

## How Spokesperson Rank and Selected Media Channels Impact Perceptions in Crisis Communication

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of spokesperson's rank and selected media channels in crisis communication by employing different ranks (i.e., CEO and communication director spokespersons) and media channels (blogs, websites, and newspapers). Findings indicated that CEO spokespersons were more effective in terms of lowering publics' crisis responsibility attributions than communication director spokespersons and that blogs were more effective in lowering crisis responsibility attributions than websites and newspapers.

**Keywords:** spokesperson, media channel impact, crisis communication, credibility, social media, blogs

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of new media has led to organizations placing increased emphasis on responding to crises through online outlets (Kim & Liu, 2012). Crisis management experts have suggested that organizations should build a strong online network and identify an effective online spokesperson before a crisis (Whaling, 2011). Spokespersons represent their organizations during a crisis and are responsible for delivering quick and accurate messages. Previous research has suggested that credible spokespersons contribute to successful crisis management (Barret, 2005; Coombs, 2007). That said, little research has examined whether spokespersons' positions or ranks influence how publics perceive the credibility of the spokespersons and, in turn, how this impacts the effectiveness of crisis communication. In other words, when comparing spokespersons, can crisis communication undertaken by chief executives (CEOs) generate more desirable outcomes, due to their leadership position and high rank, than other employees? The impact of spokespersons with different ranks or positions (e.g., CEO vs. communication director) representing crisis responses via online outlets has not been empirically tested.

In addition, despite increased interest in the opportunities associated with using the Internet and social media during a crisis (e.g., Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011), little is known about the effects of selected media channels in relation to spokespersons who deliver messages during a crisis. For instance, Schultz et al. (2011) found that social

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media (e.g., blogs and Twitter) could be more effective in generating a favorable reputation during crises than traditional media (e.g., newspapers). Based on the findings, they argued “the medium matters more than the message” (p. 25). However, what about messages that are delivered by different spokespersons? Would the impact of the selected medial channel remain the same when crisis messages are delivered by spokespersons with different ranks? Previous research seems to have placed much focus on testing the effectiveness of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002) while neglecting other contingent cues such as selected media channels and spokespersons, both of which can affect public reactions to crisis communication. Thus, this study aims to fill these gaps by investigating possible differences in publics’ responses depending on the medium being used and a spokesperson’s rank when communicating the same crisis response strategies.

The purpose of the study is fourfold. First, this study examines whether the rank of a spokesperson influences public perceptions of crisis response strategies. Second, by comparing official organization websites and newspapers with blogs, as a medium in crisis communication, this study explores how the channel used for crisis communication might impact the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. Third, this study examines possible interaction between the effects of spokesperson and media channel in crisis communication – specifically, investigating if the effectiveness of a spokesperson’s rank in online crisis communication is channel-specific (i.e., traditional vs. social media) or if it is the same, regardless of media channel. In addition, this study investigates how the level of perceived source credibility differs depending on a spokesperson’s rank and its impact on crisis communication.

Our findings add to a growing body of literature related to media channel effects and the role of spokespersons in crisis communication (e.g., Barret, 2005; Coombs, 2007; Schultz et al., 2011; Stephens & Malone, 2009). By providing empirical evidence of message impact, these findings are valuable for academics and crisis managers as they attempt to select effective online organizational spokespersons and crisis communication channels.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Organizational Spokesperson in Crisis Communication

Communication literature has suggested that the credibility of a communicator has a significant impact on the persuasiveness of communication (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). The more credible the communicator, the more likely his or her messages will be perceived as convincing by audiences. Source credibility research suggests that spokespersons who are perceived as credible, trustworthy, and a subject-matter expert have increased effectiveness in communication.

During a crisis, a spokesperson functions as the voice of the organization, and his or her responsibility is to present accurate and consistent messages and information (Coombs, 2007). Credible spokespersons increase the effectiveness of crisis

communication (Barret, 2005; Coombs, 2007; Turner, 1999). To avoid confusion, spokespersons should deliver messages with one voice throughout the crisis (Barret, 2005; Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Kaufman, Kesner, & Hazen, 1994; Turner, 1999). Spokespersons must be able to handle media inquiries and be knowledgeable about the crisis and the organization (Barret, 2005; Coombs, 2007). Crisis response messages from spokespersons who are seen as credible, trustworthy experts can enhance the believability of crisis response messages (Coombs, 2007) and influence positive post-crisis communication outcomes (Heath, 1997; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010).

Traditionally, organizations have used a variety of spokespersons, ranging from public relations staff and human resources staff to CEOs. While each of these have their benefits and drawbacks, those focusing on the use of CEOs in this role have argued that, even when well trained, CEOs should probably be avoided and may be unreliable as spokespersons because their ability to interact with media could be questionable (Jordan-Meier, 2011). However, in crisis situations with a high level of severity, CEOs often become spokespersons and are credited with increasing perceived levels of authority, morality, and credibility (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001). Even though some experts question the CEO's communication skills and ability to handle media scrutiny (Jordan-Meier, 2011), publics tend to perceive CEOs as credible spokespersons. For instance, Edelman Trust Barometer (2011) reported that CEOs are ranked in the highest credibility category with regard to spokesperson credibility, revealing a significant shift from two years earlier when CEOs were in a lower tier. CEO spokespersons are thought to bring "authority and credibility in highly equivocal situations," but they can also "establish the moral tone for the crisis response" (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001, p. 369).

Similarly, organizational blog authors can play a significant role in public relations communication. Organizational bloggers are people who blog in an official or semi-official capacity at a company or are clearly affiliated with the company where they work (Sifry, 2004). Due to bloggers' clear affiliation with a company, the authorship of blogs is important. Blogger credibility can be explained by applying source credibility because a blogger is "ultimately the source of a message in a blog" (Yang & Lim, 2009, p. 346). Yang and Lim (2009) found that blogger credibility is positively related to relational trust.

Bloggers range from low-level employees to high-ranking executives, depending on the purpose of the blog (Lee, Hwang, & Lee, 2006). After the success of several noted CEO bloggers (e.g., Jonathan Schwartz, CEO of Sun Microsystems, "Jonathan's Blog"; Bill Marriott, CEO of Marriott International, "On the Move"; Robert Lutz, GM vice chairman, "Fast Lane"; David Neeleman, chairman of JetBlue Airways, "Flight Log"; and Richard Edelman, CEO of Edelman), more and more organizational leaders have turned to blogging. Nonetheless, the effects of CEO spokespersons on crisis communication outcomes in online settings still remain unknown.

Blogs must be updated frequently. As a result, some have argued that CEOs should not operate organizational blogs because they are too busy to post on a regular basis (Hanson, 2006; Taylor, 2006). A CEO's engagement in blogging can also result in

skepticism about the CEO's communication and writing skills, as blogs require an informal tone (Wylde, 2008). However, many have argued that the personal and dialogic nature of blogs help give readers a sense of closeness to authors (Demopoulos, 2009a). When CEOs blog, readers begin to see them as real people who are not very different from themselves (Demopoulos, 2009a; Wylde, 2008).

Although previous literature has not established an agreement with regard to the effectiveness of CEO spokespersons, recent studies have claimed that the advantages of CEOs as spokespersons outweigh their potential negative consequences (e.g., Demopoulos, 2009b; Henderson, 2009). Since publics tend to assume the voice of a CEO stands for his or her organization, a CEO's authority and credibility can play a positive role in communicating with publics (e.g., Lucero, Kwang & Pang, 2009; Marken, 2008; Ulmer et al., 2007).

Therefore, based on the aforementioned discussion, the following hypotheses are raised:

- **H1a:** A CEO spokesperson will be perceived as more credible than an employee spokesperson.
- **H1b:** Perceived spokesperson credibility will have a positive impact on public responses in a crisis.
- **H2a:** Publics will attribute a lower level of crisis responsibility to the organization when crisis responses are conveyed by a CEO spokesperson than by an employee spokesperson.
- **H2b:** Publics will evaluate the organization more positively when crisis responses are conveyed by a CEO spokesperson than by an employee spokesperson.

### **Media Channels in Crisis Communication**

Crisis communication scholars have displayed growing interest in organizations' use of online channels and new media during crises that includes websites, blogs, microblogs, and other social media channels (González-Herreo & Smith, 2008; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Stephen & Malone, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005). Since organizational crises result in high levels of uncertainty and stress (Seeger et al., 2003), those affected need crisis information and emotional support from the responsible organization (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Failure to provide stakeholders with accurate crisis responses and expressions of sympathy can further aggravate crisis situations which can, in turn, threaten an organization's bottom line and reputation (Coombs, 2007; Sturge, 1994).

Traditionally, organizations used press releases, fact sheets, and press conferences as tools for distributing crisis responses and information (Taylor & Kent, 2007). However, the rapidly changing online environment has led to organizations incorporating more new media outlets as opposed to traditional ones. Taylor and Perry (2005) found that 54% of organizations used the Internet, in concert with traditional media strategies, when responding to crises. Eighty percent of organizations responded to crises within the first 24 hours of media coverage by posting a press release or fact sheet on their website (Kim & Liu, 2012; Taylor & Kent, 2007). Social media, such as blogs and

Twitter, can be also considered an ideal tool for building relationships with publics during crises (Bates & Calison, 2008) because social media are more effective in receiving immediate feedback and providing interaction with publics.

Research examining crisis communication blogs has suggested positive potential outcomes of organizational blogs during crises with regard to nurturing organization-public relationships (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Blogs allow an organization to deliver crisis information in an immediate, direct, and cost-efficient manner (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). These characteristics contribute to reducing the uncertainty that stakeholders often experience during a crisis (Stephens & Malone, 2009; Veil et al., 2011). Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) suggested that those exposed to organizational blogs perceived a crisis as less serious than those not exposed to blogs.

The ability of blogs to create dialogic two-way communication makes it ideal for organizations to maintain good relationships with their publics during and in the middle of a crisis (Hanson, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Yang et al. (2011) found that crisis responses written in a narrative, personal style led to more positive behavioral outcomes than responses written in formal styles. Research identifying best practices in crisis communication has also suggested that ongoing efforts to maintain good relationships during a crisis are a key factor in successful crisis management (Seeger, 2006). Due to the open, dialogic nature of blogs, they can be useful when building relationships with publics during a crisis (Hanson, 2006; Kim & Liu, 2012; Schultz et al., 2011; Stephens & Malone, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). In addition, the speed with which information can be shared among users in the blogosphere is conducive not only for quickly distributing crisis responses and information but also for promoting active participation from audiences (Scoble & Israel, 2006; Yang et al., 2010).

When examining public expectations during a crisis, Stephens and Malone (2009) examined the types of social support messages that stakeholders want to receive through different media. They found that stakeholders' need for social support varies between traditional and social media. Stakeholders reported that what they wanted most from an organization during a crisis was emotional support. They suggested that blogs were more likely than official websites to provide emotional support to stakeholders and concluded that the dialogic conversations shared among people in blogs seemed to help meet their emotional and informational needs during crisis situations. In addition, Schultz et al. (2011) investigated the impact of crisis communication conveyed via social media versus traditional media on recipients' willingness to interact with the organization's crisis communication (e.g., forwarding messages, telling friends about the crisis, placing comments), their purchase intentions, negative word-of-mouth intentions, and willingness to boycott the organization. They found that, in times of crisis, social media were more effective in generating positive organizational reputation than traditional media.

In addition, social presence theory can be useful in terms of testing the effectiveness of media channels in crisis communication (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence indicates the degree of awareness that a person has toward other people.

Social presence theory has suggested that social presence varies among different media, affecting the nature of human interactions and attitudes. In other words, communication can be more effective if the medium has an appropriate level of social presence to facilitate interpersonal involvement (Kehrwald, 2008). Interpersonal conversations between two communicators (e.g., face-to-face conversations) can generate higher social presence than mediated communications (e.g., telephone). Synchronous communication (e.g., real-time, online chat) can generate higher social presence than asynchronous communication (e.g., emails). In addition, when people are able to exchange visual and nonverbal cues in communication, they tend to have higher social presence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Higher social presence tends to result in greater human interactions and more positive attitudes (Rice, 1993). Since different media allow different levels of usage for people to feel socially present, people tend to feel different levels of social presence across different media. Considering that social media allow people to access to synchronous communication, immediate feedback, and visual and non-verbal cues, crisis communication message conveyed by social media might be more effective in terms of generating increasingly positive response.

In addition, since publics might have different expectations for different media channels as they seek to meet their informational and emotional needs during a crisis (Stephens & Malone, 2009; Schultz et al., 2011), there might be differences in terms of how publics respond to the same crisis messages depending on the selected media channels.

Based on the discussions above, the following research question and hypotheses are proposed.

- **H3a:** Blogs will be more effective as a crisis communication channel in lowering publics' attributions of crisis responsibility than either official websites or newspapers.
- **H3b:** Blogs will be more effective as a crisis communication channel in generating positive public responses than either official websites or newspapers.
- **RQ1:** Is the impact of a spokesperson's rank (CEO vs. employee) within an organization different depending on the crisis communication channel (blogs vs. websites vs. newspapers) used?

## METHOD

### Design

To examine the impact of both a spokesperson's rank and selected media channel in crisis communication, this study employed a between-subject experimental design. A 2 × 3 between-subjects experimental design was used: 2 spokesperson rank (CEO vs. communication director) × 3 media channels (blog vs. website vs. newspaper). In addition, a control group (no exposure to any crisis communication) was included to see the difference between those not exposed to crisis communication and those who were exposed. Thus, a total of seven conditions were employed in this study.

## Participants

A total of 171 students in undergraduate communication courses at a large Southern university in the United States completed the study. The average age of participants was 20.1 years. Participants were 68.4% female ( $n=117$ ) and 31.6% male ( $n=54$ ). On average, about 24 students ( $M=24.43$ ) were exposed to one of the conditions.

## Procedure and Stimuli

A fictitious company, Berti & Spatola Foods, was used to prevent pre-established judgments that might exist with real organizations. The company was described as a frozen food company that produces pizza and lasagna. A recent survey reported that adults between 18 and 24 years of age are more likely to consume convenience foods than any other age group (Packaged Facts, 2010). In addition, college students are reported to rely heavily on convenience-type foods due to limited time and money (Brown et al., 2011). Since college students match the demographics of those who consume convenience foods, it was appropriate that this experiment used a frozen food company and college student sample.

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were provided with a short news article about the fictitious company's crisis (see Appendix 1A for the crisis news article). An E. coli contamination caused by the company's unsanitary production system was used. The crisis news article included a brief explanation about the cause of the crisis (the company's unsanitary production system) and the number of victims (46 people were poisoned). After reading the crisis news article, participants, with the exception of the control group, were randomly assigned to one of the seven conditions and provided with the company's crisis response messages. Media channel conditions were created, simulating real blogs, websites, and newspapers (see Appendix 2 for examples). CEO and communication director were used for spokesperson's rank. The picture of the spokespersons was consistent across the conditions.

The company's crisis response messages were presented in the form of a statement from the company's spokesperson. The messages were consistent across media channels, except for the spokesperson's rank (CEO vs. communication director). The company's crisis responses included instructing information (i.e., telling customers about the danger of the company's products), adjusting information (i.e., showing sympathy for those affected by the crisis and providing corrective action to prevent a similar crisis from happening), and compensation strategy (i.e., the company will provide full compensation for the victims and their families) (See Appendix 1B for the company's crisis messages). Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their attributions of the company's crisis responsibility, evaluations of the company, and perception of the spokesperson's credibility.

## Measures

To measure the attribution of crisis responsibility variable, four items were adapted from previous research (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Kim & Sung, 2014):

- 1) the company is highly responsible for the crisis,
- 2) the company should be accountable,

- 3) the crisis is the fault of the company, and
- 4) I blame the company for the crisis.

For the company evaluation variable, five items were adopted from previous studies (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2011):

- 1) reliability
- 2) trustworthiness
- 3) attractiveness
- 4) likeability, and
- 5) overall impression.

In measuring the perceived level of spokesperson credibility, five items were adopted from previous research (Yang et al., 2010):

I think the spokesperson

- 1) is trustworthy
- 2) has expertise
- 3) is reliable
- 4) is professional, and
- 5) is experienced.

A 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used to measure all items.

To assess whether participants correctly recognized the spokesperson’s rank and communication channel variables, two questions were included for manipulation checks: 1) who was the spokesperson (CEO vs. communication director) and 2) where were the crisis responses placed (blog, website, or newspaper)? Survey responses of participants who gave the wrong answers were not used for data analysis ( $n=25$ ). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was used to assess the reliability and internal consistency of each scale. Alpha coefficients were .98 for crisis responsibility attribution, .96 for company evaluation, and .90 for spokesperson credibility.

## RESULTS

**H1a** posited that CEO spokespersons would be perceived as having more credibility than employee spokespersons. Results suggested that there was no significant mean difference with regard to perceived credibility between the employee ( $M=4.77$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ) and CEO ( $M=4.76$ ,  $SD=0.99$ ) spokespersons. Thus, H1a was not supported.

**H1b** proposed that perceived spokesperson credibility would have a positive impact on public responses during a crisis. Regression analysis revealed that perceived spokesperson credibility did not have an impact in the crisis responsibility attribution level ( $\beta=.046$ ,  $t(143) = .550$ ,  $p > .001$ ) but did have a positive impact on public evaluations of the company ( $\beta=.490$ ,  $t(143) = 6.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, higher levels of perceived spokesperson credibility generated more positive evaluations of the



company. Spokesperson credibility explained 24% of the total variance in company evaluation ( $R^2=.240$ ,  $F(1,144) = 45.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, H1b was supported for public evaluations of the company but was not supported for public attributions of crisis responsibility.

**H2a** posited that publics would attribute a lower level of crisis responsibility to the company when crisis responses were conveyed by a CEO spokesperson as opposed to an employee spokesperson. ANOVA analysis results indicated that the difference between the CEO and employee spokespersons with regard to the level of crisis responsibility attribution was marginally significant ( $F(1,145) = 3.82$ ,  $p = .052$ ) (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). When examining the attributions of crisis responsibility by each condition, those who were exposed to the CEO spokesperson blog condition ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ) revealed significantly lower levels of blame than those in the CEO spokesperson website ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) and newspaper ( $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) conditions.

**H2b** predicted that publics would evaluate the organization more positively when crisis responses were conveyed by a CEO spokesperson as opposed to an employee spokesperson. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the CEO and employee spokespersons on company evaluation. Thus, H2b was not supported. Although the difference was not statistically significant, participants in the CEO spokesperson conditions did reveal higher mean scores of company evaluation measures than those in the employee spokesperson conditions (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Effects of Spokesperson's Rank**

|                       | Spokesperson Rank      | N  | M    | SD   | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----|------|------|----------|----------|
| Crisis Responsibility | CEO                    | 74 | 5.79 | 1.41 | -1.96    | .052     |
|                       | Communication Director | 72 | 6.20 | 1.04 |          |          |
| Company Evaluation    | CEO                    | 74 | 3.20 | 1.17 | 1.33     | .185     |
|                       | Communication Director | 72 | 2.91 | 1.22 |          |          |

**H3a & b** posited that blogs would be more effective in lowering crisis responsibility attributions and generating positive public responses than official websites or newspapers. The results revealed that participants in the blog conditions exhibited lower levels of crisis responsibility attributions to the company than participants in the website conditions or the newspaper conditions (see Table 2). The difference was statistically meaningful ( $F(2,143) = 4.18$ ,  $p = .017$ ). In addition, post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD indicated that the mean scores of attribution of crisis responsibility for the blog conditions were significantly lower than those of the website conditions ( $p = .023$ ) and the newspaper conditions ( $p = .046$ ). However, there were no significant differences between the website and newspaper conditions ( $p = .963$ ) (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). Thus, H3a was supported. In addition, there was no difference across the three media channels in the company evaluation levels. Therefore H3b was not

supported. Tukey HSD also revealed no significant impact of media channels on company evaluation (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Effects of Crisis Communication Channel**

|                       | Media channel | N  | M    | SD    | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------|----|------|-------|----------|----------|
| Crisis Responsibility | Blog          | 46 | 5.56 | 1.522 | 4.176*   | .017     |
|                       | Website       | 50 | 6.23 | 1.163 |          |          |
|                       | Newspaper     | 50 | 6.61 | .981  |          |          |
| Company Evaluation    | Blog          | 46 | 3.12 | 1.237 | 1.952    | .146     |
|                       | Website       | 50 | 2.78 | 1.185 |          |          |
|                       | Newspaper     | 50 | 3.24 | 1.166 |          |          |

\*  $p < .05$

**RQ1** asked if the impact of a spokesperson's rank within an organization was different depending on the crisis communication channel used. There were no interaction effects between spokesperson rank and crisis communication channel. In other words, the impact of a spokesperson's rank was not different by crisis communication channel with regard to the level of crisis responsibility attributions ( $F(2,143) = .15, p > .05$ ) or company evaluation level ( $F(2,143) = .53, p > .05$ ). Lastly, when comparing the tested groups with the control group, there were significant differences in the crisis responsibility attribution levels ( $p < .001$ ) and the company evaluation levels ( $p < .001$ ) suggesting that those who were exposed to corporate crisis messages delivered by spokespersons via the three media channels tended to reveal more positive responses than those who were not exposed to any message conditions.

## DISCUSSION

This study's findings yield valuable insights related to how the rank of spokespersons and selected media channels affect crisis communication in terms of perceived credibility, public attributions of crisis responsibility, and company evaluation. Theoretical and managerial implications are derived regarding the use of media and spokespersons in crisis management.

### Spokesperson's Rank in Crisis Communication

Results suggested that the impact of spokesperson's rank was significant only with regard to lowering publics' attributions of crisis responsibility but not significant regarding perceived credibility and public evaluation of the company. More specifically, when it comes to lowering crisis responsibility attributions, this study confirmed that CEO spokespersons and the messages they transmitted were more effective than lower-rank employee spokespersons. However, CEO spokespersons were not perceived as having higher credibility or being more effective in generating positive company evaluations among publics, when compared to lower-rank employee spokespersons. These findings are not consistent with previous research on CEOs' source credibility in crisis communication (e.g., Seeger & Ulmer, 2001).

These particular findings might indicate that the reason CEO spokespersons are more effective in lowering public attributions of a company's crisis responsibility is related to CEOs' authority within the organizations rather than perceived credibility. Publics perceived no differences in credibility between CEO and communication director spokespersons. However, due to the high authority that CEOs have in their organizations, CEO spokespersons may enhance the believability of the crisis messages they deliver, leading publics to believe the company will adequately handle the crisis situation. When publics are more likely to believe the company's crisis messages, especially with regard to what the company will do for crisis recovery, they might attribute lower blame or crisis responsibility to the company. This might be one possible explanation.

In addition, the CEO spokespersons' effectiveness was not extended to how publics evaluate the company. In other words, a CEO's higher authority within the organization might have a positive impact on publics' attribution of crisis responsibility but not on how publics evaluate the company. A possible explanation for this is that lowering the level of crisis responsibility attributions does not necessarily immediately generate positive company evaluations (Kim & Sung, 2014). Lowering crisis responsibility attributions is deemed a short-term goal, while generating positive evaluations tends to be a long-term goal. This means that a single message delivered by a CEO spokesperson may not make a significant difference in generating positive corporate reputation. In terms of the impact of perceived credibility, this study found that when a public's perception of spokesperson credibility increased, so did the public's positive evaluation of the company. This suggests that selecting a credible spokesperson is important, regardless of a spokesperson's rank.

### **Media Channels in Crisis Communication**

Our results indicated that the medium itself has an impact on crisis communication outcomes. This was primarily found with regard to crisis responsibility attribution level. Blogs produced lower levels of crisis responsibility attributions than newspapers or websites. This suggests that an organizational blog can be an effective medium for crisis communication given that lowering crisis responsibility attributions can help reduce crisis related damage (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This may be a result of the personal and interactive nature of blogs (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Social presence theory also supports this finding. Since publics perceive higher social presence with blog-mediated communication than newspapers or websites-mediated communication, they tend to attribute lower levels of blame to the company. Due to the "personal feel" publics can experience with blog-mediated communication, they may see crisis communication messages as coming from a source that is similar to them and not an isolated company mouthpiece. In addition, traditional media may be seen as further removed from the original source since it often goes through gatekeepers. Blogs allow publics to feel as if they are getting the information directly from the source. Regardless, it seems that the perceived nature and characteristics of blogs resulted in lower levels of crisis responsibility attributions.

Official websites were found to be the least effective medium for crisis communication. This is interesting since blogging, which is also an online channel, was found to be most effective. The differences might be attributed to blogs very clearly identifying individual authorship. On the other hand, the authorship of information on company websites is often unclear, and the ownership of the websites belongs to the company, not an individual. This may be compounded by the fact that websites are characterized as formal, static, and one-directional, and they are not as interactive (Cohn, 2010; Scoble & Israel, 2006). In addition, publics might think that using websites as a channel for crisis communication does not require much effort from the organization. Thus, the crisis responses issued via websites might be seen as a somewhat formal and perfunctory procedure. Similarly, participants might evaluate the company's efforts to publish crisis responses in newspapers more positively than merely posting them on websites. The interaction effects between media channels and spokesperson's rank were not found in the crisis responsibility attribution levels or the company evaluation levels. In other words, the impact of a spokesperson's rank did not differ depending on media channels.

Lastly, an inconsistency was observed again in the effects of crisis communication channels between crisis responsibility attributions and company evaluations. This was similar to what was found with regard to the impact of spokesperson's rank. The effects of media channel were only observed in crisis responsibility attribution levels, not in publics' company evaluation (corporate reputation). This also indicates that a single crisis communication message delivered via a blog medium does not make a significant difference in generating positive company evaluation. Thus, it could be argued that factors such as relationship history, performance history, and prior corporate reputation would be stronger predictors, when it comes to public evaluations of a corporate reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Klein & Dawar, 2004), than who delivered the message and the channel they used (i.e., spokesperson's rank and selected media channels).

## IMPLICATIONS

Crisis communication research has increasingly taken an experimental approach when examining public perceptions of crisis situations and the effectiveness of crisis response strategies (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2006, 2009). However, there has been little diversity in existing experimental studies with regard to testing various factors such as media channels and spokesperson used for crisis response messages. Coombs and Holladay (2009) point out that scholars' exclusive reliance on print media stimuli have resulted in a lack of understanding of media channel effects on crisis communication. Not much attention has been given to the importance of different media channels in crisis communication. Given the popularity of using blogs as a crisis communication channel among organizations, it would be useful to test the effects of various media channels during a crisis. By uncovering the main effects of media channel and the relative effectiveness of using blogs for crisis communication in comparison to traditional media channels, this study contributes to filling existing research gaps.

Another shortcoming of crisis communication research is the understanding of spokesperson effects. Although an extensive body of advertising research has tested spokesperson credibility and sought to identify effective spokespersons or endorsers, those in public relations have paid minimal attention to these areas. In addition, while there has been substantial source credibility research regarding the impact of sex, race, and physical attractiveness of communicators (Petroshius & Crocker, 1989; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993), little research has directly examined whether a spokesperson's rank or job title has an effect on public perceptions during a crisis. The effectiveness of using CEOs as spokespersons in times of crisis has yet to be tested in comparison to other organizational members. Thus, this work illustrates that the job titles of spokespersons influence public responses to crisis communication. Specifically, this study should help to dispel any doubts concerning the effectiveness of CEOs in presenting crisis communication.

Thus, when selecting a spokesperson, this study suggests that CEOs directly and actively participate in crisis communication. Their leadership positions lend authority and morality to messages (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001). In turn, this provides publics with better impressions of the organization's commitment to crisis recovery, at least in the short term. With regard to long-term effects, CEOs should pay more attention to increasing their credibility. Given this study's findings that perceived spokesperson credibility has a positive impact on company evaluations, it is now increasingly important that CEOs enhance their credibility. As to the effectiveness of blogs, CEO presentation of crisis response messages via blogs could be more positively received by publics during a crisis. Thus, this study urges CEOs to have established online communication channels before a crisis happens. As a result, these previously established channels can be effectively used during a crisis situation.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although this study provides meaningful implications, it is also limited by several factors. First, the study only tested spokesperson's source credibility, not medium credibility. Medium credibility can be perceived differently than source credibility. Future research should explore whether the perceived medium credibility levels vary across different media channels in crisis and how perceived medium credibility affects crisis communication outcomes. In addition, this study compared only three media channels. Considering organizations use a variety of media channels, further investigations to compare other possible crisis communication channels are encouraged. Finally, although the study attempted to simulate real blogs, websites, and newspapers, those channels were presented as screenshots without activating any hyperlinks or allowing participants to place comments. Employing real blogs or websites would be much more realistic and would help participants better experience the true nature of each medium.

Taken as a whole, this study's findings provide several compelling considerations for scholars and practitioners in crisis communication. As they navigate this growing online environment to identify better prescriptions of crisis communications, these findings suggest that CEOs as active spokespersons and blogs as a crisis media channel should be considered for effective crisis communication.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1A: Crisis News Article

Officials: Unsanitary conditions at Jacksonville Berti & Spatola manufacturer caused E. coli infection

U.S. Food and Drug Administration says that they have evidence that the recent *Berti & Spatola Pizza* incident is attributed to the company's unsanitary conditions and widespread contamination throughout its subsidiary factory in Jacksonville. On January 9, the FDA found serious sanitary violations including rodent infestation and fluctuating temperatures in food storage facilities. Officials say that ingredients contaminated with rodent droppings resulted in the E. coli food poisoning.

After people in the Alachua County and Jacksonville areas were hospitalized with the E. coli infection, *Berti & Spatola Foods* immediately recalled its ready-to-eat pizza products by removing them from store shelves throughout Florida. According to the FDA, the infections were caused by E. coli O157: H7, the same bacteria found in the pizza.

The 46 victims, mostly residents of Gainesville, Ocala, and Jacksonville, became poisoned after consuming *Berti & Spatola Pizza*. Those products were manufactured by the subsidiary factory in Jacksonville and distributed to supermarkets in Florida, Alabama, and Georgia.

### Appendix 1B: Crisis Response Messages

This is a message from me, Ethan Berti, the CEO (or Communication Director) of *Berti & Spatola Foods*.

The past few days have been humbling for all of us at *Berti & Spatola Foods*. This experience will be remembered as our toughest time ever. Since *Berti & Spatola Foods* was founded in 1985, it has been our utmost pleasure to provide high quality, healthy, and delicious foods that our customers love. I am devastated by the news that our customers were hospitalized because of our products. I recognize that we must do better in listening and responding to our customers' concerns. As always, we are doing our best to protect our customers' health and safety.

As the CEO (or Communication Director) of *Berti & Spatola Foods*, I am deeply concerned for those who have been affected by the outbreak. In order to help make it right with consumers, we have issued an immediate recall of all Berti & Spatola Pizza products from store shelves due to an E. coli contamination caused by unsanitary conditions of our Jacksonville facility. We advise consumers to dispose of any of our pizza products they may have in their possession until the investigation is complete. *Berti & Spatola Foods* will provide full compensation for the victims and their families.

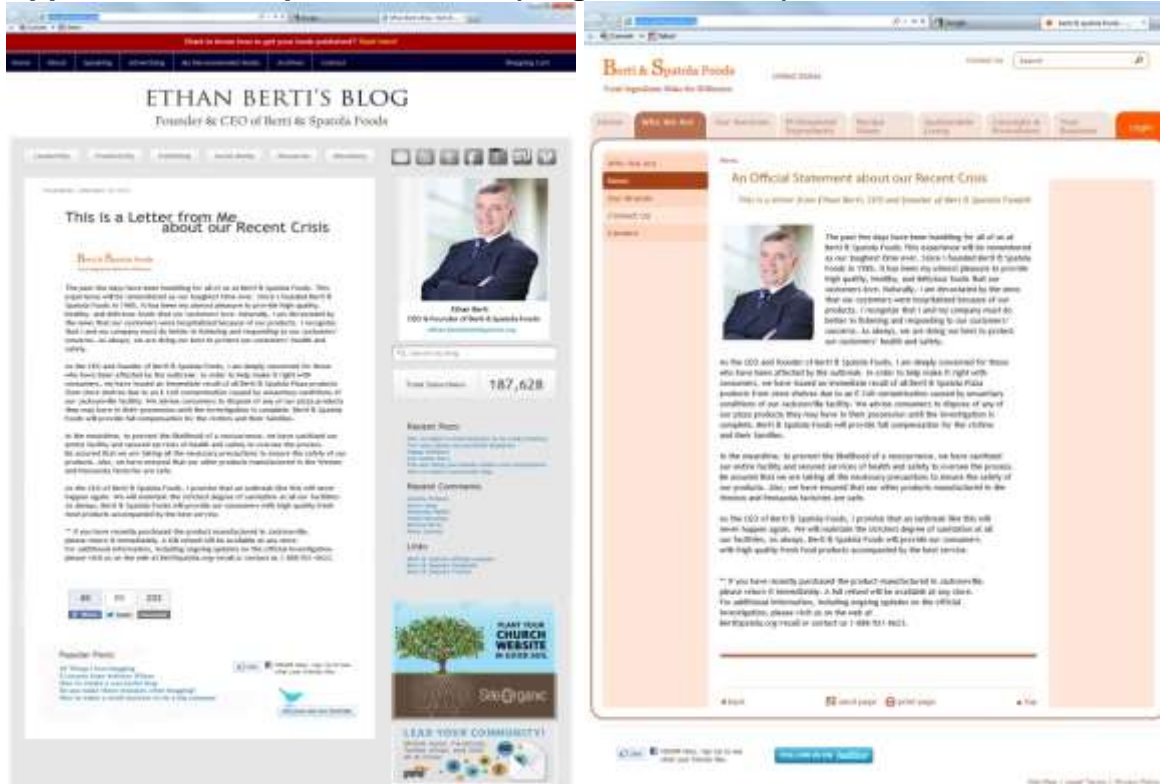
In the meantime, to prevent the likelihood of a reoccurrence, we have sanitized our entire facility and secured services of health and safety to oversee the process. Be

assured that we are taking all the necessary precautions to ensure the safety of our products. Also, we have ensured that our other products manufactured in the Tallahassee and Pensacola factories are safe.

As the CEO (or Communication Director) of *Berti & Spatola Foods*, I promise that an outbreak like this will never happen again. We will maintain the strictest degree of sanitation at all our facilities. As always, *Berti & Spatola Foods* will provide our consumers with high quality fresh food products accompanied by the best service.

\*\* If you have recently purchased the product manufactured in Jacksonville, please return it immediately. A full refund will be available at any store. For additional information, including ongoing updates on the official investigation, please visit us on the web at [BertiSpatola.org/recall](http://BertiSpatola.org/recall) or contact us 1-888-921-0623.

**Appendix 2: Examples of Stimuli (blog and website)**



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