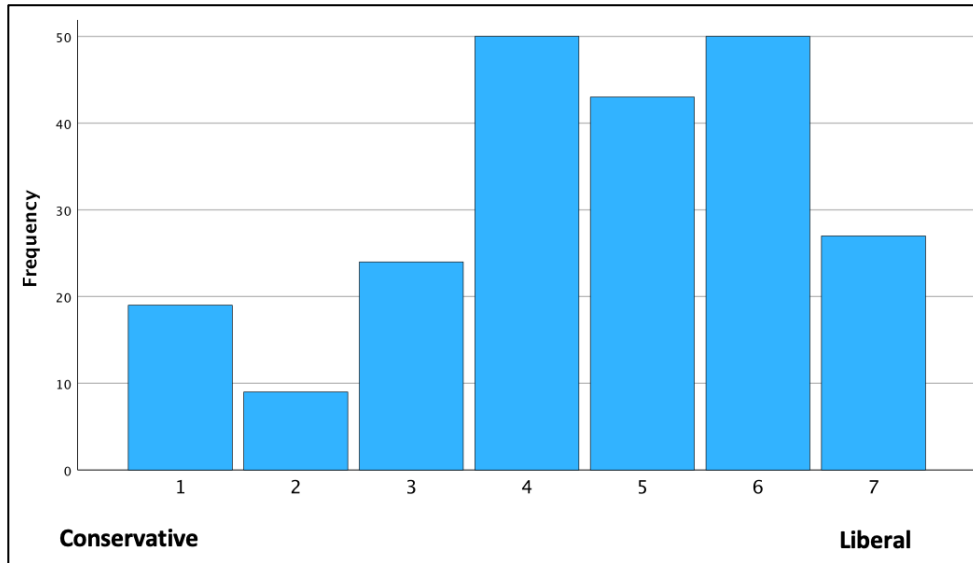
Table 8: Participants Political Ideology

Table 9: Final Cronbach's Alpha for Multiple-Item Indexes

Variable	α	Number of Items
Anger	.90	3
Sadness	.87	3
Disgust	.90	3
Happiness	.93	3

      Three items were included to test the anger emotion variable and the alpha indicated a reliability coefficient of .90, so it was not necessary to drop any item for this variable.

Likewise, for the sadness variable, the three items included to test it produced a reliability

coefficient of .87, so no items were dropped. The three items included to test the disgust emotion

indicated a reliability coefficient of .90, so no items were dropped. Finally, the three items

included to test the happiness emotion produced a reliability coefficient of .93, so there was no

need to drop any items either. The composite mean scores for every emotion are presented in

Table 10.

Table 10: Composite Mean Scores for Each Emotion

Variables	N	M	SD
HAPPINESS	224	2.9940	1.30919
SADNESS	224	2.3884	1.25019
ANGER	224	2.0774	1.17479
DISGUST	224	1.9658	1.13876

As alpha values between .80 and 1.00 indicate a high reliability (Tavakol & Dennick,

2011), there was a strong internal reliability of the items measured for each emotion in this study,

which means those variables can be used for the hypothesis testing.

Perceptual Beliefs (Trust, Corporate Social Responsibility and Attitude)

A Cronbach's alpha test was used for internal consistency for trust, corporate social

responsibility, and attitude variables. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 11.

To test the trust variable, four items were included with the alpha indicating a reliability

coefficient of .90, which meant no item was dropped. The three items included to test corporate

social responsibility indicated a reliability coefficient of .90, so no item was dropped. Likewise,

the three items included to test the attitude variable and the alpha indicated a reliability

coefficient of .94, so it was not necessary to drop any item for this variable.

Table 11: Cronbach's Alpha for Perceptual Beliefs Variables

Variable	α	Number of Items
Trust	.90	4
Corporate Social Responsibility	.90	3
Attitude	.94	3

Behavior Intention

Since there were only two items measured for the behavior intention variable, a

correlation test was used to assess their consistency. The two items had a highly positive

correlation, $r = .74$. The composite means for perceptual beliefs and behavior intention can be

found in Table 12.

Hypotheses Testing

H1 stated that the denial crisis message response will make people feel angry, disgusted,

sad, and less happy, which will make them have less trust in the message, find the company not

socially responsible, as well as have a negative attitude and behavioral intention towards the

company.

Mean scores showed significant differences in emotions due to the message strategy type

(see Table 13). The omnibus ANOVA indicated significant differences in mean scores for

emotions due to message strategy type. Specifically, message strategy type had the strongest

effect on happiness, $F(3, 220) = 33.910$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .316$, followed by sadness, $F(3, 220) =$

20.885, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .222$, and disgust, $F(3, 220) = 20.714$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .220$.

Message strategy type had the weakest effect on anger, $F(3, 220) = 15.374$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .173$.

Table 12: Composite Mean Scores for Perceptions and BehIntent

	N	M	SD
ATTITUDE	225	4.3170	1.76221
BEHINT	224	3.4933	1.23883
SOCRESP	224	3.3065	1.00684
TRUST	224	3.0692	1.10579

The denial message strategy produced significantly higher mean scores on the sadness emotion than the diminish message (MDiff= 1.434, p < .001), and the apology message (MDiff= 1.153, p < .001). Sadness was also higher for the denial message than the control message (MDiff= .349, p = .103), but it was not significantly higher.

Similarly, the denial message strategy produced significantly higher mean scores on the anger emotion than the diminish message (MDiff= 1.179, p < .001), and the apology message (MDiff= 1.045, p < .001). Anger was also higher for the denial message than the control message (MDiff= .388, p = .062), but it was not significantly higher.

Table 13: Means and Standard Deviations for Message Strategy Across Emotions

Emotion	Strategy	N	M	SD
ANGER	Apology	58	1.6897	.92161
	Diminish	57	1.5556	.95812
	Deny	59	2.7345	1.19831
	Control	50	2.3467	1.20648
	Total	224	2.0774	1.17479
SADNESS	Apology	58	1.9770	.94665
	Diminish	57	1.6959	.94760
	Deny	59	3.1299	1.23179
	Control	50	2.7800	1.29294
	Total	224	2.3884	1.25019
DISGUST	Apology	58	1.4943	.80506
	Diminish	57	1.4327	.89302
	Deny	59	2.6723	1.20104
	Control	50	2.2867	1.10863
	Total	224	1.9658	1.13876
HAPPINESS	Apology	58	3.5747	1.10782
	Diminish	57	3.8304	1.05055
	Deny	59	2.3220	1.08449
	Control	50	2.1600	1.11928
	Total	224	2.9940	1.30919

The denial message strategy produced significantly higher mean scores on the disgust emotion than the diminish message (MDiff= 1.239, p < .001), the apology message (MDiff= 1.178, p < .001), and the control message (MDiff= .3857, p = .049).

Finally, the denial message produced significantly lower mean scores on the happiness emotion than the diminish message (MDiff= -1.5084, p < .001), and the apology message (MDiff= -1.2527, p < .001). Happiness was also lower for the denial message than the control message (MDiff= -0.162, p = .440), but it was not significantly lower.

Mean scores showed significant differences in cognitive perceptions due to the message strategy type (see Table 14). The omnibus ANOVA indicated significant differences in mean

scores for cognitive perceptions due to message strategy type. Specifically, message strategy type had the strongest effect on trust, $F(3, 220) = 26.379$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .265$; followed by social responsibility, $F(3, 220) = 22.20$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .232$; attitude, $F(3,220) = 18.00$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .194$; and behavior intention, $F(3,220) = 17.0$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .188$.

For cognitive perceptions, the mean scores evaluation indicated that the denial message strategy produced the highest mean score for attitude *(M= 3.50, SD= .85),* followed by behavior intention *(M= 3.10, SD= 1.10),* social responsibility *(M= 2.93, SD= .85),* and trust *(M= 2.50, SD= 1.00).*

The denial message strategy produced significantly lower mean scores on trust than the diminish message (MDiff = -1.354, $p < .001$), and the apology message (MDiff = -0.9063, $p < .001$). Trust was also lower for the denial message than the control message (MDiff = .-0.103, $p = .575$), but it was not significantly lower.

Similarly, the denial message strategy produced significantly lower mean scores on social responsibility than the diminish message (MDiff = -0.986, $p < .001$), and the apology message (MDiff = -0.654, $p < .001$). However, the mean score for social responsibility was slightly higher for the denial message than the control message (MDiff = .231, $p = .177$).

Similarly, the denial message strategy produced significantly lower mean scores on attitude than the diminish message (MDiff = -1.77, $p < .001$), and the apology message (MDiff = -1.325, $p < .001$). The mean score for attitude was also lower for the denial message than the control message (MDiff = .-0.071, $p = .818$), but the mean difference was not significant.

**Table 14: Means and Standard Deviations for Message
Strategy Across Perceptions and Behavior Intent**

	Strategy	N	M	SD
TRUST	Apology	58	3.3879	.97465
	Diminish	57	3.8158	.98937
	Deny	59	2.4619	1.00517
	Control	50	2.5650	.82036
	Total	224	3.0692	1.10579
SOCRESP	Apology	58	3.5920	.79972
	Diminish	57	3.9240	.96777
	Deny	59	2.9379	.85875
	Control	50	2.7067	.92494
	Total	224	3.3065	1.00684
ATTITUDE	Apology	58	4.8276	1.55251
	Diminish	58	5.2759	1.54609
	Deny	59	3.5028	1.49248
	Control	50	3.5733	1.79321
	Total	225	4.3170	1.76221
BEHINT	Apology	58	3.8534	.93663
	Diminish	57	4.1491	1.10180
	Deny	59	3.0508	1.10522
	Control	50	2.8500	1.34866
	Total	224	3.4933	1.23883

Finally, the denial message produced significantly lower mean scores on the behavioral intention measure than the diminish message (MDiff= -1.098, p < .001), and the apology message (MDiff= -0.803, p < .001). However, behavioral intention was slightly higher for the denial message than the control message (MDiff= .201 p = .354), but it was not significantly higher. Based on these results, H1 is supported.

H2 stated that the diminish crisis message response will make people feel angry, disgusted, sad, and less happy, which will make them have less trust in the message, find the company not socially responsible, as well as have a negative attitude and behavioral intention towards the company.

Mean scores, shown in Table 13, indicated that the diminish message strategy produced the highest effect on the happiness emotion *(M= 3.83, SD= 1.10),* followed by sadness *(M=1.70, SD= .94*), anger *(M= 1.60, SD= .96),* and disgust (M= 1.43, SD= .90) emotions.

For perceptions and behavior intent, mean scores, shown in Table 14, indicated that the diminish message strategy produced the highest effect on attitude *(M= 5.30, SD= 1.54),* followed by behavior intention *(M= 4.14, SD= 1.10),* social responsibility *(M= 3.92, SD= 1.00),* and trust *(M= 3.81, SD= 1.00).* Therefore, H2 is not supported.

H3 stated that the apology crisis message response will make people feel happy and less angry, disgusted, and sad, which will make them trust the message, find the company socially responsible, as well as have a positive attitude and behavioral intention towards the company.

Mean scores, shown in Table 13, showed that the apology message strategy produced the highest effect on the happiness emotion *(M= 3.60, SD= 1.10),* followed by sadness *(M=2.0, SD= .94*), anger *(M= 1.70, SD= .92),* and disgust (M= 1.50, SD= .80) emotions.

For perceptions and behavior intent, mean score evaluation, shown in Table 14, showed that the apology message strategy produced the highest effect on attitude *(M= 4.82, SD= 1.60),* followed by behavior intention *(M= 3.90, SD= .93),* social responsibility *(M= 3.60, SD= .80),* and trust *(M= 3.40, SD= 1.00).* Therefore, H3 is supported.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the direct relationship between crisis communication strategies and consumers' emotions, perceptions, and behavioral intentions. The hypotheses proposed in this research aimed to test the impact of different crisis message responses on consumers' emotional states, trust, perceptions of social responsibility, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward the company. The results, as presented earlier, offer significant implications for both theory and practice in the realm of crisis communication and consumer behavior.

Effect of denial message strategy

The denial crisis message strategy evoked strong negative emotions, with consumers reporting high levels of anger, disgust, and sadness. This emotional response translated into unfavorable perceptions, as evidenced by reduced trust in the message, a diminished perception of the company's social responsibility, and negative attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the company. These results align with the literature on crisis communication, highlighting the detrimental effects of denying responsibility during a crisis (Coombs, 2007). The findings emphasize the importance of transparency and accountability in crisis communication efforts.

Effect of diminish message strategy

Contrary to expectations, the diminish crisis message strategy elicited predominantly positive emotions, with consumers reporting higher levels of happiness. However, this positive

emotional response did not translate into favorable perceptions and behavioral intentions. While consumers felt happy, the strategy did not enhance their trust in the message or their perception of the company's social responsibility.

One explanation for this outcome could be the nuanced nature of the diminish message strategy employed. Unlike the denial strategy, where the company refuses to take responsibility, or the apology strategy, where the company acknowledges fault and expresses apology, the diminish strategy in this context involved blaming external factors and emphasizing that the crisis was not related with the company's values. This approach might have led to confusion among participants.

Participants may have found it challenging to interpret the message accurately due to the discrepancy between the emotional tone (blaming external factors) and the cognitive content (disassociating from the crisis concerning company values). This confusion might have influenced their emotional responses and evaluations.

This finding demonstrates the importance of message clarity and consistency in crisis communication. Future research could explore the impact of different nuances within crisis communication strategies, examining how variations in message content and tones influence consumer emotions, perceptions, and behaviors.

Effect of apology message strategy

The apology crisis message strategy proved to be the most effective in eliciting positive emotional responses, particularly in terms of happiness. This emotional positivity translated into good perceptions, with consumers reporting higher levels of trust in the message, a more positive

attitude toward the company, and a higher intention to engage in positive behaviors. These findings support previous research emphasizing the power of sincere apologies in crisis communication (Coombs, 2015). Apologies not only mitigate negative emotions such as anger and sadness but also foster positive emotional states, leading to trust and positive consumer attitudes.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

This study delves into consumer responses to crisis communication strategies, unraveling the complexities of emotions, perceptions, and behavioral intentions in the aftermath of crises. Through an analysis of denial, diminish, and apology crisis messages, this research provides invaluable insights into the nuanced dynamics of consumer reactions.

The findings revealed the importance of transparency and sincerity in crisis communication. Denial messages, evoking strong negative emotions and unfavorable attitudes, highlight the detrimental effects of avoiding responsibility during crises. On the other hand, diminish messages, particularly those perceived as blaming someone else, lead to confusion and mixed emotional responses, emphasizing the need for clarity and consistency in crisis messaging. In contrast, sincere apology messages emerge as powerful tools, eliciting positive emotions, rebuilding trust, and fostering favorable behavioral intentions among consumers.

The study's results show that an empathetic and accountable approach is indispensable in crisis communication strategies. Acknowledging responsibility, expressing genuine remorse, and demonstrating a commitment to rectify the situation are pivotal in mitigating negative emotions and having positive consumer attitudes. The study highlights the impact of ethical communication practices and social responsibility initiatives, which play a big role when shaping consumer perceptions and rebuilding trust.

In conclusion, this research focuses on the strong relationship between crisis communication strategies and consumer responses, providing actionable insights for businesses navigating challenging communication crises. When embracing transparency, sincerity, and ethical conduct, companies can not only effectively manage crises but also increase better relationships with consumers, which strengthens their reputation in the face of adversity.

Implications for theory and practice

The results of this study have several implications for both theoretical research and practical applications. From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to the understanding of the nuanced relationship between crisis communication strategies, emotions, and consumer perceptions. The study highlights the complexity of consumer responses, showcasing the importance of aligning emotional states with cognitive evaluations and behavioral intentions. Future research could explore the underlying psychological mechanisms that mediate the relationship between emotions and behavioral outcomes during crisis communication.

From a practical standpoint, the results emphasize the critical role of sincerity and emotional resonance in crisis communication efforts. Acknowledging responsibility and expressing genuine remorse are pivotal in eliciting positive emotional responses, which, in turn, enhance trust and positive consumer attitudes. Organizations should invest in training their communication teams to work on empathetic and sincere crisis messages, ensuring that emotional responses are aligned with desired outcomes.

Study limitations

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The use of a fictional crisis scenario may not have fully capture the complexity and emotional intensity of real-life crises. The generalizability of the findings may also be limited to the specific context and target consumer population under investigation. Additionally, participants' responses may be subject to social bias or demand characteristics. The research design and sample size may have also impacted the statistical power and generalizability of the results.

As this research focused on a specific type of company, such a restaurant, it limits the applicability of the results to different contexts. Different types of crises might elicit varied consumer responses. Emotional complexity also played a huge role because of their complex and multifaceted nature and consumer perceptions can be influenced by individual differences, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences. These factors might not have been fully explored in the study, leading to potential limitations in understanding the diversity of perceptions.

Finally, publicity and media coverage surrounding a crisis can significantly influence consumer perceptions. The study might not have fully accounted for the external media influences that participants could be exposed to during the research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Denial message treatment

Deny

We deny the allegations made against Crazy Pizza Restaurant regarding the incident that occurred on Saturday June 5th, involving Ms. Dayana Navarro and Ms. Barbara Sanders. These accusations are a deliberate attempt to tarnish our reputation and undermine our values. It is unfortunate that false narratives have been spread, misrepresenting the actions of our staff. Our investigation reveals that there were other factors at play in this incident, such as overcrowding and safety concerns, which led to a request for patrons to be mindful of their behavior. This incident was in no way a reflection of any discriminatory behavior. We have always welcomed customers from diverse backgrounds and will continue to do so. We urge the public to consider the facts before making judgments. Crazy Pizza Restaurant remains committed to inclusivity and providing an enjoyable dining experience for all customers."

@CrazyPizzaCol

Appendix B: Diminish treatment message

Diminish

At Crazy Pizza Restaurant, we deeply regret the unfortunate incident that occurred on Saturday June 5th, involving Ms. Dayana Navarro and Ms. Barbara Sanders. We want to emphasize that this incident was the result of the actions of an individual staff member who acted outside of our established policies and values. This staff member's behavior does not reflect the values and principles that we uphold as an organization. We hold all our employees to high standards of professionalism and inclusivity, and we are appalled by the behavior exhibited in this case. We have taken immediate disciplinary action against the responsible staff member and have implemented additional training and monitoring protocols to ensure that those behavior do not happen again. We apologize to the affected couple and reaffirm our commitment to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all customers.

@CrazyPizzaCol

Appendix C: Apology message treatment

Crazy Pizza Restaurant deeply apologizes for the incident that occurred on Saturday June 5th, involving Ms. Dayana Navarro and Ms. Barbara Sanders.

Our investigation revealed that our staff misunderstood the situation and mistakenly asked the couple to leave. While we acknowledge this misjudgment, we want to assure everyone that it was never our intention to discriminate against anyone based on their sexual orientation.

As a gesture of our commitment to rectifying this situation, we would like to offer the couple a complimentary meal at any of our restaurants.

We want to express our deepest apologies to the couple and the wider community. Discrimination has no place in our establishment, and we take full responsibility for the behavior of our staff.

@CrazyPizzaCol

Appendix D: Control treatment

At Crazy Pizza Restaurant, we are excited to announce a new addition to our menu that we believe will delight our customers. Our mouthwatering 'Mediterranean Delight' pizza features a perfect blend of flavors inspired by the vibrant Mediterranean cuisine. This delectable creation includes fresh ingredients like sun-dried tomatoes, feta cheese, and Kalamata olives, all nestled on a thin and crispy crust. We invite you to come and savor the taste of this exquisite new pizza that is sure to leave you wanting more. Our team is dedicated to delivering exceptional culinary experiences, and we appreciate your continued support as we strive to bring you the best in gourmet pizza. Join us soon and experience the magic of Crazy Pizza Restaurant!"

@CrazyPizzaCol

Appendix E: Instrument

Thank you for participating in this study!

We value your opinions and insights about the challenges company's face in responding to current social issues. Your thoughts are instrumental in helping us gain a deeper understanding of the role company's play in society. Your honest and thoughtful responses are highly appreciated, and we thank you in advance for taking the time to share your perspective. Your input will make a meaningful contribution to this research.

The questionnaire will take less than 10 minutes to complete. All responses are anonymous. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

_____

Informed Consent Statement: You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document. Study Staff: This study is being led by Valentina Ahumada who is a Graduate student at/in University of South Florida. This person is called the Principal Investigator. She is being guided in this research by Kelly Werder. Other approved research staff may act on behalf of the Principal Investigator. Study Details: This study is being conducted at University of South Florida. The purpose of the study is to investigate the effect of crisis communication responses on consumers' emotions, perceptual beliefs and intended behavior and subsequent behaviors. Participants: You are being asked to take part in this study to contribute valuable insights and data to the research on crisis communication and its impact on consumers' emotions and behaviors. Your participation is essential to understand how individuals respond to crisis scenarios involving discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community and how crisis communication strategies employed by companies can influence consumer emotions and actions. Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: We do not know if you will receive any benefit from your participation. There is no cost to participate. You will not be compensated for your participation. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks you face in daily life. Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential. Privacy and Confidentiality It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet. However, your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet. If you complete and submit an anonymous survey and later request your data, be withdrawn, this may or may not be possible as the researcher may be unable to extract anonymous data from the database. Contact Information If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, call Valentina Ahumada at (813) 5855018. If you have questions about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact the IRB by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu. We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are. You can print a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____

I understand that by proceeding with this questionnaire, I am agreeing to take part in research, and I am 18 years of age or older. By clicking the **CONTINUE** button below, I freely give my consent to take part in this study.

CONTINUE >

Recently, an international restaurant called **Crazy Italian Pizza** was criticized for its response to a same-sex couple who visited the restaurant and engaged in a kiss. The restaurant employees responded by asking the couple to leave, saying there was discomfort expressed by other customers due to their display of affection. The incident resulted in criticism of the restaurant by the couple and members of the community.

On the following page, you will see the **response message** that Crazy Italian Pizza issued after the incident. Please read the response carefully before proceeding with the study. After reading the message, you will be asked to respond to a series of statements about your feelings about the restaurant's response message. There are no right or wrong answers, so please respond as honestly as possible.

Thank you for participating in this study!

< | CONTINUE >

* This section asks about your perceptions of the restaurant's statement. Please indicate your response to the following statements by clicking the appropriate button on the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
In the message I read, Crazy Italian Pizza is denying its responsibility in the incident.	○	○	○	○	○
The message I read had nothing to do with the incident.	○	○	○	○	○
In the message I read, Crazy Italian Pizza is accepting responsibility for its role in the incident.	○	○	○	○	○
In the message I read, Crazy Italian Pizza does not respond to the incident at all.	○	○	○	○	○
Crazy Italian Pizza is denying any wrong-doing in this response.	○	○	○	○	○
Crazy Italian Pizza is apologizing in this response.	○	○	○	○	○
Crazy Italian Pizza is diminishing its role in the incident in this response.	○	○	○	○	○
In the message I read, Crazy Italian Pizza is blaming someone else for the incident.	○	○	○	○	○

‹   CONTINUE ›

* The next set of statements ask how you feel about the message from Crazy Italian Pizza that you read. Please indicate your response to the following statements by clicking the appropriate button on the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I appreciate the restaurant's response to the incident.	○	○	○	○	○
The restaurant's statement is infuriating.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel angry about the way Crazy Italian Pizza responded.	○	○	○	○	○
This response makes me furious.	○	○	○	○	○
Crazy Italian Pizza's response disgusts me.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel sad about the way Crazy Italian Pizza managed this situation.	○	○	○	○	○
I am happy with the way the restaurant's responded.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel nauseated by the way Crazy Italian Pizza responded to this incident.	○	○	○	○	○
The restaurant's response is offensive.	○	○	○	○	○
I am glad the restaurant responded this way.	○	○	○	○	○
The restaurant's response is emotionally distressing.	○	○	○	○	○
This response makes me unhappy.	○	○	○	○	○

< CONTINUE >

*Please indicate your response to the following statements by clicking the appropriate button on the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I trust that Crazy Italian Pizza is telling the truth about the incident.	○	○	○	○	○
Crazy Italian Pizza's response about the incident is attempting to mislead costumers.	○	○	○	○	○
Crazy Italian Pizza's response honestly represents the incident.	○	○	○	○	○
I believe what Crazy Italian Pizza said.	○	○	○	○	○

*Please indicate your response to the following statements by clicking the appropriate button on the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I believe Crazy Italian Pizza engages in ethical business practices.	○	○	○	○	○
I believe Crazy Italian Pizza is a socially responsible organization.	○	○	○	○	○
I believe that my community would be negatively impacted if Crazy Italian Pizza opened there.	○	○	○	○	○

* My attitude toward Crazy Italian Pizza is:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Negative	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Positive
Bad	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Good
Unfavorable	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Favorable

* Please indicate your response to the following statements by clicking the appropriate button on the scale provided.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I would eat at Crazy Italian Pizza if it opened in my neighborhood.	○	○	○	○	○
I will not buy products from Crazy Italian Pizza restaurant in the future.	○	○	○	○	○

‹   CONTINUE >

Listed below are a few demographic questions about you that will help us to understand your answers. Please write or select the appropriate response.

*What is your age? (please enter a whole number in years) Ex. 24

[   ]

*What is your gender?

◯ Male

◯ Female

◯ Other

◯ Prefer not to say

*What is your ethnicity?

◯ Hispanic

◯ African American

◯ Caucasian

◯ Pacific Islander

◯ Asian

◯ American Indian

◯ Other

*My political ideology is

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Conservative	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Liberal

‹   CONTINUE ›