UNDERSTANDING PARACRISIS COMMUNICATION: TOWARDS DEVELOPING

A FRAMEWORK OF PARACRISIS TYPOLOGY AND ORGANIZATIONAL

RESPONSE STRATEGIES

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

For the past few years, both academic and trade publications have repeatedly found that "social media crises" were at the core of organization fears. This dissertation argues that one of most important reasons for such fear is the prevalent use of the term "social media crisis" to refer to both crises and risks emerging from social media, which obscures the differences between risks and crises and among various types of risks that might require different organizational responses. To address this problem, Coombs and Holladay proposed the term "paracrisis" to describe more accurately crisis risks as socially constructed in social media. They also developed conceptual work on classifying paracrisis clusters and response strategies. However, extant crisis communication research and practice has largely failed to incorporate this concept.

The first focus of this dissertation is thus to build on their work to refine and expand the framework of paracrisis clusters and response strategies with empirical data by collecting and 143 paracrisis cases occurring during January 2014 to December 2017 (Study 1). The other focus is to examine how might a paracrisis evolve on and off social media to gain more sophisticated understanding on how the publics communicatively construct a paracrisis and how a paracrisis differs from a full-blown crisis. To serve this focus, a big data case study using mainly computational methods has being conducted to analyze 210, 892 tweets, along with offline news coverage (Study 2). As such, this dissertation contributes to the severely understudied paracrisis communication research by identifying typologies on paracrisis types and response strategies and gaining initial

understanding to paracrisis communication processes as socially constructed on and off social media. The research findings also offer practical suggestions for social media practitioners to diagnose and strategically respond to paracrises.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning growth of social media has presented opportunities to organizations as they seek to capitalize on social media's strengths in low costs, wide reach, and immense engagement potential. However, social media, along with the ethos guiding communication within social media contexts, may present a double-edged sword when the use of social media is seen as conflicting with or impeding those organizational objectives. In the participatory environments created through social media, organizations are often confronted with crisis risks as any discontented stakeholders can go to social media to expose and broadcast what they perceive as a negative organizational behavior. Rather than lamenting their loss of control in social media contexts, organizations can capitalize on the technological affordances of social media and use them to their advantage. However, surveys over the past few years (e.g., ERM Initiative & Protivit, 2019; Weber Shandwick & KRC Research, 2015) all suggest that many organizations are not well prepared for managing risks in and through social media.

The fundamental reason that managing risks has been challenging for years is that many practitioners and scholars do not have clear, precise understandings of the uniqueness of crisis risks in social media. Before the prevalence of social media, a crisis risk was generally unknown to the publics and could thus be managed largely through an internal process. However, a crisis risk in social media is visible to potentially all publics and may trigger intense reactions from individual as well as organizational users.

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Therefore, some form of public responses would be necessary to mitigate a crisis risk before it escalates into a crisis. Nevertheless, a crisis risk is not a crisis, and using crisis response strategies to manage a crisis risk might not be appropriate.

Still, for almost a decade, scholars and practitioners alike have used the term "*social media crisis*" to refer to both crisis risks and full-fledged crises that spread on social media platforms (e.g., *"Speed and scope play key roles in social media crises,"* 2009; Aula, 2010; Jahng & Hong, 2017; Oelschig, 2018). The negligence to differentiate between crisis risks and actual crises prompted Coombs and Holladay (2012) to address this pressing concern. They proposed the term "*paracrisis*" to refer to "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (2012, p. 409) and identified possible response strategies to manage a particular type of paracrisis, the challenge paracrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2015b). Coombs later went on to describe additional forms of paracrises that organizations might face, including *customer service*, *misuse of social media*, and *venting* (2015a). In a more recent work, Coombs (2019) revised the paracrisis typology to include four clusters: (1) *faux pas*, (2) *rumor(s)*, (3) *challenge(s),* and (4) *collateral damage*.

Despite Coombs and Holladay's important conceptual contribution, the field of risk and crisis communication has largely overlooked the concept of paracrisis. Against such background, this dissertation seeks to further clarify the distinctions between paracrises and crises, among different forms of paracrises, describe paracrisis response strategies, and understand how these distinctions make paracrisis communication

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different from crisis communication during the post-crisis stage. Two separate yet interrelated studies were conducted to meet this research goal.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation contains five chapters focusing on the concept of paracrisis. The present chapter provides a brief introduction, rationale, and overview of the dissertation to contextualize and to demonstrate the value of this work. The second chapter reviews foundational literature in crisis communication, risk management, social media, and paracrisis to demonstrate how the concept of paracrisis adds value to existing crisis communication theories.

Chapter 3 describes Study 1. Building on nascent research on paracrisis, Study 1 adopts content analysis to build a framework of organizational paracrisis communication. Following a systematic identification of a corpus of "social media crises," a case series study is used to refine and elaborate existing typologies of paracrisis clusters and paracrisis response strategies, and to connect typologies with response strategies.

The fourth chapter describes Study 2, an investigation into the evolution of a specific paracrisis on social media. Time series analysis and social network analysis are used to describe paracrisis development and social media influencers. Finally, the fifth chapter presents overall conclusions and implications derived from the two studies of paracrisis, discusses limitations as well as future research directions, and presents implications of this work for theory-building and practice.

Focus and Rationale for Study 1

Research on organizational crisis communication has generated considerable interest among scholars as well as practitioners due to the potential negative effects of crises. Crises not only violate important stakeholder expectations but may, in some situations, endanger the physical and psychological well-being of stakeholders as well as the health of the organization in crisis. Though the magnitude of the crisis may influence the severity of negative outcomes, researchers note possible negative effects of crisis including operational damage, reputational damage, reduced purchase intention, and negative word-of-mouth (Coombs, 2019). Origins of crises vary as does perceived responsibilities for crises. Though some crises may develop through no fault of the organization (e.g., natural disasters, terrorist attacks), other crises vary in the extent to which they are attributed to an organization's actions or inactions (e.g., chemical explosions, operational disruptions, safety violations resulting in casualties, management misconduct). Thus, the level of the organization's perceived responsibility for a crisis has been used to identify different types of crises (Coombs, 2019).

Following a crisis, an organization is expected to communicate with stakeholders to ensure their safety and to provide an account for the crisis. The type of crisis as well as the content of the organization's communication - its response strategies - are assumed to influence stakeholder perceptions and willingness to support the organization as it recovers from the crisis. Because response strategies presumably influence the organization's ability to protect important intangible and tangible assets, communication strategies have been the focus of intense study and theorizing.

The exploding growth of social media has affected all aspects of communication with stakeholders, ranging from opportunities for two-way interaction with stakeholders and among stakeholders (e.g., active engagement processes and community-building) to reliance on more traditional, unidirectional communication such as marketing messages. Social media environments also have been examined as potential facilitators of crisis risks and crises as well as conduits for crisis response strategies.

Relevant to this study are the visible, online challenges to organizations that may arise due to stakeholder concerns regarding business practices. For instance, stakeholders may claim an organization's supply chain permits exploitation of children or a CEO's behavior constitutes sexism. Because these challenges differ from actual crises, the term "paracrisis" has been proposed to describe the crisis risks posed through these online challenges. A paracrisis is distinct from a crisis because it signals a possible risk; but it does not necessarily portend a crisis. Moreover, some researchers argue the concept of paracrisis may offer a panacea to overuse of the term "social media crisis" to describe nearly any negative comments or parodies posted by stakeholders in response to an organization's online or offline actions (Coombs 2017).

As is the case with crisis clusters, several paracrisis clusters have been proposed based on the nature of the online challenge (Coombs, 2017; 2018). However, researchers who have begun to incorporate the paracrisis concept often do not distinguish between paracrisis clusters (e.g., Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016; Lim, 2017; Roh, 2017) and may be prone to label any online, negative feedback as a paracrisis or perceive a crisis as a paracrisis (Persuit, 2017). Also problematic is the assumption this online crisis risk

should be managed analogously to a crisis, as some researchers tend to test the effectiveness of crisis response strategies for paracrisis cases (e.g., Roh, 2017), which might actually increase the publics' perceived level of crisis responsibility (Kim et al., 2016).

The dearth of research on paracrises and responses to paracrises provides the backdrop for Study 1. The aims of this study are two-fold. First, Study 1 seeks to describe and categorize paracrisis clusters through the systematic examination of online incidents labeled "social media crisis" as well as other negative events that might pose crisis risks requiring public responses from organizations. This effort is designed to test the external validity of existing paracrisis typologies. Second, to address questions concerning the appropriateness of applying crisis response strategies to paracrises management, examples of actual organizational responses to the various paracrisis clusters previously identified through Study 1 will be examined. Testing and refining current typologies for both paracrisis clusters and response strategies supports the utility of the distinction between crises and paracrises and clarifies how crisis response strategies can be applied and/or adapted to different paracrisis types.

Three research questions guide Study 1:

RQ 1: To what extent does the current paracrisis typology describe paracrises occurring from January 2014 to December 2017?

RQ 2: What response strategies did organizations use to address the paracrises occurring from January 2014 to December 2017?

RQ 3: What single and combined response strategies were used to address different paracrisis clusters occurring from 2014 to 2017?

Focus and Rationale for Study Two

Study 2 extends the examination of paracrisis by shifting focus to the online development of a paracrisis. This study complements current literature by documenting the evolution of a specific paracrisis, #DeleteUber. Additionally, it demonstrates the viability and usefulness of big data methods in unpacking paracrisis development and offers a unique methodological contribution.

The purpose of Study 1 was to revise the typologies of paracrisis clusters and response strategies. The data set for the investigation was created by identifying mentions of "social media crises" and protests against organizations that posed online risks, and culling the cases. In Study 1, the case series was composed of incidents that corresponded with the definition of paracrisis. Thus, these cases were selected because they had reached the status of paracrisis and could provide insights for the typology modifications. However, neither the data set nor current research can explain exactly *how* online comments escalate into paracrises that can be viewed by other social media users. Instead of treating incidents as fait accomplis, Study 2 problematizes the ontology of a specific paracrisis and unpacks factors contributing to its evolution.

Though researchers claim a paracrisis may unfold on social media in highly uncertain and complicated ways, the transformation of an online comment into a paracrisis is not well understood. Some researchers suggest online challenges will escalate into a crisis when they reflect news values (e.g., celebrity, human interest,

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novelty, conflict) and garner traditional media coverage and credibility (Pang, Hassan, & Chong, 2014). However, for the purposes of this dissertation, there also is a need to understand how online comments can evolve into a paracrisis. This knowledge would benefit practitioners who need to monitor and decide if and when to respond to a developing paracrisis as well as researchers who seek to identify factors contributing to paracrisis evolution. The research questions guiding Study 2 are situated within the context of Twitter and address the variables of time, characteristics of social media influencers and their networks, and traditional media coverage to better understand if and how these factors may influence how a specific paracrisis evolves over time.

Six research questions guide Study 2:

RQ 1: How did the #DeleteUber paracrisis evolve over time online on Twitter?

RQ 2: Did news coverage from traditional media escalate the evolution of the #DeleteUber paracrisis to a crisis status?

RQ 3: Who are the social media influencers (SMIs) during #DeleteUber on Twitter?

RQ 4: How might their accounts be characterized?

RQ 5: How might social media influencers (SMIs) change over time during #DeleteUber on Twitter?

RQ 6: What are representative SMIs' volumes and extends in spreading their original tweets in the form of retweets?

Conclusion

Overall, this dissertation examines (1) organizations' paracrisis communication practices by analyzing a large sample of paracrisis cases (Study 1) and (2) the evolution of one paracrisis on social media where various SMIs played critical roles in spreading their content as related with the paracrisis (Study 2). While Study 1 generates comprehensive understandings on paracrisis communication practices by identifying typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies, and connecting clusters with response strategies through examining a corpus of actual paracrisis cases, Study 2 relies on a single case study to unveil features of a paracrisis evolution and factors that contribute to the process. As such, Study 1 and Study 2 complement each other to further understanding on paracrisis communication as an understudied area. Taken together, this dissertation offers both theoretical and practical suggestions to paracrisis communication, and marks an essential step towards building theories in this area.

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CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation seeks to contribute to the emerging area of paracrisis communication as situated in the larger field of risk and crisis communication. To set the overall theoretical ground for this dissertation, the first section of this literature review defines terms key to this dissertation, including organizational crisis, crisis management, crisis communication, crisis risk, risk management, and risk communication. The distinctions between a crisis and crisis risk and between crisis communication and risk communication are also discussed in this section. The second section presents an overview on important crisis communication theories, including corporate apologia, Image Restoration/Repair Theory (IRT), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), stealing thunder, Discourse of Renewal Theory (DRT), and Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT). The section also reviews briefly the synergistic and antagonistic effects of using combined crisis response strategies together to address a single crisis.

The third section provides a more detailed discussion on how social media complicate risk and crisis communication, traces scholarly as well as trade publication articles on practitioners' struggles to manage risks and crises on social media, and explains why the term "social media crisis" might exaggerate crisis risks posed via social media and thus misrepresent an organization's need to respond publicly as if it faced a crisis.

The fourth section then focuses on the concept of paracrisis and reviews evolving definitions of paracrisis, typologies for paracrisis clusters, and response strategies used by organizations to address paracrises. Recent empirical studies relevant to paracrisis communication are then reviewed. This section also discusses connections between paracrisis typologies and major crisis communication theories, arguing for the need to develop distinct typologies for paracrisis clusters and response strategies. Additionally, the review suggests that Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT), with its multivocal approach, could offer new insights into how paracrisis are socially constructed by various voices in the arena. Research questions for Study 1 (Chapter III) are derived from the literature review and posed at the end of this section. Finally, the fifth section explores the uncertain, complicated processes of paracrisis evolution and raises the research questions to be addressed in Study 2 (Chapter IV).

Defining Key Terms in Risk and Crisis Communication

This section defines key terms relevant to this dissertation. These concepts are crisis, crisis management, crisis communication, crisis risk, and risk communication.

Defining Organizational Crisis

Crisis is a polysemantic notion that has been used to refer to various situations ranging from national economic recessions to natural disasters to personal quandaries. This dissertation focuses on organizational crisis experienced by corporations, non-profits, and government agencies. Therefore, crises in the context of disaster and emergency communication are not considered relevant to this project.

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In the dynamic field of organizational crisis research, there is no consensus on the definition of organizational crisis (e.g., Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Winter & Steger, 1998). Yet despite the various definitions, there are common important elements, such as significant threats, suddenness, and urgency (Kaman, 2005). Capturing and synergizing these elements, Coombs (2018, p. 3) defines crisis as "the perceived violation of salient stakeholder expectations that can create negative outcomes for stakeholders and/or the organization" (p. 3).

As indicated in Coombs' (2018) definition, a crisis is a threatening event or situation that has four features. Firstly, a crisis is perceptual. Though the existence of some crises may be indisputable, as in cases of product harm or visible management misconduct, the status of other incidents may be more difficult to discern. Nevertheless, a crisis exists when important stakeholders perceive expectation violations on safety, environment, health, and/or economic issues. As such, a crisis might come into being when an organization is not aware of it or when an organization denies its existence in order to persuade stakeholders there is no crisis. There are also cases when an organization perceives a developing crisis before its important stakeholders do and manages it proactively via stealing thunder.

Secondly, a crisis may generate serious negative outcomes for stakeholders and/or the organization. On one hand, when stakeholders experience expectation violations in the above-mentioned aspects, they might be physically and/or psychologically threatened or harmed to various extents. On the other, a crisis may have adverse repercussions for an organization, including threatening an organization's

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reputational and/or operational survival, which are key to the organization's financial

bottom line (Coombs, 2002).

   While many situations and events can pose threats to an organization, not all of

them are crises. Coombs (2002) proposed a Threat Grid to assess the threat (risk)

produced by a negative event (Figure 1).

Reputational Threat

						1				
Quadrant 1						2		Quadrant 2		
						3				
						4				
						5				

Operational

Threat   1   2   3   4   5 | 6   7   8   9   10

						6				
						7				
						8				
Quadrant 3						9		Quadrant 4		
						10				
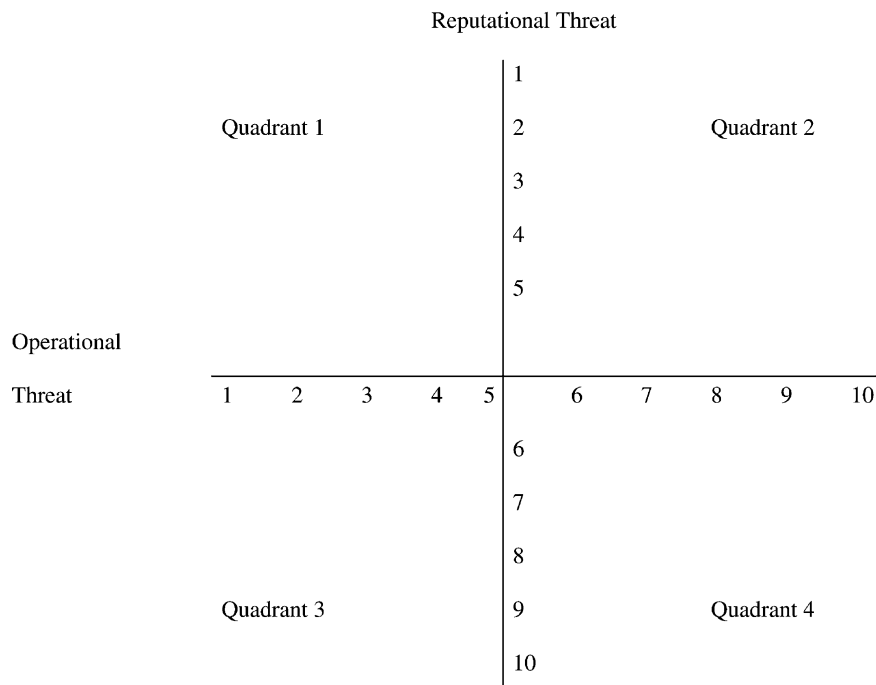
Figure 1 Threat Grid
*Reprinted from Public Relations Review, 28(4), W. Timothy Coombs, Deep and
surface threats: conceptual and practical implications for "crisis" vs. "problem", 339-345,
Copyright (2002), with permission from Elsevier.

As shown in Figure 1, this matrix is used to evaluate a negative event through

two intersecting dimensions: operational (y axis) and reputational threats (x axis).

Numbers on the axes represent increasing threat levels. According to Coombs (2002),

for an event to be labeled as a crisis, it would need to pose either a survival reputational

threat that "strikes at the heart of a reputation and shatters it" (p. 341) (Quadrant 3 in

Figure 1) or a survival operational threat where financial loss is intolerable and might

result in organizational extinction (Quadrant 2), or both (Quadrant 4). In other words,

events posing only thrive operational and reputational threats are not considered crises

(Quadrant 1).

In addition, it is noteworthy that these threats are not limited to corporations.

Nonprofits in crisis are threatened operationally and financially as well because they

might lose donations and clienteles; government agencies might not experience

immediate financial threats, but operational and reputation threats are key to their

existence as well. Actually, an organization in crisis might not experience all three types

of survival threat. For example, companies experiencing a supply chain disruption due to

a natural disaster crisis can face severe operational threats but their reputations are likely

to be intact (Coombs, 2019).

Lastly, a crisis is innate with equivocality. As an unpredictable event or situation,

a crisis brings uncertainty to an organization and stakeholders (Ulmer, Seeger, &

Sellnow, 2007). Nevertheless, in many cases, a crisis is "unpredictable but not

unexpected" (Coombs, 2019). It is a more of a matter of *when* a crisis would happen

rather than *what* would happen (Coombs, 2015). Organizations well-versed in risk and

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crisis management assessment and communication generally are prepared for such crises. For example, because food companies are aware they are at risk from food contamination concerns, they can develop patterned responses before a food recall crisis affects the organizations.

Defining Crisis Management

Crisis management is the combination of four interrelated factors, namely (1) prevention, (2) preparation, (3) response, and (4) revision to reduce actual crisis damage (Coombs, 2019). According to Coombs' (2017; 2019) regenerative crisis model, there are two stages of crisis: pre-crisis and post-crisis. These two stages are separated by either an objective crisis event such as chemical explosion or the management's subjective realization that the organization violates stakeholders' key expectations. Although this model has only two stages, it is a dynamic model because it demonstrates how a crisis might be reframed and redefined when a turning point occurs. In such scenario, the post-crisis stage becomes part of the pre-crisis stage and a new post-crisis phase begins (Coombs, 2017; 2018). Nonetheless, not all crises have a turning point, but a crisis manager should be aware that a crisis might be reframed into a new crisis type (Coombs, 2019).

Regarding the four factors that compose crisis management, *prevention* occurs during a pre-crisis stage, when a crisis manager seeks to avoid a crisis by detecting crisis threats and taking action to prevent a crisis from manifesting. *Preparation* refers to more systematic efforts to prepare the organization for possible crises because a crisis is not completely unpredictable. Preparation covers a series of management activities, such as

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assessing the organization's crisis vulnerabilities, creating a crisis management plan, and developing a crisis management team. Preparation also necessitates consideration of stakeholders that could be affected by a crisis. *Response*, or the public communication with the stakeholders, directly serves the goals of reducing negative crisis outcomes for both stakeholders and the organization. Effective responses sometimes can lead to organizational learning and improvement. Finally, *revision* refers to the "evaluation of the organization's response in simulated and real crises" to determine whether the organizational response is effective and if modifications are needed (Coombs, 2019).

There are alternative definitions for crisis management and models for crisis stages in the crisis management literature. For example, based on their review of management literature, Pearson and Clair (1998) defined crisis management as covering management actions before and after a triggering event. Before a triggering event, crisis management focuses on minimizing potential risk prior to a triggering event, whereas after a triggering event, an organization improvises and interacts with key stakeholders to reconstruct individual and collective sense making, shared meaning and roles, addressing individual and organizational readjustment of basic assumptions, and creating behavioral and emotional responses aimed at recovery and readjustment.

Regarding crisis stages identified in crisis management literature, Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) proposed five stages: (1) signal detection, (2) preparation/prevention, (3) containment, (3) recovery, and (5) learning stages. The signal detection stage recognizes potential crises. The preparation/prevention stage occurs when organizations manage potential crises before they become crises. The containment stage aims to limit the crisis

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damage. The recovery stage occurs when organizations try to restore the situation to normal. Finally, the learning stage is a phase when an organization evaluates its crisis management efforts and makes possible improvements in crisis responses for future crises.

Another frequently-cited model is Fink's (1986) four-stage model, which encompasses the (1) prodromal, (2) acute, (3) chronic, and (4) crisis resolution stages. Despite the different definitions and stages used to characterize crises and crisis management, it is clear that crisis management begins before a crisis hits an organization and that crisis communication is one of the most important components of crisis management (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). The following subsection will define crisis communication as grounded in Coombs' regenerative crisis model, because compared to other crisis stage models, this model places a stronger emphasis on communication.

Defining Crisis Communication

As with the term crisis, crisis communication has been defined in various ways. According to Coombs (2010a), crisis communication is "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (p. 25). As an applied field, crisis communication seeks to understand and guide the processes of both *managing information* to share facts and *managing meaning* to shape the publics' perceptions of a crisis (Coombs, 2010b). Crisis communication is crucial for crisis management during both the post-crisis and pre-crisis stages.

Crisis Communication during Post-crisis Stage

When the organization enters the post-crisis stage, a crisis manager should first manage information to protect the publics physically and psychologically (Coombs, 2019). Only after an organization meets the overriding goals of protecting the publics' safety and wellbeing (i.e., provides an ethical base response) can it start to manage meanings to reduce its own reputational and financial damages. Traditionally, crisis communication has focused on organizations' responses during a post-crisis stage, exploring what an organization could say or do repair the organizational reputation that is threatened by a crisis. Though research may seem to reflect an "organization-as-sender," orientation, models often incorporate a simultaneous receiver orientation by examining how publics influence and react to organizational crisis responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The second section of this literature review will present a more detailed review on major crisis communication theories centering on the post-crisis stage, including corporate apologia, IRT, SCCT, and DRT.

Crisis Communication during Pre-crisis Stage

Traditionally during a pre-crisis stage, communication efforts concentrate on identifying and mitigating crisis risk. To identify risk, a crisis manager engages in information management through environmental scanning (Lauzen, 1995) and risk assessment. To mitigate crisis risk, a crisis manager focuses on both information and meaning management by training the organization to respond to hypothetical crises and to manage risks proactively before they become crises (Coombs, 2010b). The following subsection will further define risk, risk management, and risk communication.

Defining Crisis Risk

The concept of crisis risk carries different definitions and implications in different fields. For example, for financial management scholars, risk is closely related with future losses and risk management focuses on the estimation of such losses to eliminate risk and reduce "the expected costs of financial trouble" (Stulz, 1996, p. 8). For the purpose of this dissertation, risk or a crisis risk is defined as an event or situation that has the potential to escalate into an organizational crisis (Coombs, 2019). Traditionally, an organizational crisis risk arises from products, customer services, personnel, competition, regulations, or procedures (Barton, 2001; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003).

Just as not all crisis risks evolve into crises, not all threatening events or accusations pose crisis risks. If an event or accusation only threatens an organization's ability to thrive rather than to survive (Coombs, 2002), it is more like a problem than a crisis, because it lacks the potential to become a crisis. Nevertheless, problems can be dynamic. If a problem keeps compounding, it might develop into a crisis risk or even a crisis.

Defining Risk Management

Risk management seeks to reduce an organization's vulnerabilities (Smallwood, 1995). It starts with risk assessment to identify risks and evaluate their likelihoods of becoming a crisis (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). After identifying a risk, an organization considers the crisis-prevention potential to make the decision to engage in risk aversion, elimination, or reduction (Coombs, 2019). For example, risk aversion might be desirable

when the cost of a risk (e.g., property damage) is lower than the cost of risk reduction (e.g., resources needed to fix the property damage and possible negative outcomes brought by the damage). Once the strategy of risk aversion is chosen, the organization manages the risk by eliminating the risk or reducing it as reasonably as possible (Coombs, 2019).

When a risk threatens stakeholders' safety and wellbeing, risk communication between an organization and its stakeholders becomes necessary. Other than that, risk management traditionally is more of an internal process that scans internal weaknesses and takes management actions without public awareness.

Defining Risk Communication

Historically, risk communication and crisis communication are grounded in different academic traditions. Risk communication is rooted in the emergency management tradition and is aligned more closely with health, safety, and environmental communication. Its objectives include warning the publics about certain risks, helping the publics to manage risks via care communication, fostering public consensus to manage risks, and preparing the publics for sudden, extreme dangers (Lundgren & McMakin, 2018). In contrast, crisis communication is more closely associated with public relations and organizational communication to protect stakeholders and repair corporate images (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2019) .

In this dissertation, risk communication is viewed as a subset of crisis communication that occurs during the pre-crisis stage. According to Palenchar (2005), risk communication is "a communication infrastructure, transactional communication

process among individuals and organizations regarding the character, cause, degree, significance, uncertainty, control, and overall perception of risk" (p. 752). As a dialogue between an organization with a crisis risk and the stakeholders who might be affected by the risk (Coombs, 2019), risk communication involves both information management to warn stakeholders and provide protection information and meaning management to persuade stakeholders to take actions and reduce the organization's perceived responsibility.

The above subsections defining risk, risk management, and risk communication are based on research that examines more traditional types of risks related with products, personnel, and procedure. Organizations nowadays face more and different types of risks that arise from the ubiquity of social media and society's increasing yet often different and sometimes contradictory expectations for corporate social responsibility (Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013). The third section of this chapter will present a more detailed discussion on these new types of risks that require public responses from an organization. But before elaborating on crisis risks in the social media context, the following section reviews major crisis communication theories that have informed work on paracrisis, a relatively new concept that attempts to incorporate risks that manifest through social media.

Crisis Communication Theories

This section reviews major crisis communication theories. These theories are corporate apologia, Image Restoration/Repair Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Discourse of Renewal Theory (DRT), stealing thunder, and Rhetorical

Arena Theory (RAT). The first four theories focus on post-crisis communication, with the first three theories sharing similarities in recommending crisis response strategies to repair organizational reputation. The DRT approach shifts communication goals to organizational change and growth after a crisis. The fourth theory, stealing thunder, is more of a crisis response strategy than a theory of crisis communication, as stealing thunder is an alternative communication strategy used during a pre-crisis stage. Finally, RAT is a more macro theory offering an alternative perspective to understanding crisis communication as constructed by a multitude of voices.

Corporate Apologia

Apologia is a genre that refers to self-defense (Hearit, 2006). Grounded in the rhetorical tradition, apologia research was first developed for individual uses. Ware and Linkugel (1973) found that when being accused of misbehavior, an individual can choose from four rhetorical strategies to defend oneself. These four strategies are (1) *denial* (denying responsibility for an offense), (2) *bolstering* (making oneself look better by stating good qualities or values), (3) *differentiation* (making a distinction between the accusation and what actually happened), and (4) *transcendence* (placing the accusation within a bigger, more favorable picture). As the first scholars to apply apology in a corporate setting, Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1988) proposed the term "*corporate apologia*" and argued the four strategies could be used as the first identified set of crisis response strategies. Hearit (1994, 1995, 1996, 1997) then actively applied apologia to corporate communication, expanding Ware and Linkugel's (1997) typology to help an organization reestablish its social legitimacy, which typically is jeopardized after a crisis.

Image Restoration/Repair Theory

Drawing upon corporate apologia, Kenneth Burke's work on guilt and redemption (1969, 1970), and Scott and Lyman's (1968) account research, William Benoit (1997) proposed Image Restoration/Repair Theory (IRT) to explain how individuals could respond when their images were attacked. IRT is based on the assumptions that maintaining a favorable image is the primary goal for individuals, and that when the image is attacked and threatened, an individual can resort to communication to restore the image. At the outset, Benoit named this theory "Image *Restoration* Theory" and applied the theory to describe how prominent individuals and celebrities responded to image threats, including reputational threats to disgraced politicians, actors/actresses, and athletes. Only later was Benoit's work adapted to corporate settings by drawing upon the reasoning first outlined by Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1988). Benoit later revised the title to "Image *Repair* Theory" because he reasoned that after a personal or corporate crisis happens, a completely restored image is not always possible. Though originally not developed for application in crisis communication research, IRT's concern with image protection attracted attention from crisis communication scholars. Thus, the communication strategies proposed in IRT soon were applied to organizational images.

According to Benoit (1997), for an attack to pose an image threat, two conditions must be met: (1) an individual or organization is held responsible for an act and (2) the act is considered offensive by stakeholders or audiences. Building on these assumptions, Benoit then expanded image repair responses into five major categories: denial, evasion

of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. These five

categories were further divided into 14 sub-strategies and used to examine responses

(See Benoit, 1997, p. 179).

To address the first dimension of responsibility for an act, a crisis manager can

choose from two categories: denial and evasion of responsibility. The denial strategy can

be either simple denial or shifting the blame to assert someone else is responsible for an

offensive act. Evasion of responsibility is used when an individual or organization cannot

deny an offensive act but may try to evade the responsibility for committing the act. This

strategy can be used in the forms of provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good

intention.

To address the second dimension of causing offensiveness, Benoit suggested

using reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Six ways might be

considered to reduce offensiveness: bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence as

identified by Ware and Linkugel (1973) as well as minimization, attacking the accuser,

and compensation. Corrective action is more costly than other strategies as it involves

taking action to restore situations to pre-crisis levels that predate the offensive act or

enacting measures to prevent the act from happening again. Finally, mortification, a term

drawn from Burke (1969), refers to the effort to admit guilt, apologize for an offensive

act, and seek forgiveness.

Limitations of Corporate Apologia and IRT

Corporate apologia and IRT contribute significantly to the field of crisis

communication. However, those approaches have their own limitations. Firstly, taking a

rhetorical approach, corporate apologia and IRT rely heavily on case studies to illustrate theories. Take IRT for example. Although Benoit stressed the importance of understanding stakeholders' perceptions of an act's offensiveness and an individual/organization's culpability for the act, he did not establish a connection between crisis situations and response strategies. Crisis communication studies using IRT or corporate apologia often describe an organization's words and actions during a crisis and then sort them into the crisis response typologies. When it comes to evaluating communication effectiveness, researchers typically make subjective or speculative claims without rigorous empirical tests (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Secondly, sporadic studies that empirically tested IRT's claims yield contradictory results (e.g., Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Thus, despite corporate apologia and IRT's contribution in generating rich descriptive findings, more evidence-based studies are necessary to test theories developed from rhetorical approaches (Coombs, 2010b). This line of research is almost exclusively sender-oriented, as it focuses on organizations' words and actions (Coombs, 2010b). More receiver-oriented studies are necessary to understand how crises affect stakeholders, how stakeholders perceive crises, and how organizational crises responses can be adapted based on stakeholder perceptions.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

As an evidence-based theory, SCCT originally was developed to understand how stakeholders' crisis responsibility attributions affect their perceptions of an organization's reputation after a crisis and how to use communicate strategies to protect reputation (Coombs, 1995, 2007). Drawing from attribution theory that explains

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inferences or perceptions of causes (Weiner, 1985) as well as IRT's response strategies, SCCT is built on the connection between a crisis situation and crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007). According to Coombs (2007), the crisis situation should provide the foundation for an organization's response. An organization must first communicate the "ethical base response" by providing instructing and adjusting information designed to protect the physical and psychological well-being of stakeholders. Only then should organizations seek to protect organizational reputation. A crisis manager should evaluate the crisis situation by considering three factors: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational organizational reputation.

Initial crisis responsibility refers to the extent to which stakeholders believe an organization holds control over a crisis event. Empirical studies confirm that the greater crisis responsibility attributed to an organization, the more likely the organization would suffer from reputational loss (Coombs, 2004). Using cluster analysis, Coombs and Holladay (2002) categorized 13 prevalent types of crises into three clusters: victim crises, accidental crises, and preventable crises, ranging from lowest attributed crisis responsibility to the highest. For victim crises where organizations are victims of events such as natural disasters and product tampering, organizations are considered to have a minimal amount of crisis responsibility as they as well as stakeholders are victims of the crises. For accidental crises such as technical-error accidents such as machinery failures and software glitches, the organization is perceived as unintentionally causing harms and thus attributed with a low crisis responsibility level. For preventable crises, such as management misdeeds and human-error accidents, organizations are regarded as

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purposefully causing the crises and thus are attributed with the highest level of crisis responsibility.

In addition to assessing initial crisis responsibility, a crisis manager also needs to consider two mitigating factors: crisis history and prior relational reputation. Crisis history reflects whether the organization has experienced similar crises before; and prior relational or relationship reputation addresses how well or poorly the organization is evaluated by its stakeholders before a crisis. These two factors have direct effects on reputation outcome and indirect effects on responsibility attribution. If an organization has a crisis history and/or poor prior relational reputation, its crisis situation will be intensified as evidenced by studies on the Velcro effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). On the other hand, if an organization has no crisis history and a positive prior relational reputation, it might benefit from the halo effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). In other words, its reputation during the post-crisis stage might be protected to a certain extent. In addition to examining reputation damage as a crisis outcome, SCCT also has investigated other crisis consequences, such as emotions, purchase intention, and negative word of mouth (Coombs, 2019).

Crisis Responses

After evaluating the crisis situation, a crisis manager can select communication responses accordingly. First and foremost, organizations must provide instructing and adjusting information (Sturges, 1994) to protect stakeholders. Instructing information informs stakeholders on how to physically protect themselves from a crisis, and adjusting information seeks to shield them from negative psychological impacts. Only after

communicating what Coombs' terms the "ethical base response," i.e. the combination of instructing and adjusting information, should a crisis manager develop responses that aim to reduce negative crisis outcomes threatening the organization (Coombs, 2019).

SCCT strongly recommends a crisis manager to choose reputation repair crisis response strategies based on the level of attributed crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2019). According to SCCT (Coombs, 2019), there are four postures, or categories of strategies: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering, the latter of which is a secondary posture that can be used to supplement the other three but is unlikely to be effective if used on its own (See Coombs, 2019, p. 151).

For some victim crises such as natural disasters, providing instructing and adjusting information will be sufficient. Yet, for crises where organizations are perceived as responsible, the denial, diminishing or rebuilding postures would be desirable to repair reputation damage (Coombs, 2019). Out of the four postures, the *denial* posture is the most defensive as it seeks to negate the connection between a crisis and the organization by using strategies such as *attack the accuser* (i.e., to confront the person or group who claim a crisis exists), *denial* (i.e., to state that no crisis exists), and *scapegoating* (i.e., to blame other person or group outside the organization for the crisis). The *diminishment* posture, which includes the strategies of *excuse* (i.e., to minimize the organization's crisis responsibility) and *justification* (i.e., to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis), intends to reduce the attributed crisis responsibility. This is a moderately accommodative posture because it acknowledges some responsibility while trying to make the organization seem less responsible. The most accommodative posture is the

rebuild posture. By using the strategies of *compensation* (i.e., to provide money or other gifts to the victims) and *apology* (i.e., to publicly state that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and ask for forgiveness), an organization aims to mitigate the crisis's negative outcomes and improve its sullied reputation. Finally, the bolstering posture is a supplementary strategy that can be used with any of the other three postures to foster a positive connection with stakeholders. This posture includes two strategies, *ingratiation* (i.e., to raise stakeholders) and *victimage* (i.e., to explain how the organization is also a victim of the crisis). It is noteworthy that when used by itself, this posture is not effective in managing reputation (Coombs, 2019). In addition, the diminishment and rebuild posture might be used together as they both accept crisis responsibility (Coombs. 2018).

Limitations

Although SCCT's propositions and crisis response recommendations have been empirically supported, it still has limitations as do any other social scientific theories. A meta-analysis on 24 SCCT studies published between 1990 and 2015 (Ma & Zhan, 2016) suggested that while an organizational reputation and the attributed crisis responsibility are strongly correlated, the connection between organizational reputation and reputation repair strategies recommended by SCCT is relatively weak. This is partly because compared to the basic psychological process of attributing crisis responsibility, how crisis response strategies affect cognitions and affect is a more complex process (Coombs, 2016). Crisis responses have a limited effect on repairing reputation, especially for the most serious crises (Coombs, 2016).

It is unreasonable to expect SCCT to provide answers for all crisis communication problems. The theory was developed to guide organizations to choose crisis responses based on stakeholders' attributed crisis responsibility. It assumes organizations will be the primary communicators, and the message strategy will be guided by the level of crisis responsibility attributed to the organization. SCCT also incorporates the intensifying factors of crisis history and prior reputation to further guide response selection. SCCT does not seek to address the forms and channels of crisis responses, nor does it explicitly articulate how the multiple voices arising during a crisis communication process would affect the choice of crisis responses. The two theories that are reviewed in the following section, stealing thunder and the rhetorical arena theory, complement SCCT by respectively addressing the timing of responses and the multiple voices aspects of crisis communication.

Synergistic/antagonistic Effects of Crisis Response Strategy Used in Combination

In actual crises, crisis response strategies are often used in various combinations. A quantitative content analysis on 18 years of published crisis communication research using IRT and/or SCCT (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009) found that apart from using bolstering as a secondary response strategy as recommended by SCCT, denial was also used frequently with attack-the-accuser, corrective action, mortification, and defeasibility.

The combination of crisis response strategies can lead to both synergistic and antagonistic effects. For example, using bolstering with other crisis response strategies might increase the effectiveness of reputation management; but using denial with

apology not recommended, because using a defensive strategy and an accommodative strategy together leads to contradicting and inconsistent impression (Coombs, 2007). Thus, Coombs (2008) recommends that an organization should maintain consistency or coherence in their crisis responses.

Drawing from Fisher's (1989) narrative theory on storytelling, Ihlen (2002) further distinguished three aspects of coherence (i.e., response consistency) during crisis communication: argumentative/structural coherence, material coherence, and characterological coherence. Arugmentative coherence can be assessed by featuring a consistent internal logic and characters acting from good reasons. In a crisis scenario, it can be enhanced by avoiding response strategies (postures) prescribed for different clusters identified in SCCT (Coombs, 2019). Material coherence, or external coherence, requires the presentation of thorough facts, arguments, and counterarguments. Finally, characterological coherence, or the credibility of an organization, may be attained by adhering to initial characterizations of a situation or a problem. By increasing coherence in these three ways, an organization may be able to deliver a consistent message that capitalizes on the synergistic effect of using combined strategies.

Discourse of Renewal

Discourse of renewal theory (DRT) was proposed by Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) to shift attention from image restoration to organizational renewal and growth during a post-crisis stage. Through an examination of the 911 terrorist attacks, the authors discussed three categories of renewal based on (1) stakeholder commitment, (2) commitment to correction, and (3) core values. Later, Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007)

extended DRT as an alternative to crisis communication theories that seeks to understand "what will happen and how the organization will move forward" (Ulmer et al., 2007).

In their 2007 article, Ulmer et al. listed four characteristics of renewal communication: (1) DRT is provisional rather than strategic, (2) DRT is prospective rather than retrospective, (3) DRT is leader-based communication, and (4) DRT focuses on the ability to reconstitute an organization by identifying opportunities within a crisis. Firstly, renewal is described as an ongoing process that requires an organization to be provisional in creating immediate, natural communication responses. Secondly, since DRT's focus is not reputation management but rather positive organizational reconstruction, communication efforts should be prospective to address upcoming changes. Thirdly, effective DRT should be led by organization leaders and derived from their values and virtues. Lastly, DRT emphasizes optimism as it identifies opportunities from a crisis and seeks to inspire stakeholders. Later, Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2009) revised DRT as covering central objectives for renewal: organizational learning, ethical communication, a prospective vision for the organization, and effective rhetoric.

Regarding conditions under which DRT can be applied, Ulmer et al. (2007) argued that DRT is more effective (1) for disaster crises or crises where massive destruction takes place and/or (2) when the organization has positive stakeholder relationships prior to a crisis so that stakeholders can help with rebuilding. However, DRT might be more effective for privately held corporations than for publicly held corporations, partly because private organizations have greater autonomy and are more entrepreneurial (Ulmer et al., 2007).

DRT has been used to study cases such as large-scale industrial crises (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002), community restoration after a school shooting (Littlefield, Reierson, Cowden, Stowman, & Feather, 2009), and three universities respectively going through a financial crisis, a student arson case, and a natural disaster (Barone, 2014). These studies showed that DRT is constructive under specific conditions and attested to DRT's characteristics and objectives. However, it should be noted that these are subjective case studies where the effectiveness of DRT was largely based on researchers' interpretations. To address this deficiency, recent scholarship developed measures to investigate how DRT affects publics' relationship with an organization (Xu, 2018) as well as organizational readiness for renewal during a precrisis stage (Fuller, Ulmer, McNatt, & Ruiz, 2019). Future research in DRT might be more rigorous in testing assumptions and might extend into the pre-crisis stage to explore organizations' preparedness for renewal if a crisis occurs.

Stealing Thunder as a Pre-crisis Communication Theory

So far, this section has reviewed crisis communication theories developed primarily for the post-crisis stage. Because risk communication used to be a largely internal process, theories on organizations' public communication during a pre-crisis stage is relatively underdeveloped. The most important communication theory developed for use during a pre-crisis stage is stealing thunder.

As a proactive crisis communication strategy, stealing thunder is used when an organization "breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties" (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425). Compared

to remaining silent until a crisis threat is exposed, self-disclosing a *thunder*, or an upcoming crisis threat, is found to be effective in reducing crisis damages for various possible reasons (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). First, frames used by the organization to describe the crisis and downplay the crisis severity might be more acceptable to the publics. Second, the organization might draw less attention to itself and be perceived as more credible than those who respond during a post-crisis stage (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Furthermore, stakeholders might be better prepared to handle physical and psychological threats. In this way, the organization is behaving ethically as it takes the initiative to break the crisis news to protect its stakeholders (Claeys, 2017). Therefore, if possible, practioners should steal thunder rather than using reputation repair responses recommended by SCCT during a post-crisis stage (Coombs, 2016).

Rhetorical Arena Theory with a Multivocal Approach

Crisis communication theories and strategies reviewed so far assume the organization itself will be the primary crisis communicator and examine how organizations might communicate effectively in the context of individual and/or organizational crises. Yet, it is also important to understand the dynamic, complicated interactions among various stakeholders that are involved in the crisis communication processes. To address such concern, Frandsen and Johansen (2010, 2016) developed the rhetorical arena theory (RAT) that takes a multivocal approach to explain crisis communication as consisting of communication produced by a multitude of senders and receivers.

RAT is based on two metaphors: arena and voice. The term "arena" was first perhaps applied in social sciences by Strauss (1978) to refer to a social world or space where members from different backgrounds engage in and negotiate for their issues of concern. Frandsen and Johansen (2010, 2016) applied the concept of arena to the field of crisis communication to refer to a space that opens up around the discussion of a crisis. This metaphor emphasizes "how actors involved in a crisis struggle with each other on how to interpret not only the crisis itself but also how to handle it" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018, p. 94). The second metaphor, voice, underlines the multitude of senders and receivers in the arena who communicate about, to, with, past, or against each other. These senders and receivers include but are not limited to media outlets, activists, experts, and other companies (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010)).

The goal of RAT is to "identify, describe, and explain patterns within the multiple communication processes taking place inside the arena" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016, p. 142). This theory approaches crisis communication from two integrated perspectives: macro and micro perspectives. A macro perspective examines all voices and communicative processes within a rhetorical arena to gain overviews of interactions among voices whereas a micro perspective addresses individual communicative processes in terms of context, media, genre, and text (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

Based on RAT's concept of rhetorical arena, Coombs and Holladay further proposed the term "sub-arenas" to address multiple spaces that compose a rhetorical arena (2014). Taking a multivocal perspective, communicative interactions on various sub-arenas have been examined, such as a corporate blog and the comment section of an

online news story (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), a corporate Facebook page (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016), Sina Weibo, a Chinese social media platform (Zhao, 2017), and newspapers (Raupp, 2019) from both macro and micro perspectives.

<div style="text-align:center">Social Media and Crisis Communication</div>

Social media can be defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). Till January 2019, Facebook had about 2.2 billion active users, YouTube 1.9 billion, WhatsApp 1.5 billion, WeChat 1 billion, Instagram 1 billion, Sina Weibo 446 million, and Twitter 326 million (We Are Social, Hootsuite, & DataReportal., n.d.). According to the 2019 version of the "*What Happens in An Internet Minute*" report (Lewis, 2019) that has been released each year since 2016, within one single minute, 1 million users log in Facebook, 347,222 users scroll Instagram, 87,500 people tweet, 18.1 million WeChat texts are sent, and 4.5 million YouTube videos are viewed.

The pervasive use of social media by individuals and organizations has transformed the landscape of crisis communication. Though the content of organizational crisis responses tends to remain the same, the variety of channels has changed. While the above-mentioned as well as other social media platforms differ in their user demographics and technical features, they share common features such as interactivity, connectedness, openness, participation, and communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). On the one hand, these features promise richer possibilities for organizations to communicate with their stakeholders; but on the other, they also contribute to the "dark sides of social

media and may complicate the process of risk and crisis communication.. This section begins with a discussion of how features of social media have generated, amplified, and complicated crisis risks faced by organizations, and reviews practitioners' challenges in managing these risks. The section concludes with a critique on why the term "social media crisis" is confusing and inappropriate, and how the prevalent use of this term has limited further theory development that might help organizations to deal with crisis risks in the context of social media.

Social Media Features as Related with Risks and Crises

Social media features first and foremost offer open access to almost all users. In the absence of gatekeepers, any individual or organization can share information on social media. As social media have been integrated increasingly into daily life, traditional media's model of one-to-many communication has been greatly challenged (Enli, 2009). Traditionally, the publics generally rely on traditional media to obtain information, including crisis information. Nowadays, individuals have increasingly turned to social media sites to seek and produce information on crisis causes, backgrounds, and inside perspectives (Austin, Fisher Liu, & Jin, 2012; Palen & Liu, 2007). However, it I important to note that social media sites simply present the *potential* for stakeholders and organizations to use additional and more varied channels of communication; the availability of social media does not guarantee it will be used in any particular ways. From a multivocal perspective, voices on the sub-arenas (Coombs & Holladay, 2014) of social media platforms are more complicated than voices on sub-arenas that predate

social media because stakeholders with diverse stances and intentions can now easily communicate with, against, and past each other via social media.

The nascent research on the diverse voices arising on the sub-arenas of social media mainly examine two types of actors: (1) *faithholders,* or publics with favorably predisposed attitudes towards an organization and (2) *hateholders,* or publics with unfavorable predisposed attitudes (Luoma-aho, 2015). Faithholders tend to support an organization in trouble by seeking and providing positive information, expressing sympathy (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), attacking hateholders (Johansen, Johansen, & Weckesser, 2016), and sending tweets using traditional crisis response strategies to help the organization manage its reputation (Brown & Billings, 2013). By contrast, hateholders were found to use persuasive attacks against an organization and urge other stakeholders to protest (Johansen et al., 2016).

In addition to providing open access to all, social media also allow users to connect with each other and form various communities. In uncertain situations such as those involving risks and crises, these features leave opportunities for helpful information-sharing as well as the potential for inflammatory, malicious voices to disseminate information lacking veracity and/or to instigate negative reactions from other users. Past crisis research has shown that in times of crisis when complete, accurate crisis information is not available, misinformation, ambiguous messages, and rumors tend to fill the information void on social media platforms (Austin et al., 2012). Furthermore, social media's networking structures are particularly pliable spreading misinformation and rumors: mathematical evidence has confirmed that rumors travel much faster on

these networks than on many other network types, including those where any two individuals have connection(s) with each other (Doerr, Fouz, & Friedrich, 2012).

Another type of voice that is prominent within social media is trollers (Craker & March, 2016). As ill-intentioned voices, trollers seek to provoke reactions from others via deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous communications (Noble, Noble, & Adjei, 2012). Research on trolling is still at its infancy. However, according to a survey conducted by YouGov, an international Internet-based market research and data analytics company, over 25% of Americans have engaged in trolling behavior at one time or another (Gammon, 2014), which seems to attest to the enormous attraction of engaging in this online misconduct.

What further complicates the presence and impacts of misleading, inflammatory voices is the rise of social bots, or automated accounts that algorithmically impersonate humans (Lazer et al., 2018). According an estimation made by scholars from the field of artificial intelligence (Varol, Ferrara, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2017), about 9% to 15% of active Twitter users are actually social bots. While social bots have positive functions such as volunteer coordination (Savage, Monroy-Hernandez, & Hollerer, 2016), they are often used to spread misinformation. A recent study (Shao et al., 2018)that analyzed 14 million tweets spreading 400 thousand articles on Twitter also found that social bots played a disproportionate role in spreading articles from low-credibility sources and tended to target influential users when doing so. Unfortunately, human beings were found to be vulnerable to social bots' manipulation, as they tended to retweet false news posted by social bots. While no research has examined the roles of

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trollers and social bots in crisis communication yet, it seems safe to assume that at least for online threats involving heated issues, trollers would be present in the arena, and so might social bots.

Another social media feature that also contributes to the spread of misleading, inflammatory information is the tendency to value emotionality over rationality. Theoretically, social media are capable of facilitating rational deliberation, because it is close to the ideal of equal and unrestrained communication (Bohman, 2004). However, empirical studies on various social media platforms and across national backgrounds seem to suggest otherwise. For example, a content analysis of 250 Facebook political group pages from 23 countries showed that the majority of the examined pages were created to express political selves and identities rather than to promote rational discussions (Marichal, 2013). Similarly, a study that examined public discussion on food safety issues on Sina Weibo also found that this social media platform is not an effective forum for deliberative discussion (Song, Dai, & Wang, 2016). By using machine learning and social network analysis, Song et al. (2016) revealed that emotional interactions predominate cognitive ones and that the most contagious emotions are negative ones such as anger, fear, and sadness. YouTube users also tend to respond more to emotional video content. A study on YouTube users' responses found that videos with a stronger positive or negative valence received more replies and likes, with the exception of political videos with positive valence. For these videos, positive emptions had no effect on users' responses (Möller, Kühne, Baumgartner, & Peter, 2018). While current research has mainly focused on political social media content (Möller et al., 2018),

scholarly interests on emotions' effects during online interaction has begun to extend to crisis contexts. For example, when examining tweets with #MH370 that were posted after Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 went missing from radar, Xu and Zhang (2018) also found that tweets with both positive and negative sentiments tended to gain more retweets than emotionally neutral content.

Valuing emotionality over rationality not only impedes the spread of emotionally neutral content, but also reinforces user fragmentation on many social media platforms. Thanks to social media's connective feature, users across geographic boundaries can discuss issues they are concerned with, including content they may not share offline for the fear of social and/or political rejection. As like-mined individuals tend to cluster together during their online interactions, they are likely to reinforce each other's stances and thus lead to fragmented communities on social media.

For a century, objectivity and impartiality have been central pillars for journalism (Schudson, 2001). In the past, publics relied on traditional media content to make sense of public events and construct daily narratives (Bird, 1998). Now social media have transformed norms of news providing and sharing, which further erodes traditional media's norms for objectivity and impartiality. For organizations, such change may result in more uncertainty and crisis risks.

Crisis Risks as Generated, Amplified and Complicated by Social Media

Crisis Risks Arising from Organizations' Social Media Use

Crisis risks seem inevitable as organizations increasingly use social media to engage stakeholders. Firstly, the use of social media itself makes an organization

vulnerable to risks such as hacking. For example, in 2014, many of CNN's Facebook, Twitter and blog accounts were hacked and posted content accusing CCN content as all lies (Shoichet, 2014). In 2017, IHOP's Twitter account was hacked and sent an anti-Hillary tweet (Dicker, 2017). Also, spoof sites and social media accounts might be created to sabotage an organization's social media presence and confuse current and potential social media followers.

Secondly, attracted by social media's immense potential to get close to customers and facilitate revenue increases, many organizations maintain an active social media presence to disseminate information, organize various campaigns, and interact with followers. However, sometimes an organization might post social media content with good intentions but end up offending some publics. One example is Wendy's use of a questionable meme. In response to a Twitter user's request: "@Wendy's Got any memes", Wendy's tweeted an image of Wendy Thomas, the company's mascot and namesake, morphing into a Pepe the Frog meme. The company was immediately denounced online for using an image associated with white-nationalist and the "alt-right" Internet culture (Reinstein, 2017). Wendy's later apologized and said they were unaware of the changing connotation of the meme and did not intend to use an "alt-right" Internet symbol. As shown in this example, creating social media content and interacting with followers can be challenging as the social media culture and subcultures are constantly changing.

Crisis Risks Arising from Employees' Use of Social Media

Employees' use of social media might generate risk as well. To begin with, there are cases in which organizations sent out nonsense or even inappropriate content but later it turned out that the content was meant to be sent from their social media professionals' personal accounts. One high-profile example of this type is the "rogue" tweet sent from American Red Cross' Twitter on drinking beers, which should have been send from their social media director's personal account (Wasserman, 2011). As social media increasingly blur the work-life boundary for social media professionals, it is highly possible that such mishaps might happen again.

Furthermore, many individual social media users have made their job information available online. When such individuals post offensive or controversial content on their personal social media accounts, angry publics might take to their employers' social media accounts, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Yelp pages, to air their opinions and emotions. The criticism might spread to the organizations they work for, especially when the individual is viewed as representing the organization as a member of management.

Crisis Risks Amplified by Social Media

The above subsections discuss how the use of social media by organizations and their identifiable members might generate risks that were unlikely to occur in the days predating social media. Yet, what makes managing risks in social media contexts more challenging is social media's potential to amplify and complicate risks.

As reviewed earlier, social media allow all users, including hateholders and trollers, to participate in the rhetorical arena. Traditionally, an organization's mishap

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might not catch public attention, unless traditional media decide the event is worthy of coverage. However, with social media, any mistakes made by an organization might be brought into the limelight. For instance, DC Comics' 2016 *Superman/Wonder Woman Annual #2* contained a scene that mistakenly used "Pakistanian" rather than Urdu to refer to the language spoken by bystanders from a village in Pakistan. After angry readers exposed and spread this mistake on social media, DC Comics was vehemently criticized for their ignorance of and disrespect for other cultures (Burlingame, 2016). If a similar mistake had been made predating social media, the company would most likely avoid this crisis risk because many of the social media users who expressed their anger were not DC Comic fans and would not be aware of this scene at all.

Because social media have given potentially all users a megaphone, even a groundless accusation against an organization may go viral and force the organization to respond publicly. On 2017, Starbucks launched its red holiday cup featuring snowflakes, wrapped presents, and a pair of hands holding each other, of which the gender(s) cannot be identified. Yet after a Buzzfeed article suggested that the pair of hands was "totally gay," social media discussion heated, and traditional media outlets such as Fox News and the Blaze, took Buzzfeeds' suggestion and accused Starbucks of pushing a homosexual agenda (Stack, 2017). This viral accusation would be quite impossible during pre-social media days, when journalism still operated by the norms of objectivity and impartiality.

Starbucks' 2017 red holiday cup risk is one of the many cases that demonstrate how social media have generated and amplified crisis risks. Now that individuals or organizations can raise a publicly visible accusation against an organization via social

media, if the accusation gains wide attention from others with similar concerns, interests, and/or stances, the organization may be forced to make public responses. What is worse, as in the Starbucks' case, an accusation does not have to be legitimate at all to go viral. If an accusation has elements that fit into social media norms for content sharing, it may have the potential to attract many retweets, reposts, likes, thumb-ups, and comments, and become a crisis risk or even a crisis.

Crisis Risks Complicated by Social Media

Social media not only have the potential to amplify crisis risks, but also complicate how crisis risks might evolve online. Firstly, it is challenging to predict whether a crisis risk would be amplified into a crisis. A challenge or accusation might travel quickly n social network sites in the beginning, but soon lose its momentum as social media feature fragmented communities and information overload (Gomez-Carrasco & Michelon, 2017). Secondly, social media have given rise to more plural and potentially polarizing expectations on what counts as corporate social responsibility (Castelló et al., 2013). As a result, companies these days are often confronted by new media activists challenging corporate actions that might otherwise not violate mainstream social expectations when traditional media still played a dominant role in agenda setting. Since these new media activists might be able to reach millions of social media users by protesting against certain corporate behavior or policy, a company would need to constantly scan the social media environment for possible risks and make public responses if a challenge is gaining resonance online.

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In addition to being pressured to address a wide range of challenges, an organization might find itself in quagmire when a challenge involves polarizing stances among its key stakeholders. For example, in 2016, Coca-Cola Russia posted on Vkontakte, a Russian social media platform, a map of Russia decorated with Christmas theme with words: "Ring in the New Year together with Coca-Cola." This Christmas greeting was vehemently criticized on and off the social media platform for not including Crimea, the Kuril Islands, and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. But after Coca-Cola apologized and posted a revised map including all three areas, Ukraine was upset and their lawmakers called for a boycott against Coke (Esterl & Sonne, 2016). While multinational companies' stances for geographic and political rows have always been a management challenge, social media further complicate these challenges as companies are under heightened pressure to react under potentially the full view of stakeholders with contradicting stances. No matter which side a company takes, important stakeholders from different sides could immediately find out and air their protests.

As reviewed earlier, a crisis happens when stakeholders' expectations on health, safety, environmental, and economic issues are violated (Coombs, 2019). Traditionally, a crisis risk often arises from external legal changes and internal operations that might violate stakeholder expectations in the above-mentioned aspects. However, with social media's potential of uniting discontented users, an organization may experience a crisis risk when the expectations it violates are not directly related with health, safety, environmental, or economic issues. As in the examples of DC Comics, Starbucks' holiday cup, and American Red Cross' rogue tweet, the expectation violations for crisis

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risks arising on social media are often related with people's feelings, values, and issue stances. Given social media's potential to amplify and complicate crisis risks, organizations are prompted to manage these risks to preclude further escalation. Unfortunately, both trade and academic publications suggest that many organizations and crisis communication professionals are still ill-prepared to address such crisis risks.

Organizations' Continuous Struggles in Managing Risks on Social Media

Over the past decade, increasing industrial and academic efforts have been made to understand organizations' practices in managing risks in the social media context. For example, a 2013 global survey conducted by Deloitte found that new technologies, especially social media, were key to organizations' fears (as cited in Lambret & Barki, 2018). A 2015 Weber Shandwick survey of Fortune Global 1000 companies' in-house lawyers who were involved with risk management showed that companies require about 38 hours to respond to a social media threat (Weber Shandwick & KRC Research, 2015). Given how fast information can travel on social networking sites, a lapse of 38 hours might be too late to mitigate a threat before it evolves into a crisis. A 2018 annual research report investigating executives' perspectives on risks found that social media, mobile apps, and other internet-based applications were the third most threating strategic risk issue among all possible organizational risks (ERM Initiative & Protivit, 2019). The above-mentioned as well as many other industrial surveys all suggest that despite the growing body of practical suggestions made by scholars and practitioners, risks arising from or amplified by social media are still challenging to manage.

In addition to large-scale industry surveys and consulting reports, scholars also have examined how organizations and crisis communication professionals are under-prepared for risk and crisis communication in the context of social media. For instance, Claeys and Opgenhaffen's (2016) interviews with Belgian crisis communication practitioners suggested that "companies seemed to experience more and more problems with regard to rumors and information leaking through social media" (p. 267). Helsloot and Groenendaal (2013) studied Twitter use during a fire disaster in Netherlands and concluded that crisis communication professionals' use of this particular social media platform was premature. Ott and Theunissen's (2015) work revealed that organizations still applied traditional media-based crisis responses on social media without tapping into social media's dialogic, interactive features to communicate with the publics.

However, what has been largely overlooked in the industrial research and academic literature are small businesses' plights of managing risks on social media. Traditionally, crisis scholars tend to focus on large organizations. This is because compared to small businesses, large organizations in crises tend to generate more harm to stakeholders, attract more media attention, and have more resources to repair damages. Though small businesses also experience crises, they generally attract only local media attention, if any. However, the advent of social media has transformed the situation. A local business whose action is viewed as inappropriate may experience backlash from social media users from far beyond its business area.

For example, Spicer Greene Jewelers, a family-owned jewelry store in Asheville, North Carolina, was denounced on social media because of its billboard placed in

Asheville that reads "Sometimes, it's ok to throw rocks at girls..." Among many of the critical voices is Chelsea Clinton, who might never have heard of the store before (Schmidt, 2017). Arguably, when small businesses experience risks arising on social media, they might be even more unprepared than large organizations as their resources for social media communication and risk management is very limited. Therefore, it is important to further develop knowledge of risks on social media, which would not only benefit large organizations but also small businesses as well.

<div align="center">*"Social Media Crisis" as a Confusing Term*</div>

In 2008, Alfonso and Suzanne explained how the Internet could both trigger and facilitate crises. In the same year, practioners began to use the term "social media crisis" when discussing how social media might change crisis communication, such as the necessity to develop a "social media crisis plan" (e.g. Marketwired, 2008). During the 2010s, such discussion has gained popularity and people have continued the use of "social media crisis" to refer to a threatening situation that originated in and/or is magnified by social media. While the early use of this term has its own merit in highlighting social media's impacts on crisis communication, this section argues that with social media's burgeoning presence in today's society, the continual use of this term could limit scholars and practitioners from making theoretical contributions to risk as well as crisis communication in the social media context. The following argues why this is the case.

Managing crisis risks in social media is challenging partly because research tends to lag behind practices and generate few conceptual understanding grounded in practices.

When it comes to the context of social media, many scholars and practitioners have confused the differences between a crisis risk and an actual crisis, as evident in the prevalent use of the term "social media crisis." When using "social media crisis" to address both risks and crises related with social media, they tend to overlook the differences between a crisis *risk* and a crisis, as well as among various *types* of crisis risks arising on social media, which would limit scholarly efforts from making further theoretical development on crisis and risk response strategies.

Firstly, neglecting the differences between a crisis and crisis threat prevents scholars from developing specific response strategies to managing this *new* type of crisis risks. As reviewed earlier, a crisis risk is different from a crisis because it only has the *potential* to affect organizational reputation and operation. Although an organization may need to make public responses when a crisis risk is made visible to all publics on social media, response strategies for managing a crisis might not be a good fit for crisis risks In a case study that examined an organization's communication effectiveness during an online risk event, Kim, Zhang, & Zhang's (2016) study of TMall, a Chinese e-commerce platform, found that the CEO's self-mockery and mocking the accuser were more effective than traditional crisis response strategies in reducing consumer blame, increasing their satisfaction, and developing more positive consumer attitudes. Based on their research finding, the authors argued that companies should be cautious about using traditional crisis response strategies, which may increase rather than reduce the perceived seriousness of a risk. After all, crisis response strategies were developed for and thus are

associated with severe events or situations that involve substantial harm to important stakeholders and threaten organizational survival.

Secondly, risks that are made publicly visible by social media come in various forms that require different response strategies. As Coombs (2017) pointed out, "social media crisis" is used too often to describe both risk situations that can be managed easily with one single apology and more complicated, uncertain situations that require more sophisticated communication.

One example illustrating this situation would be Nestlé's reactions towards Greenpeace's challenge of the company's palm oil purchasing practice in 2009. At that time, Nestlé was sourcing palm oil from Sinar Mas, a manufacturer who destroyed orangutan habitat to produce palm oil. Greenpeace used social media platforms to release and spread a parody commercial of Kit Kat, a Nestlé candy bar product, and to argue that Nestlé's sourcing practice was not sustainable. Nestlé eventually reformed by closing its contract with Sinar Mars and partnering with the Forest Trust to develop a sustainable palm oil purchasing program (Coombs & Holladay, 2015b). There are trade publications that described this high-profile case as a "social media crisis," including established ones such as *PR Week* (see O'Reilly & Magee, 2010). Nevertheless, a closer look into this case would suggest that Greenpeace's accusation, though triggering intensive attention on and offline, did not plunge Nestlé into a full-blown crisis. Since Greenpeace's challenge only posed a crisis risk, not a crisis, existing crisis response strategies cannot fully account for Nestlé's reactions and responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2015a). Therefore, in view of different types of crisis risks that require public response, we should only not discontinue

the use "social media crisis" but also identify types of crisis risks that may be related with different risk response strategies.

Meanwhile, lack of conceptual clarity on the differences between a crisis risk and a crisis might also interfere with research on crisis communication in the social media context. If a study claiming to explore crisis communication actually selects a crisis risk case as either an experiment scenario or collects data for content analysis, its research findings might be misleading. For instance, a study discussed an online apology and tested purchasing/donating behaviors during a crisis by examining Lowe's case of pulling advertisements from a controversial TLC program, *All-American Muslim* (Kinsky, Drumheller, Gerlich, Brock-Baskin, & Sollosy, 2015). The program was controversial because some Muslims did not like the program's portrayal of their faith and lifestyle, and some non-Muslims were concerned about the possibility of a hidden Islamic agenda that threatened traditional American values. However, what Lowe's managed was a crisis risk, not a crisis. While Lowe's decision led to online outcry and its apology on Facebook promoted more than 28,000 comments, there was no evidence suggesting financial loss or operational disruption. When arguing that Lowe's did not truly apologize because it did not show mortification, the authors were operating from the assumption that the effective apology for a crisis requires an acceptance of crisis responsibility. Yet in Lowes' case, there was no consensus on what Lowes' had done wrong to put its own survival in question. Therefore, clear conceptual distinction between a crisis risk and a crisis is also necessary for research on crisis communication in the social media context, so as to increase research validity and implications.

Another reason why the term "social media crisis" should no longer be used is because nowadays almost all crises involve the channels of social media, as used by the publics, the organization, or both. Additionally, many traditional media rely on their social media extensions to disseminate news. Thus, we can say all crises are "social media crisis," which nullifies the initial merit of this term: to emphasize the increasingly important roles of social media.

In fact, evidence indicates some practitioners are wary of the questionable use of "social media crisis" to describe both crisis risks and crises. For example, Van den Hurk, the principal of a crisis management consulting firm, proposed a typology of crises based on their impact levels in her book *Social Media Crisis Communications: Preparing for, Preventing, and Surviving a Public Relations #Fail* (2013). According to this experienced practitioner, *a Level-1 crisis* is short-lived and has minimal impact, such as negative customer feedback, negative media stories, and venting from unhappy employees. A *Level-2 crisis* is an ongoing situation with moderate impact such as an activist campaign against an organization or an unresolved customer service issue. A *Level-3 crisis* arises from episodes such as employee misconduct and illegal organizational behavior . A *Level-4 crisis* is of catastrophic impact as in the cases of data breaching and natural disaster. Regarding the necessity of public response, Van den Hurk suggested that a Level-1 crisis might or might not need a communication response and Level-2, 3 & 4always need to be addressed.

It seems like what this crisis consultant actually tried to articulate was the need to separate a *crisis risk* (i.e., a level-1 or level-2 crisis) from an *actual crisis* (i.e., a level-3

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or level 4 crisis) and to be cautious about addressing the first two types of crises using traditional crisis response strategies. Clearly, more scholarly efforts are needed to account for practitioner concerns and instincts through clear illustration of the distinction and connections between crisis communication and crisis risk communication in the social media context.

Paracrisis: Definition, Typology and Responses

Definition

To describe more accurately crisis risks that have been confused "social media crises," Coombs and Holladay (2012) developed the term "*paracrisis*" to refer to a socially constructed crisis challenge or threat that may or may not develop into a crisis. In the past, organizations used to manage a crisis risk without full public awareness unless or until the risk was exposed by traditional media, as the publics relied heavily on traditional media for risk and crisis information. Since traditional media generally would not cover a crisis risk that does not pose threats to public safety or the survival of a high-profile organization, risk management remained e a predominately internally-managed process before the prevalence of social media.

However, the ubiquity of social media use by individuals and organizations means discontented stakeholder can go to social media to air their negative experiences and/or launch an accusation against an organization. Given the features of social media communities, these may or may not generate attention from other stakeholders. If other stakeholders notice and endorse such negative content, an organization may need to offer some form of public response to address this crisis risk before it becomes a crisis.

However, the organization may determine the content does *not* pose a risk and chose not to respond. In the case of the former, this new type of crisis risk is similar to a crisis in that it requires public response; but it is *not* a crisis because it does not threaten either the reputational or the operational survival of an organization, at least not yet. In the case of the latter, the organization does not perceive the negative content as warranting a public response.

Initially, Coombs and Holladay (2012) defined a paracrisis as arising from a corporate social responsibility (CSR) challenge or "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (p. 409). Later, Coombs (2017; 2018) expanded the definition of paracrisis to encompass a wider range of crisis risks that appear to be crises but are actually *crisis risks* that are managed in potentially full view of all publics.

Paracrisis Clusters

Just as crises can be categorized into different types, paracrises also tend to group into identifiable types or clusters despite the wide contextual differences among them. To further understand crisis risks that require public responses from organizations, Coombs (2015) first distinguished four clusters of paracrises: (1) *customer service*, (2) *misuse of social media*, (3) *venting*, and (4) *challenges*.

First, Coombs described a customer service paracrisis as a situation where multiple customers complain about an organization's product, service, or inappropriate social media use by employees. Second, misuse of social media is a situation when an organization violates informal "rules" for using a specific social media channel. For

example, GAP tweeted about its online shopping on its website during Super Storm Sandy, which was viewed as inappropriate and insensitive for many who lost power during and after the disaster (Nudd, 2012). Paracrises of this type might become a crisis if the violation is perceived as a significant ethical breach by an organization. Third, a venting paracrisis occurs when "stakeholders are simply angry at the organization and seek to express that anger" (Coombs, 2017, p. 285). Unlike costumers who launch a customer service paracrisis, angry stakeholders do not seek solutions but simply to release their anger. Fourth, the challenge paracrisis resembles Coombs and Holladay's original definition of paracrisis. It occurs when stakeholders use social media to claim an organization is behaving in an irresponsible or unethical way.

In a more recent work, Coombs (2019) revised the paracrisis typology to include four clusters: (1) *faux pas*, (2) *rumor(s)*, (3) *challenge(s),* and (4) *collateral damage*. This new typology is quite different from the earlier one, with the challenge paracrisis as the only type included in the revision. According to Coombs (2019), a faux pas paracrisis occurs when an organization takes an action it believes is positive or neutral but is viewed by stakeholders as negative, racist, and/or insulting. A rumor paracrisis refers to a situation when "false or misleading information is purposefully circulated about an organization or its products in order to harm the organization" (p. 59). Lastly, a collateral damage paracrisis is "a risk of guilt by association" when "some negatively viewed actor mentions or is publicly associated with the organization" (p. 59).

The customer service cluster was dropped from the more recent typology because managing online customer complaints is an established function of customer relations

management that can be addressed by following guidelines of customer service. Moreover, as customer service increasingly move online, customer complaints are normalized within the context of the customer service functions. Customer service fails become a crisis only when more unusual customer service concerns arise, such as those exposing evidence of product harm or tampering (Coombs, 2017).

Connecting Crisis Communication Theories to Paracrisis Communication

As reviewed earlier, paracrises are similar to crises in that they require public responses. Yet because paracrises are not crises, we should consider whether crisis response strategies can be applied to paracrisis communication. This section discusses the connections between paracrisis communication and crisis communication, arguing that effective paracrisis communication calls for a distinct set of public response strategies.

To begin with, there are compelling reasons to believe crisis response strategies recommended by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the primary crisis communication theory in the field, cannot be applied directly to paracrises communication. Based on the assumption that attributed crisis responsibility affects organizational reputation, SCCT recommends matching response strategies with the level of crisis responsibility attributed to the organization. Yet, the level of attributed responsibility for a crisis is much higher than for a paracrisis, as a paracrisis is simply not as severe as a crisis. Furthermore, for a challenge paracrisis involving divisive issues, it is debatable whether an organization is responsible at all for doing something *wrong* or for not doing the *right* thing. Applying SCCT's response strategies to paracrises might

end up increasing the publics' perception of paracrisis severity rather than mitigating the risk before it becomes a crisis. In addition, instructing and adjusting information, the ethical base response recommended by SCCT, probably is not applicable to paracrises because paracrises do not involve public safety issues. For crisis risks that impact public safety, stealing thunder should be considered during a pre-crisis stage

We should be especially cautious about applying crisis response strategies that might seem to be applied for paracrisis situations. Take apology for example. According to SCCT, apology is a highly accommodative strategy that often comes at heavy costs to an organization. If an organization apologizes for a crisis, it means the organization accepts the crisis responsibility, including legal responsibility that often requires compensation or organizational changes to repair the damage and prevent the crisis from happening again. However, for a faux pas paracrisis where an organization inadvertently offends a group, making an apology incurs minimal costs, ranging from deleting an offensive tweet to canceling a controversial marketing campaign. For a challenge paracrisis involving divisive issues, an organization can choose to express regret without mortification if they do not want to support the issue stance advocated by the challenger. In such cases, we cannot conclude that because an organization does not show mortification, its apology is ineffective. Therefore, although paracrisis and crisis communication share the goal to protect reputation, a distinct set of paracrisis communication strategies may need to be developed to more accurately correspond to the nature of paracrises.

For the same reasons, crisis response strategies identified in corporate apologia and image repair theory (IRT) cannot be applied directly to paracrisis communication. Nevertheless, existing crisis response strategies may provide useful information for developing paracrisis response strategies. For example, drawing from Benoit's (1995) integration of apologia and account analysis, Coombs and Holladay (2015b) developed a list of responses for challenge paracrises, which will be reviewed in the next subsection. Similarly, based on findings from IRT and SCCT, it is reasonable to expect bolstering could be used for paracrisis communication, because bolstering is not associated with perceived level of crisis responsibility and, as a secondary strategy, can be used for all crisis types to reduce offensiveness.

Recently, scholars have tried to extend DRT (discourse of renewal theory) to examine renewal after hoaxes (see Sellnow, Parrish, & Semenas, 2019). While the authors examined case studies on full-blown crises such as a campus shooting, their argument references hoaxes that were actually paracrises, such as the false claim of finding syringes in Pepsi cans. The authors argued the strategy of denial is not sufficient to clear the lingering concerns regarding a hoax and conclude the discourse of renewal can fill the gap. However, based on previous discussion, this project assumes that that a timely refutation against misinformation would be sufficient to manage a paracrisis and that applying discourse of renewal might be a waste of organizational resources. Nevertheless, more empirical studies are necessary to address this dispute on whether DRT could be applied to paracrises.

Finally, RAT's (rhetorical arena theory) multivocal perspective seems particularly applicable to examining paracrises as socially constructed by both the organization facing a paracrisis and the voices in the arena. While this theory does not recommend specific communication strategies, it encourages scholars to observe how the organization and voices (publics) in the arena use social media to make sense of and manage the meanings and implications of paracrises. If we extend RAT to paracrises, it can be said that the rhetorical arena opens whenever a crisis threat is raised on social media. Additionally, it is highly likely the multiple voices will express many different views regarding the nature of a paracrisis.

Paracrisis Response Strategies

Because a paracrisis is a *risk* rather than an actual crisis, paracrisis communication requires a reconsideration of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2017). Among all types of paracrisis, challenge paracrises are most complicated in terms of response options. When an individual or organization raises a challenge online, a social media manager may evaluate the situations and then decide which responses are appropriate. Drawing reference from crisis communication (Benoit, 1995) and rhetoric of agitation and control (Bowers, Ochs, Jensen, & Schulz, 2009), Coombs and Holladay (2015a) developed six response strategies for *challenge* paracrises: (1) refusal, (2) refutation, (3) repression, (4) recognition or reception, (5) reform, and (6) revision.

As stated in their work (Coombs, 2017; 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2015a), *refusal* is a form of deliberate silence. Organizations use it when they pretend to ignore the challenge or decline to respond. *Refutation* argues that the challenge is invalid and

includes two sub-strategies: denial with evidence and dispute (Coombs & Holladay, 2015a). *Denial with evidence* asserts there is no violation of stakeholder expectations as supported by evidence, whereas *dispute* is used to argue that stakeholder expectations are invalid or unreasonable. Organizations can use refutation to protect their current practice from the challenge raised against it.

Repression refers to an organization's efforts to prevent a challenge from disseminating, such as deleting negative comments on the organization's social media pages. This strategy is very risky because it seems like the organization tries to use its power to silence free speech, a practice inconsistent with the ethos of social media. It can only be used cautiously when an organization seeks to stop the circulation of rumors and misinformation.

Recognition/reception is used when the organization acknowledges a problem but cannot take action due to various constraints. *Revision* is used when an organization makes a minor modification that is consistent with the challenger's request, but is not the exact change proposed by the challenger. This strategy is used when the change proposed by the challenger is not feasible or too costly to make. Finally, *reform* occurs when an organization implements the exact change expected by the challenger.

Apart from the response strategies to manage challenge paracrisis reviewed above, some sporadic efforts also have explored other response strategies used specifically for paracrises. For example, Kim et al. (2016) identified the strategies of self-mockery from an organizational leader and mocking the accuser in their case study on an unusual faux pas paracrisis. In this case, TMall, a Chinese e-commerce platform,

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was perceived to exaggerate its sales figures. While their study profiled a fairly unique paracrisis and two responses, a more systematic study on how organizations are managing different types of paracrises would be necessary to provide a more comprehensive picture of paracrisis communication practices.

Refining Typologies on Paracrisis Clusters and Response Strategies with Large Sample of Paracrisis Cases

Coombs and Holladay's work has provided a significant conceptual foundation for further development of theories on paracrisis communication. This dissertation argues the next important step towards theory development is to test and refine their typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies with a large sample of naturally-occurring cases.

Firstly, such examination and refinement will increase the ecological validity of the paracrisis typology to better guide paracrisis research and communication practices. External validity can be defined as the degree to which a research assumption is congruent with real-life circumstances (Schmuckler, 2001). Strong external validity reflects effectively what occurs in actual contexts and increases confidence in the generalizability of the typology when categorizing paracrises. Furthermore, given the conceptual confusion underlying the wide use of "social media crisis," an exhaustive typology on paracrisis clusters would not only provide criteria for identifying paracrisis types, but it would also explain what is *not* a paracrisis. In other words, an empirically tested paracrisis cluster typology will further clarify the confusion between a *crisis* and a *paracrisis*, as well as a *paracrisis* and a *problem* that may only constrain organizational

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thriving but not survival (see Coombs, 2002).Secondly, extant empirical research on paracrises also highlights the importance of an empirically-tested typology of paracrisis clusters as tied to a typology of response strategies. So far, the author has identified two peer-reviewed journal articles and one dissertation (Honisch, 2018) that examined the effectiveness of paracrisis response strategies. The study conducted by Kim et al. (2016) examined a paracrisis triggered by a Sina Weibo tweet sent by TMall, a Chinese e-commerce platform. The Weibo tweet claimed that 2 million pairs of underpants were sold within an hour during China's "Cyber Monday" and that if all underpants were laid out one after another, the row of underpants would be 3,000 km long. Other Weibo users soon pointed out that the Weibo tweet was an exaggeration because for the row of underpants to reach 3,000 km, each pair of underpants would be longer than a meter. By studying this case, Kim et al. found that traditional crisis responses may not work for paracrisis communication and that humorous self-mockery used by a corporate leader is an effective paracrisis response strategy. However, this TMall case, though professing to examine a paracrisis, seems fairly atypical and does not correspond to paracrisis types proposed by Coombs and Holladay.

Honisch(2018) claimed to conduct an experimental study of paracrisis communication and offered response recommendations that differed substantially from Kim et al.'s recommendations. Using fictional paracrisis where International IT suppliers were accused of creating unethical contracts with producers that exploited Indian workers, Honisch examined respondent perceptions of organizational reputation and behavioral intentions. This study showed that a reform strategy is the most effective

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response whereas a humorous strategy is the least effective. However, it is very likely that the discrepancy between the results of the two studies results from vastly different paracrises they studied. A framework that offers meaningful distinctions between types of paracrises and ties response strategies to different types of paracrisis would better support and guide future empirical studies of paracrises.

Another journal article (Roh, 2017) reports an experimental study to compare he effects of crisis responses strategies (deny vs. diminish) on public perceptions of a fictional paracrisis in which an identifiable individual (CEO vs. real estate agent) posted a racist tweet. At least two problems might constrain this study's contributions to organizational paracrisis communication. Firstly, crisis response strategies were used to address the paracrises. Although the *deny* strategy seems to be identical with the *denial with evidence* response for challenges crisis, the former negates crisis responsibility whereas the later negates the violation of stakeholder expectations. Testing crisis response strategies for paracrisis studies may not help researchers or practitioners to distinguish between a paracrisis and a crisis. Secondly, the study's responses and the measures for response effectiveness were more related to individual image repair than to organizational paracrisis communication. In the experimental setting, the responses were provided by the identifiable individual who posted a racist tweet. Participants' perceived paracrisis responsibility after being exposed to a response was measured with individual-oriented items such as the racist tweet was the identifiable individual's mistake. As such, the experiment might contribute more to individual risk management than to organizational paracrisis communication.

It seems that empirical studies on paracrisis communication are about to take off. Given the deficiencies in the research designs and discrepant research findings reviewed above, it is all the more necessary to develop a framework connecting paracrisis clusters with response strategies to lay the groundwork for future empirical research on the effectiveness of organizational paracrisis communication. Therefore, the first study of this project seeks to answer the following research questions through case series analyses by collecting and analyzing a sufficiently large sample of paracrisis cases:

RQ 1: To what extent do the current paracrisis typologies categorize paracrisis occurring from 2014 to 2017?

RQ 2: What response strategies did organizations use to address paracrises occurring from 2014 to 2017?

RQ 3: What single and combined response strategies were used to address different paracrisis clusters occurring from 2014 to 2017?

Paracrisis Evolutions as Uncertain, Complicated Process

Managing a paracrisis is challenging for companies partly because its life span can unfold on social media in highly uncertain and complicated ways. On one hand, because of social media's interactive, participatory, and community features (Coombs, 2015), a crisis threat might quickly become a social media hype (Pang, 2013) and evolve into a full-blown crisis. On the other hand, not all paracrises go viral. A crisis threat might stall in spreading with minimal or even no action from the threatened organization. Though practitioners may not be familiar with the term "paracrisis," undoubtedly they have observed how such uncertainty further complicates risk and crisis management. For

example, a Marketwired article recommended reacting "appropriately" to risk online, because both overreacting and underreacting can hurt a brand (Sysomos, 2013). However, few studies have contributed to heuristic knowledge on how to monitor and diagnose a paracrisis so that managers can respond appropriately.

One effective way to close this knowledge gap is to identify patterns of paracrisis evolution through in-depth case studies of various paracrises. As an initial effort in this direction, the second study of this project tracks the #DeleteUber movement, a paracrisis that originated in Twitter and led 200,000 Uber users to delete their accounts within three days. Inspired by a multivocal approach, Study 2 seeks to contribute to theories on paracrisis diagnosis by answering three fundamental questions: (1) how did this paracrisis evolve over time?; (2) who are the social media influencers (SMIs) shaping the evolution online?; and (3) what are the structural features of SMIs' content dissemination on the social networking site?

Specifically, Study 2 is guided b six research questions:

RQ 1: How did the #DeleteUber paracrisis evolve over time online on Twitter?

RQ 2: Did news coverage from traditional media escalate the evolution of the #DeleteUber paracrisis to a crisis status?

RQ 3: Who are the social media influencers (SMIs) during #DeleteUber on Twitter?

RQ 4: How might their accounts be characterized?

RQ 5: How might social media influencers (SMIs) change over time during #DeleteUber on Twitter?

RQ 6: What are representative SMIs' volumes and extends in spreading their

original tweets in the form of retweets?

To sum up, Chapter II presents a literature review that sets the theoretical

foundation for this research, including definitions of key concepts, major crisis

communication theories, a discussion on social media and risk and crisis communication,

and a review on extant paracrisis communication research. This chapter ends with

research questions for Study 1 (Chapter III) and Study 2 (Chapter IV). Next chapter

provides a full description of Study 2.

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CHAPTER III

STUDY 1

Chapter III presents Study 1 which focuses on the identification and description of paracrisis clusters and organizational response strategies used to address these paracrisis clusters. Study 1 elaborates and expands upon previous work to more precisely describe characteristics of naturally-occurring paracrisis cases identified through the case series. Study 1 also examines how these response strategies were used to address the observed paracrises in the case series. The organization of Chapter III is as follows: (1) a brief review of relevant literature from Chapter II to establish the rationale and research questions for Study 1; (2) methods used to address the research questions; (3) study results; and (4) a brief discussion, including limitations and theoretical and practical implications of Study 1.

Overview

The preceding review of literature demonstrates the field of crisis communication arose from the need for organizations to communicate effectively with stakeholders affected by a crisis (e.g., at a minimum, provide instructing and adjusting information to insure stakeholder well-being) as well as the need for organizations to reduce the negative consequences of a crisis. The risk tradition often situates communication about risks within the pre-crisis phase to emphasize the importance of information sharing and understanding risk-bearers' perceptions and concerns in order to manage risk. However, risk communication also may be required in the post-crisis phase when organizations supply instructing and adjusting information to motivate stakeholders to engage in self-

protection and to cope psychologically with a specific crisis. Thus, the need to manage risk is a preeminent organizational concern.

Crisis has been defined as the manifestation of risk. Theories of crisis communication vary in their emphases (e.g., image repair, organizational renewal, multiple voices) and the explanatory mechanisms used to guide the selection of optimal communication strategies (e.g., attributions of responsibility, conditions for positive reconstruction). Despite differences, crisis communication theories offer guidance for minimizing negative outcomes for stakeholders and the organization, including damage to important tangible and intangible resources. The notable exception to univocal approaches to crisis communication (i.e., organizations communicating to stakeholders) is Rhetorical Arena Theory's multivocal approach which proposes multiple voices begin communicating to, with, against, or past other voices in the arena when a crisis hits (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

The multivocal approach does not privilege the voice of the organization or any particular media channel in crisis communication. Rather, the organization's voice co-exists with many other voices conveyed through myriad media – i.e., carriers of messages. Its complexity is both a strength and weakness. The multivocal approach offers provocative metaphors for contemplating the contributions of many voices to the arena that opens around a crisis. Thus, the approach may best reflect the multitude of voices available via social media and traditional media. The concept of paracrisis, including its concern with how crisis risks arise and are managed in online environments, seems consistent with issues raised through the multivocal approach. Public challenges (voices) charging organizations with irresponsible behavior can be seen by the organization as

well as others (potential voices) in the arena. The consequences of such charges can be uncertain. To what extent will additional voices contribute to the challenge? Will other voices support the challenge? Will others even notice? How might these challenges affect the organizations (i.e., assessing crisis threat through likelihood and impact assessments)? Organizations within the arena are tasked with making sense of the charges and determining if and how they will respond to the challenges. This context sets the stage for Study 1 of this dissertation.

Study 1 seeks to contribute to the arena that has opened around paracrisis research. As a relatively new concept, paracrisis warrants investigation to determine its ability to contribute to the arena – the scholarship of risk and crisis communication. Three concerns drive the research agenda presented in Study 1: identification and description of (1) paracrisis clusters, (2) organizational paracrisis response strategies, and (3) uses of response strategies to address different paracrisis clusters. The last synthesizes the first and second concerns to move toward a framework for recommending responses for managing paracrises in order to mitigate risks and prevent crisis from happening.

Study 1 poses three research questions designed to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding paracrises:

RQ 1: To what extent do the current paracrisis typologies categorize paracrises occurring from 2014 to 2017?

RQ 2: What response strategies did organizations use to address paracrises occurring from 2014 to 2017?

RQ 3: What single and combined response strategies were used to address different paracrisis clusters occurring from 2014 to 2017?

Method

Study 1 uses a case series method to identify, categorize, and describe paracrises and responses to paracrises. In the field of crisis communication, the case study method has been used widely, in part because crises are complicated, naturally occurring situations (Jaques, 2008) that cannot be fully assimilated by experimental designs (Yin, 2009). Compared with other research methods such as experimental studies, the focused case study excels in enabling the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge on a specific commonly occurring, but little-understood, real-life phenomena that researchers generally have little control over (Merriam, 2009). Case studies often are comprised of a single case or a few cases selected because of similarities (e.g., similar types of crises). However, despite the case study's strength in theory testing and refining in new research areas (Eisenhardt, 1989), research using this method is prone to deficiencies in validity, reliability, and generalizability (Cutler, 2004; Michael, Winfried, & Barbara, 2008). Because the case study is better-suited to in-depth analysis of a single crisis (or a limited set of similar crises), the traditional case study method was not appropriate for Study 1. Therefore, Study 1 adopts a *case series*, a method used in clinical research, to identify and describe paracrises and responses to paracrises to develop the paracrisis and response strategy typologies.

Applying Case Series to the Identification of Paracrisis Clusters and Paracrisis Response Strategies

The case series approach is a descriptive, unobtrusive research method often used in clinical research that allows researchers to "follow a group of patients who have a similar diagnosis or who are undergoing the same procedure over a certain period of

time" (Kooistra, Dijkman, Einhorn, & Bhandari, 2009). In clinical settings, in the absence of experimental protocol or a comparison group for medical treatment, case series offer an observational approach that enables patients and doctors to decide whether treatment is given or to obtain reports on novel diagnostic or therapeutic strategies. The primary purpose of a case series study is to develop hypotheses that can be tested later in clinical analytical studies with stronger methodological rigor. Compared to other clinical research methods, the case series excel in external validity because the study results resemble those obtained in actual, routine clinical practice. Including a diverse range of patients also increases external validity. Stronger external validity is advantageous because it suggests the results can be more appropriately generalized to other patient groups.

Nevertheless, a limitation of this method is the potential for researcher bias in case selection and assessment. To address possible limitations in sample selection, researchers must articulate and apply clear criteria for case inclusion and exclusion. In addition, the approach is purely descriptive, not analytic, so no causal inferences are possible. Thus, only descriptive statistics can be used to characterize the sample. However, information gleaned from the case series may be used to formulate testable hypotheses for future research (Kooistra et al., 2009).

Although case series are rarely used outside of clinical research settings, the principles of case series offer a good fit with the purposes of Study 1 and can be grafted to descriptions of paracrisis clusters and responses to paracrises. Firstly, the term *case series* captures the nature of the sample and sampling purpose: to use predetermined criteria to collect a corpus of paracrisis cases to describe and cluster cases according to additional, common characteristics. Doing so enables the identification and comparison

of the collected cases to existing paracrisis typologies proposed by Coombs and Holladay (Coombs, 2017, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012, 2015).

Secondly, Study 1 also seeks to increase the external validity of descriptions of paracrisis clusters and response strategies and refine these so they can be applied to similar cases outside of this case series sample. Furthermore the goal of a clinical case series study is to identify and describe possible medical treatments applied to patients in a non-experimental setting, so as to guide future analytical studies. This study also seeks to identify paracrisis "treatments," or the uses of response strategies to address different paracrisis clusters, as an essential step towards analytical research findings on organizational paracrisis communication.

The following section elaborates how the sampling and data collection methods were used to strengthen external validity, avoid selection bias, and increase the accuracy of descriptions.

Data Collection: Selecting the Sample

The unit of observation for this study is a paracrisis case that occurred during January 2014 to December 2017. Miles and Hubermas (1994) suggested that depending on the richness and complexity of cases, researchers should decide how many cases are sufficient to answer their research questions. Following case series study's guideline to collect a wide, diverse range of cases, this study aimed to cast a wide net to identify various clusters of paracrises reported over the time frame of four years. The goal is to capture both the overall characteristics as well as the peculiar elements of paracrisis which might occur less frequently, but still be worthy attention from crisis communication scholars and professionals.

Since a case series approach is developed for clinical research and thus provides few guidelines on collection of text-based data, this study refers to Yin's (2009) data collection principles developed for case studies to ensure the rigor of this process. Specifically, two linked steps were taken: (1) use of multiple sources of evidence and (2) summary of a case study database. Four separate rounds of literature search were conducted to collect cases from various sources. Figure 3 presents the task flow chart for the data collection and cleaning processes.
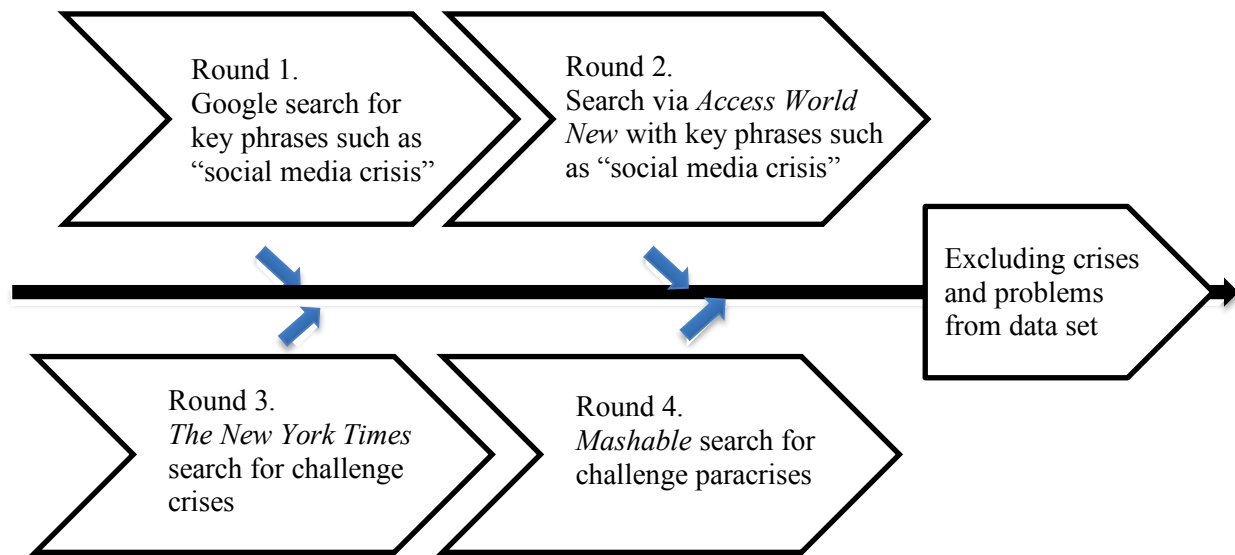
Figure 2 Task flow chart for data collection and cleaning processes

As established in Chapter II's review of paracrisis literature, incidents that could be defined more precisely as paracrises often simply are labeled as "social media crises."

During the first round, key phrases such as "social media crisis", "social media failure" and "social media blunder" coupled with "2017", "2016", "2015," and "2014" were entered on Google's search engine. During the second round, the same sets of key phrases were searched on *Access World News*, a data set that offers more than 5,900 news sources and trade publications at local, state, regional, national and international levels.

Reviewing cases collected during these two rounds of search, the author realized most of them fall into or contain elements of the faux pas type of paracrisis and customer relations problems. However, the literature indicates challenge paracrises do pose risks for organizations; , the challenge paracrisis is the most complicated and intriguing of all paracrisis clusters (Coombs, 2017). Because challenge paracrises may be more complex and less likely to be labeled as simple social media crises, the search terms used earlier in the process may not have captured challenge paracrises. To potentially increase the sample of challenge paracrises or paracrises more aligning with the challenges type, the author then turned to social movement literature for possible key search phrases.

From an activism perspective, a challenge paracrisis is also a form of communication that may be used by social movements to target companies as existing systems of authority. After initiating claims that an organization behaves in an irresponsible way, a challenger would need to engage in some form of collective action to generate pressure for the organization to respond. Specifically, King and Soule (2007) identified protest as the essential extra-institutional form or tactic that was often used in social movement activities. In their highly influential piece (King & Soule, 2007) on social movements' effects on stock price returns, they used protest events as the proxy for

social movement and reviewed *The New York Times* published between 1962 to 1990 to extract protest events targeting U.S. companies.

According to King and Soule (2007), the decision was made because newspaper data on protest events are one of the most frequently used sources in social movement literature, and *The New York Times* is well positioned to report protests against corporations. King and Soule also used keywords such as *protest*, *activist,* and *demonstration* to search events covered by *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* and found neither of them provided more comprehensive coverage than *The New York Times*. Thus, following King and Soule's data collection method for social movements challenging companies, the author conducted a third round of data collection by searching combinations of keywords such as "social media" and "protest," "boycott," "activist," and "activism" on *The New York Times* archived from 2014 to 2017 provided by the data set of Lexis Uni. This round of search identified 42 cases.

To strive for a sufficiently large sample of cases that might capture variations among challenge paracrises, one more round of search was conducted by searching cases on *Mashable*, a digital-born news media, using the same sets of key words to extract cases from *The New York Times*. Digital-born news media refer to news media organizations launched on digital platforms vs. those who are digital extension of traditional media (Painter, Kristiansen, & Schäfer, 2018). Over the past few years, digital-born media such as *Buzzfeed*, *Mashable,* and *Vice,* have forayed into the field of journalism and challenged traditional media. Generally speaking, digital-born media have younger social media audience bases, and are more sophisticated at creating contagious, viral content with high social media shareability (Tandoc & Foo, 2018; Tandoc & Jenkins,

2017). Given social media's significant roles during paracrisis communication, it seems reasonable to assume that these digital outlets are important sources of information regarding for protests as well.

Among major digital-born media, *Mashable* was chosen over others because of its content emphasis: *Buzzfeed* focuses more on entertainment, *Vice* on online video content, whereas *Mashable* features a focus on technology and social goods, which might be closely related with challenge paracrises. What's more, a closer look at *Mashable*'s coverage suggested this rising media outlet sought to be objective and impartial through making efforts to include corporate voices as well. In addition to covering activists' protests, they also reached out to the challenged companies for a response, especially when the company had not issued any public statement before their coverage. Using the same sets of key words to extract paracrisis cases from *The New York Times*, the author conducted the fourth round of case collection from *Mashable* and identified 22 additional cases that were not found in previous rounds.

Only cases that fit into the definition of paracrisis (Coombs, 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2012) were retained in the data set for analysis. Three criteria of exclusion were used to guide this data cleaning process. First, crises occurring without a paracrisis or fermenting stage were excluded. These are negative events that once exposed or happened, immediately threatened an organization's operation and/or reputational survival. For example, in 2017, large companies and government agencies learned their advertisements appeared next to extremist content on YouTube, one of Google's subsidiaries. This means brands were actually unwittingly funding extremists, because an advert appearing next to a video brought about $7.50 for every 1,000 clicks the video

earned. This event immediately threatened Google's operational survival because brands pulled millions of dollars in advertising, and governments as well as companies were pressuring Google to take corrective actions (Solon, 2017). Although cases like this one are often addressed as "social media crises," they are actually crises that involve social media, either as related with the crisis causes or were discussed on social media, or both.

The second criterion for case exclusion is to filter out negative situations that should be better managed by other management functions rather than risk or crisis communication. These situations include (1) customer relations issues and (2) labor rights disputes. As reviewed in Chapter II, customer relations was dropped from the revised paracrisis typology because customer complaints via social media should be addressed by social customer relations management rather than through paracrisis communication strategies. Likewise, labor rights disputes are usually managed through an internal conflict resolution process involving the corporate management, employees, and sometimes government mediators and legal forces. Nevertheless, if a customer relations issue or a labor rights dispute violates important stakeholders' expectations on safety, economic interests or environmental issues, it then becomes a crisis and would require intervention from crisis professionals. For instance, in 2017, an uncooperative United Airlines customer was knocked out and dragged from an airline. Once this event was exposed via social media, United Airline was faced with a crisis (Benoit, 2018) because its actions may have broken laws surrounding safety issues and expectations for passenger treatment were egregiously violated. Although this event was originally exposed on social media, it was never a paracrisis or "social media crisis," but rather a

full-blown crisis unveiled through social media and actively discussed by various voices on social media.

Thirdly, "social media fails/blunder/crises" that were actually *problems* posing very minimal threats to organizational reputation were excluded. For instance, on November 24, 2017, McDonald's tweeted: "Black Friday **** Need copy and link****". Although this tweet was mentioned by several practitioners and social media consultancies as a "crisis" or "big fail" (e.g., Roberts, n.d.), it is only a mistake and did not violate any important public expectations. In addition to these three criteria of exclusion, any accusation or protest targeting individuals or countries were filtered out during the four rounds of searches. Eventually, 143 paracrisis cases reported during 2014 to 2017 were included in the sample (See Appendix A for a sample of cases).

After collecting cases and filtering out those that did not fit the definition of paracrisis, the author then proceeded to the second step of a rigorous data collection, building a case study data set (Yin, 2009). For this case series study, each paracrisis case was summarized as including, but not limited to, name of the organization facing a paracrisis, the name of challenger (if any), description of the crisis threat or accusation, platform(s) on which the crisis risk was made publicly available, and the date on which the paracrisis first appeared.

Secondly, the organization's responses were entered into the data set, including the responses issued via its own social media account(s), the corporate website, and/or statements obtained by news media and/or trade publications. Also included in the data set are the author's research notes when summarizing cases and collecting organizational responses. The data set was then imported into Nvivo 11, a qualitative data analysis

software tool used to store, manage, and code large quantities of data in a time-efficient manner (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). In addition to these two steps for a rigorous data collection, Yin (2009) also listed a third principle designed to increase the reliability of case information: the maintenance of a chain of evidence, or the explicit links between the research questions asked, the data collected, and the conclusions drawn. This third principle can be fulfilled as the data collected directly address the research questions and the conclusions are based on an analysis adequately grounded in the data.

It should be noted that the purpose of collecting paracrisis cases from different sources with different sets of keywords and phrases was not to build an exhaustive data set of all paracrises occurring during the period. Such mission would be impossible as media and trade publications may not cover every incident meeting the definition of a paracrisis, especially those confronted by small companies. However, given the scope of the four rounds of search, it is reasonable to expect the data set is comprehensive in paracrisis clusters. A quick review of the data set also indicates wide coverage of various types of organizations experiencing paracrises, including government agencies, nonprofits, large companies headquartered in different countries, medium-sized companies, and small businesses owned by families. Therefore, analysis based on this data set can be expected to have satisfactory external validity to account for paracrisis cases outside of this data set.

Analysis Procedure

The three research questions are addressed using different units of analysis. For RQ1 concerning paracrisis clusters, each individual paracrisis case scenario serves as the unit of observation. For RQ2 on paracrisis response strategies, the unit of analysis is an

organization's public reaction towards a paracrisis. For RQ3 connecting paracrisis clusters with response strategies, the unit of analysis is a paracrisis case, including a paracrisis scenario and the response strategies used to address the paracrisis. A three-step mixed content analysis was conducted to answer the three research questions that differ in unit of analysis. Firstly, a round of open coding was conducted, with reference drawn from existing paracrisis typologies (Coombs, 2015; 2018) and challenge paracrisis responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2015) as well as other crisis communication responses and elements identified in (para)crisis communication literature.

After this round of opening coding, a constant comparative analysis (CCA) was conducted to distill open codes into main codes. Originating from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), CCA is an iterative and inductive qualitative analysis procedure that allows categories to emerge by reducing data through constant recoding (Fram, 2013). Constant comparisons were made (1) within cases and responses labeled by the same codes, (2) by the same code families, (3) among cases and responses labeled by different codes, and (4) by different code families (Eisenhardt, 1989). This process enabled the author to more fully conceptualize similarities and differences that could be used to describe categories.

The second round of in-depth analysis led to a paracrisis typology with six paracrisis clusters and a response strategy typology containing seven strategies.. Operational definitions for categories also were drafted. For the last step, the two typologies were returned to the entire data set to examine if they can account for all cases and responses, and if revisions of operational definitions should be made. During this step, the author refined the operational definition for faux pas paracrisis and concluded

that there was no outlier piece of data that cannot be explained by the framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These two revised typologies were then returned to the data set to recheck coding of clusters and response strategies. Based on the audited coding results, the author proceeded to calculate the frequencies of paracrises clusters, as well as different response strategies used to address different clusters of paracrises.

<div align="center">*Reliability Measurement*</div>

An intracoder reliability test was carried out to assess coding reliabilities for the typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies. Although intracoder reliability is "the weakest form of reliability check" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 271), it excels in pinpointing possible coder drift (Neuendorf, 2016) the author might make when developing the two typologies. Thus, an intracoder reliability test would be the first step to check reliability for this exploratory study.

The intracoder reliability test was conducted on a subset of 27 paracrisis cases randomly drawn from all 143 cases, which is about 20 percent of the full data set. The author coded this subset of cases at two different time frames with an interval of more than a month. Krippendorff's alpha test (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002) was used to estimate the intracoder reliability. The results are satisfactory for both paracrisis clusters ($\alpha = 1.00$) and response strategies (the respective alpha values for refusal equals 1.00, for recognition .85, for refutation .93, for revision 1.00, for repression 1.00, for reference to organization values .84, and for disassociation 1.00).

Research Findings

In line with the three research questions, this section on paracrisis communication contains three related components. The first subsection reports the classification of paracrisis clusters (RQ1), the second presents categories of response strategies organizations used to manage the paracrises in the sample (RQ2), and the third details various single and combined response strategies used to manage the paracrisis clusters (RQ3).

Paracrisis Typology

Drawing from Coombs' conceptual work on paracrisis clusters (2015; 2019), this study identified six paracrisis clusters: (1) challenge, (2) faux pas, (3) social media misuse, (4) guilt by association, (5) misinformation, and (6) social media account hacking (Table 4). Among the six clusters of paracrises, Clusters 1 and 3 were identified in the two paracrisis typologies proposed by Coombs (2015; 2019). Cluster 2's description was expanded, Clusters 4 and 5 were adopted from Coombs' 2019 typology but were renamed to more sufficiently capture actual cases, and Cluster 6 is a newly identified type.

Table 1 Typology on Paracrisis Clusters

Paracrisis Cluster	Description	Frequency
1. Challenge	A situation when an organization's existing practice is charged by discontented stakeholders as unethical or irresponsible	44

Table 1 Continued

Paracrisis Cluster	Description	Frequency
2. Faux Pas	A situation when (1) an organization takes an action with good or no bad intention but is perceived by at least some publics as embarrassing, offensive, or insensitive; or (2) when an organization unintentionally allows people to generate embarrassing, offensive, or insensitive content that can be attributed to the organization.	56
3. Guilt By Association	A situation occurs when a negatively viewed actor is publicly associated with an organization	32
4. Social Media Misuse	A situation when an organization incurs crisis risk because it violates social media rule(s).	4
5. Misinformation	A risk situation triggered by the circulation of messages that lacks veracity	5
6. Social Media Account Hacking	A situation happens when an organization's social media account is hacked and generates crisis risk	2
	Total	143

As the only paracrisis type identified in both versions of Coombs' paracrisis typology (2015; 2019), a *challenge paracrisis* occurs when an *existing* organizational practice, such as taking an issue stance or enacting a corporate policy, is accused of being unethical or irresponsible. This definition remains unchanged from previous conceptualizations of a challenge paracrisis.

The second paracrisis cluster, *faux pas* paracrisis, was originally defined as a risk situation where an organization *takes an action* with good or no bad intention but that action is perceived by at least some publics as embarrassing, offensive, and/or insensitive (Coombs, 2019). The sampled cases suggested the need to modify this conceptualization

of faux pas to further distinguish two different types of faux pas paracrises (Table 4). The first type of faux pas, or Type I faux pas, follows Coombs' definition (2018) as a situation where an organization itself takes an action that can be interpreted as embarrassing, offensive, and/or insensitive. The second type of faux pas, or Type II faux pas, refers to a situation where an organization unwittingly *allows* people to generate embarrassing, offensive, and/or insensitive content that can be attributed to the organization. Perhaps this type of faux pas had not been described in previous research due to its actual infrequent occurrence and/or perceived lack of "newsworthiness."

Although there were only 3 Type II faux pas out of all 58 faux pas paracrises in this data set, these two faux pas types are qualitatively different from each other and the differences might affect organizations' response strategies. For Type I faux pas, the organization is fully responsible for the action, albeit with no deliberate intention to upset the publics. But for Type II faux pas, the locus of control is more ambiguous. For example, Coca-Cola created a Tweeter generator that turned tweets with #MakeItHappy into cartoon pictures with ASCII code and urged its consumers to tag negative Tweets with this hashtag. Gawker, an online media company and blog network, soon noticed Coke tweeted an ASII dog made up by the "Fourteen Words" slogan of white nationalism. Gawker than created a Twitter bot to post quotes from Mein Kampf, Hitler's autobiographical manifesto with #MakeItHappy, so that Coke would turn those lines into art (Monllos, 2015). Compared to Type I faux pas where an organization is fully responsible for creating an ad or engaging in offensive action, the locus of control in this case was less on the company and more on those who abused this social campaign. For a Type II faux pas like this one, an organization might consider attacking those who

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manipulate its action to reduce the perceived responsibility for offending the publics (i.e., refutation). In Coke's case, its spokeswomen clearly stated, "It's unfortunate that Gawker is trying to turn this campaign into something that it isn't. Building a bot that attempts to spread hate through #MakeItHappy is a perfect example of the pervasive online negativity Coca-Cola wanted to address with this campaign" (Monllos, 2015). However, for a Type I faux pas, the attacking strategy might not be recommended because the locus of control is less debatable because theorganization is responsible for creating the "objectionable" content. The other two paracrisis clusters proposed by Coombs (2019), rumor and collateral damage, were identified as mutually exclusive clusters in the sample and were renamed to provide more precise descriptions. The category of rumor paracrisis is renamed as *misinformation* paracrisis to account for a situation where "false or misleading information is purposefully circulated about an organization or its products in order to harm the organization" (Coombs, 2019, p. 59). By using the term *misinformation* instead of *rumor*, the author expands this paracrisis type to include other messages that are ambiguous in veracity. Though we have seen terms such as misinformation, rumor, and disinformation used interchangeably in academic work to describe messages or content that lacks truthfulness, there are important conceptual differences among those terms. For example, rumor is often defined as unconfirmed information (e.g., DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007) that can turn out to be either true or not. In contrast, misinformation is false and stems from the deliberate intention to mislead (Faris et al., 2017; Shin, Jian, Driscoll, & Bar, 2018). In addition to rumors, disinformation, and misinformation, the circulation of "fake news" might also generate risks for organizations.

To include paracrises resulting from all messages lacking truth value, the author thus follows Rojecki and Meraz's (2016) conceptualization of misinformation as covering different types of *unverified messages*: rumor, gossip, disinformation, propaganda, and factitious information blend (FIB). According to Rojecki and Meraz, rumor and gossip originate from individual sources and are spread out of personal, psychological motivations; disinformation and propaganda are said to have state actors as sources and are spread to influence public attitudes; disinformation is meant to erode public support, whereas propaganda is used to muster public support. Rojecki and Meraz also proposed a new term, *factitious information blend (FIB)*, to refer to misinformation generated by elites and "opinion entrepreneurs" who seek to discredit political rivals.

By using Rojecki and Meraz's understanding of misinformation to rename this paracrisis cluster, this author does not attempt to distinguish different types of misinformation. In some cases, it is impossible and unnecessary for organizations to distinguish misinformation types to manage a paracrisis. One example of this difficult situation was experienced by Roberta's, a Brooklyn restaurant, in 2016. Misinformation on social media sites such as Voat, a social media news aggregator featuring "no censorship," linked this restaurant to the so-called Pizzagate hoax that claimed Hillary Clinton led a child-abuse gang that harbored children as sex slaves in a pizza restaurant. A Voat user posted an alleged finding of a reference to Roberta's in one of Hillary Clinton's emails, which then spurred discussion on related topics such as whether the restaurant's logo, a skeleton holding a pizza paddle, connected the restaurant to the conspiracy. Suddenly this local restaurant became the center of national political fights and was harassed because of the misinformation spreading online (Rosenberg, 2016). In

this case, it would be difficult to accurately distinguish between rumor, misinformation, disinformation, and even FIB. Thus, misinformation as an overarching term may more accurately capture the complicated online flux of unverified information posted against organizations.

The paracrisis type originally called *collateral damage* by Coombs (2019) was renamed "*guilt by association.*" Coombs' definition of collateral damage used the term guilt by association: "a risk of guilt by association happens when some negatively viewed actor mentions or is publicly associated with the organization" (p. 59). Through renaming, the author distinguishes this type of paracrisis from the frequently used meaning of "damage" in the crisis literature, as in reputational, financial, and/or operational damage. Because a paracrisis only has the potential of causing such damages, *guilt by association* may more appropriately describe a situation where an organization faces a crisis risk because it is associated with some negatively-viewed entity. For example, Jim Beam experienced backlash on Twitter when its celebrity spokeswoman, Mila Kunis, stated on the "Conan Show" that she had been donating to Planned Parenthood under Vice President Mike Pence's name in a form of "peaceful protest." Although Jim Beam had never made pro-choice statements, it was still denounced online by some social media users who oppose the pro-choice stance and who saw the company as associated with the actress's comments (Ledbetter, 2017).

The analysis also revived a paracrisis type proposed by Coombs in 2015 but dropped in 2019: *social media misuse*. This paracrisis cluster refers to situations where an organization engenders crisis risk because it violates the often unarticulated ethos of social media use. Although there are only four cases of social media misuse out of 143

cases in the data set, this type is unique and should not be equated with a faux pas or challenge paracrisis. Take, for example, DiGiorno Pizza's inappropriate use of #WhyIStayed. After a video surfaced of Ray Rice punching his then-fiancee Janay Palmer, thousands of female Twitter users used #WhyIStayed during the discussion of their physically and emotionally tortuous experiences in abusive relationships. DiGiorno jumped onto the trendy hashtag and tweeted "#WhyIStayed You had pizza." This tweet was vehemently denounced as highly inappropriate and offensive to female victims of domestic violence who used the hashtag to share their heartbreaking stories (Meyer, 2015). This tweet could not be interpreted as an innocent mistake on DiGiorno's part. Rather, using the popular but emotionally-laden hashtag to promote their products was viewed as exploitive. The commercialization of the hashtag trivialized the issue of abusive relationships.

Likewise, *social media account hacking*, the newly-identified cluster of paracrises, also occurred infrequently ($n = 2$) but cannot be categorized into other paracrisis clusters. Social media account hacking often provokes short-term social media attention and discussion because the account is hacked to post insensitive, controversial, or even egregious content. While most hackings are crises because they jeopardize an organization's daily operation and threaten information security, social media account hacking typically poses relatively minimal risk and can be managed easily with appropriate responses. Hacking a social media account is qualitatively different from hacking for financial benefit to access data from an organization.

Overall, the case series of 143 cases informed the identification, description, and/or renaming of paracrisis clusters (RQ1). Based on naturally occurring instances of

paracrises, the analysis supported the need to distinguish between six clusters and to further refine definitions presented in extant literature. Faux pas ($n = 56$) was the most frequently observed paracrisis, and together with challenge ($n = 44$) and guilt by association ($n = 32$) paracrises, comprised 92.3% of the paracrisis cases. Though social media misuse ($n = 4$), misinformation ($n = 5$), and social media account hacking ($n = 2$) occurred less frequently, their contents represented qualitatively distinct clusters that warranted their own labels.

Paracrisis Response Strategies

The second part of Study 1 addresses RQ2 concerning use of paracrisis response strategies. The response strategies corresponding to the previously classified cases were identified. Coombs and Holladay (2015) proposed six response strategies for challenge paracrises: (1) refusal, (2) refutation, (3) repression, (4) recognition and/or reception, (5) reform, and (6) revision. Their operationalizations provided the groundwork for identifying response strategies in the data set.

The author found all six response strategies were used to manage not only challenge paracrises but also the other paracrisis clusters. This is not surprising because their proposed response strategies generally are consistent with response strategies identified for crises. However, because the original response strategies were developed for challenge paracrises, revisions of the response strategy descriptions were made to more accurately account for responses to other paracrisis clusters as well (Table 2).

Table 2 Paracrisis Response Strategies

Response Strategies	Description
Refusal	An organization deliberately ignores a paracrisis by not making any direct response
Refutation	An organization denies a challenge accusation, an accused bad intention, or attack the accuser
Repression	An organization takes efforts to silence discontented stakeholders through actions such as deleting negative social media posts
Recognition	An organization acknowledges the validity of a challenge accusation or an accused negative intention
Revision	An organization takes action to make change(s) regarding a faux pas or a challenged existing organizational practice
Reference to Organizational Values	An organization refers to its organization values and/or its long-termed commitment to pursue the values to address an accused negative intention or a challenge
Disassociation	An organization denies its connection with an negatively perceived actor or action that generates crisis risk

In addition to revising response strategy descriptions, the *reform* and *revision* strategies developed by Coombs and Holladay (2015) were collapsed into the single *revision* strategy. Originally, the revision strategy was reserved for instances of requests for minor modifications, whereas the *reform* strategy was reserved for cases where the *exact change* expected by the challengers was implemented. However, given the multivocal nature of the social media arena, different challengers may hold different expectations for revision and reform. In other words, the demands made with respect to a particular issue may differ. More importantly, it can be difficult to distinguish between the two. Like a crisis, a paracrisis may be a sudden, emergent situation that requires a quick response from an organization. It is not uncommon for an organization to make an immediate, easy-to-implement revision or promise a more extensive reform to address a

challenge, and then engage in a relatively long-term management process to negotiate with challengers and take further actions. In such scenarios, only the initial response to a challenge would be counted as a paracrisis response; whether the organization eventually implements the reform is not a concern for paracrisis communication at this point. Therefore, the decision was made to collapse reform and revision into one single response strategy to refer to organizations' efforts to make changes regarding a faux pas or a challenge paracrisis.

Furthermore, two new response strategies were identified: *disassociation* and *reference to organizational values*. Disassociation is typically used to address two paracrisis clusters: guilt by association and social media hacking. The goal is to separate the organization from a negatively viewed action (e.g., a racist tweet posted by a hacked account) or an actor (e.g., an employee who engaged in racial profiling of a customer). Disassociation comes in two forms: *direct disassociation* and *indirect disassociation*. The former is used when an organization publicly announces its disconnection with the entity and the negativity associated with the entity. In contrast, latter is used when an organization drops its connection with the entity without directly addressing the negativity element in a public statement. This often happens when a controversial or even divisive issue is involved. For example, in 2017, online activists organized a boycott to urge several department stores to drop Ivanka Trump's brand because of President Trump's political stances. While several department stores did drop the brand following the protests, none of them stated publicly that the decision was in reaction to the protests or had anything to do with their corporate stances toward with President Trump (Taylor & Hanbury, 2018).

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The other newly identified response strategy is *reference to organizational values*. When organizations are accused of offending people or engaging in unethical or irresponsible behaviors, many of them refer to their organization's values to counter criticism and to remind the publics of their continuous commitment to certain causes. A somewhat similar strategy, *bolstering*, was also observed in the cases. Bolstering is a "secondary" crisis response strategy recommended by SCCT that is used to foster a positive connection with stakeholders. However, as a secondary strategy, bolstering cannot stand alone to address public concerns but can be combined with any of the six primary crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2019). Thus, bolstering is not considered to be a separate paracrisis response strategy. In contrast, *reference to organizational values* can be used alone to address paracrisis challenges, because an organization can express and validate its issue stance by stating its values. Reference to organizational values is used to justify its (in)actions. All paracrisis response strategies identified in the sample can be coded into the seven primary strategies, along with bolstering as a secondary response strategy which was used to remind the publics of an organization's positive facts.

Connecting Paracrisis Response Strategies with Paracrisis Clusters

The third part of Study 1 seeks to connect paracrisis response strategies with clusters to examine if there are any patterns of applying certain response strategies to address a specific paracrisis cluster (RQ3). While some paracrisis cases were managed with a single response strategy, most cases were addressed by using more than one. Table 3 reports the frequencies and percentages of stand-alone and combined response strategies used to manage the six paracrisis clusters.

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Table 3 Single and Combined Uses of Response Strategies to Address Six Paracrisis Clusters

Single and Combined Response Strategies	Challenge		Faux Pas		Guilt by Association		Social Media Misuse		Misinformation		Social Media Account Hacking	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Refusal	4	9.10	3	16.25	5	15.63	0	0.00	2	40.00	0	0.00
Refusal & Revision	11	25.00	1	0.45	2	6.25	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refusal & Disassociation	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	3.15	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refusal & Reference to Organizational Values	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	3.15	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Repression & Reference to Organizational Values	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	20.00	1	0.50
Refutation	9	20.45	2	0.37	5	15.63	1	25.00	1	0.20	0	0.00
Refutation & Repression	0	0.00	1	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refutation & Recognition	1	2.27	2	0.04	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refutation & Revision	1	2.27	6	0.04	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refutation & Reference to Organizational Values	6	13.64	2	0.24	5	15.63	1	25.00	1	20.00	1	50.00
Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	3	6.81	21	0.12	1	3.15	1	25.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refutation, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27	1	0.04	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refutation, Recognition, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27	3	0.04	2	6.25	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00

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Table 3 Continued

Single and Combined Response Strategies	Challenge		Faux Pas		Guilt by Association		Social Media Misuse		Misinformation		Social Media Account Hacking	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Refutation, Recognition, Revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27	0	0.04	2	6.25	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Refutation, Recognition, Reference to Organizational Values, & Disassociation	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	6.25	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Recognition	0	0.00	2	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Recognition & Revision	4	9.10	8	0.16	2	6.25	2	50.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Recognition, Revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	0	0.00	3	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	50.00
Revision	1	2.27	0	0.04	2	6.25	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Revision & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27	0	0.04	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Reference to Organizational Values	0	0.00	1	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Disassociation	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	3.15	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Reference to Organizational Values & Disassociation	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	3.15	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total paracrisis number of each cluster:	44		56		32		4		5		2	

Note.. The *n* size is the frequency of single or a combined response strategies used to manage a paracrisis cluster; percentage represents the n size of a strategy divided by the total number of paracrises within the cluster.

As presented in Table 3, the author identified 21 single and combined response strategies by using an organization's response for each case as the unit of analysis. Specifically, four single strategies, namely refusal, refutation, revision, and reference to organizational values, were used as stand-alone responses to address a paracrisis; and 19 different combinations of response strategies were applied by using two to four response strategies together to address one single paracrisis. To better illustrate how strategies were applied to manage different paracrisis clusters, three additional tables display the single and combination strategies for the most frequently-observed paracrisis clusters: challenge, faux pas, and guilt by association paracrises. Since the data set contains few cases for the clusters of social media misuse ($n = 4$), misinformation ($n = 5$), and social media hacking ($n = 2$), no separate tables were constructed for these clusters. Limited information was available to report different uses of response strategies, and these three clusters were less complicated to manage. The following subsections will review the uses of response strategies for the six paracrisis clusters in turn.

Single and Combined Response Strategies for Challenge Paracrises

Table 4 presents the strategies used to address challenge paracrises. Unlike Table 3 that only focuses on reporting the frequencies of all single and combined response strategies used to manage the 6 paracrisis clusters, Table 4 organizes 20 different uses of response strategies to manage challenge paracrises with respect to the 4 paracrisis response strategies identified for RQ2. Therefore, in Table 4, a combined use of response strategies is displayed more than once, in order to illustrate the occurrence of all response strategies it contains, which makes the total percentages for paracrisis

response strategies and for single and combined response strategies higher than 100

percent.

Table 4 Strategies Used to Address Challenge Paracrises

Paracrisis Response Strategy (*n* and %)[a]	Single and Combined Response Strategies	n[b]	%[b]
Refusal (15, 34.09%)	Refusal	4	9.10
	Refusal & Revision	11	25.00
Repression (0, 0.00%)	N/A	0	0.00
Refutation (21, 50%)	Refutation	8	18.19
	Refutation & Revision	2	4.55
	Refutation & Recognition	1	2.27
	Refutation & Reference to Organizational Values	6	13.64
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	3	6.81
	Refutation, Recognition, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
	Refutation, Recognition, Revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
Recognition (9, 20.45%)	Recognition & Revision	4	9.10
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	3	6.81
	Refutation, Recognition & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
	Refutation, Recognition, Revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27

Table 4 Continued

Paracrisis Response Strategy (n and %)a	Single and Combined Response Strategies	n^b	$\%^b$
Revision (22, 50%)	Revision	1	2.27
	Refusal & Revision	11	25.00
	Recognition & Revision	4	9.10
	Refutation & Revision	2	4.55
	Revision & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	3	6.81
	Refutation, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
Reference to Organizational Values (10, 22.73%)	Refutation & Reference to Organizational Values	6	13.64
	Revision & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
	Refutation, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
	Refutation, Recognition, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
	Refutation, Recognition, Revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	2.27
Disassociation (0, 0.00%)	N/A	0	0.00

Total Number of Challenge Paracrises: 44

Note. [a] represents the *n* size and percentage of challenge paracrisis cases that were addressed with a primary paracrisis response strategy divided by the total number of challenge paracrises. [b] represents the *n* size and percentage of challenge paracrisis cases that were addressed with single or combined response strategies divided by the total number of challenge paracrises.

Among the seven paracrisis response strategies, refutation (50%), revision (50%), refusal (34.09%), and recognition (20.45%) were all used frequently. It is not unexpected that organizations were taking different reactions towards CSR-based challenges, because the institutionalization of CSR has been based on the interplays of multiple, plural and sometimes conflicting voices in today's networked society (Castelló, Morsing, & Schultz, 2013). An organization might choose different response strategies by considering the plural discourses underlying a challenge, the context where a challenge is raised, and its own CSR practices and organizational values.

For example, Starbucks has been explicitly supported homosexual right (Garcia, 2016). But when a prominent Muslim group in Malaysia joined calls by Islamic conservatives in Indonesia to protest the company for its pro-LGBT stance, Starbucks Malaysia used the strategy of refusal by not responding to news media's request for comments (Harris, Cahya, & Latiff, 2017). Note that the LGBT issue is more sensitive and controversial in Malaysia than in the U.S. If the company's Malaysia branch used refutation, it might attract more attention to the challenge and risk alienating more stakeholders because of the local context. But if the company uses more accommodative strategies such as recognition to express their understanding of the challengers' concerns, it might incur criticism from all over the world for both withholding their diversity efforts and being inconsistent or even opportunistic with their CSR practices. Given the publics' multivocal, ambiguous, and sometimes polarizing interpretations on

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what constitutes being socially (ir)responsible, it is not surprising that a continuum of strategies ranging from refutation to revision was applied to address various challenges.

The complexity in addressing challenge paracrises in a multivocal arena is further reflected in the combined uses of response strategies. For example, refutation was used in tandem with revision in 6 out of 44 challenge paracrises (13.64%). At first glance, this combined use might deliver inconsistent messages: refutation is a defensive response strategy that denies a challenge accusation, whereas revision is an accommodative strategy as an organization takes action to make changes regarding its challenged organizational practice. However, a closer inspection of case scenarios suggests that such seemingly inconsistent use is actually well grounded in the multivocal or polyphonic interpretations on corporate social (ir)responsibility (Castelló et al., 2013).

For instance, on 2017's World Refugee day, Starbucks announced its decision to hire 2,500 refugees across its European locations by 2022. In line with the company's CSR practices and values, Starbucks' decision was a response to Trump's temporary travel ban on refugees and immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries. The company soon received backlash for its promise to hire refugees rather than unemployed people in the U.S.. In response to these challenges and accusations, Starbucks said it had already hired over 8,800 veterans and claimed its brand perception and customer satisfaction were not affected negatively by their promise to hire refugees. Additionally, the company also promised to speed up its previously stated goal of hiring 10,000 veterans and military spouses by 2018 (Kilpatrick, 2017). While using refutation to deny

the accusation that Starbucks did not hire U.S. citizens and that by doing so, the company tarnished its own reputation, Starbucks also made a revision as it promised more efforts to hire veterans. In this way, two response strategies were used to address different concerns and the message was clear and coherent.

Similarly, refusal and revision were used together to address 25% of all challenge paracrises in the data set. For example, when pressed by activists to drop the Trump brand, Sears Holding Corporation announced that it would remove 31 Trump-branded items due to a stock refresh without making any direct reference to the challenge, and stated that the company preferred to focus on its business and "leave the politics to others" (Disis & Wiener-Bronner, 2017). In this way, the company used refusal as if deliberately ignored the challenge that it is irresponsible to carry the Trump brand. While we cannot know whether dropping the brand was part of its strategic initiative to optimize brand assortment, it is clear that by announcing this decision, the company was also using revision as it took at least some action regarding the challenge. Cases like these further showcase the complicated concerns for addressing challenge paracrises online: when pressed by different CSR expectations and interpretations, an organization would need to consider multiple voices in the arena and might use more than one response strategy, including those seemingly contradictory ones, to address a challenge accordingly.

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Single and Combined Response Strategies for Faux Pas Paracrises

Table 5 presents the single and combined response strategies used to address faux pas paracrises with respect to the seven response strategies. A faux pas paracrisis is a situation where an organization either unintentionally takes an action that is perceived by at least some publics as embarrassing, offensive, or insensitive or a situation where the organization allows people take embarrassing, offensive, or insensitive actions that can be traced back to an organizational action. Unlike challenge paracrises, where an organization's existing practice and its implications are open to different, conflicting or even polarizing interpretations, faux pas paracrises are less ambiguous in terms of publics' interpretations of an organizational action, because even those who are not offended by a faux pas can see why it's offensive. Among the seven response strategies, refutation was used most frequently (67.86%) to deny a bad intention, followed by recognition (69.64%) as organizations acknowledged the unintentional act and admits it could be valid, and revision (55.36)% in the form(s) of deleting problematic social media content, halting offensive marketing campaigns, and/or promising to prevent a similar paracrisis from occurring again.

Table 5 Strategies Used to Address Faux Pas Paracrises

Paracrisis Response Strategy (*n* and %)[a]	Single and Combined Response Strategies	*n*[b]	%[b]
Refusal (4, 7.14%)	Refusal	3	5.36
	Refusal & Revision	1	1.79
Refutation (38, 67.86%)	Refutation	2	3.57
	Refutation & Repression	1	1.79
	Refutation & Recognition	2	3.57
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	21	37.50
	Refutation, Recognition, & Reference to Organizational Values	3	5.36
	Refutation & Revision	6	10.71
	Refutation, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	1.79
	Refutation & Reference to Organizational Values	2	3.57
Repression (1, 1.16%)	Refutation & Repression	1	1.79
Recognition (39, 69.64%)	Recognition	2	3.57
	Recognition & Revision	8	14.29
	Recognition, Revision & Reference to Organizational Values	3	5.36
	Refutation & Recognition	2	3.57
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	21	37.50
	Refutation, Recognition, & Reference to Organizational Values	3	5.36
Revision (31, 55.36%)	Refutation & Revision	6	10.71
	Refutation, Recognition & Revision	21	37.50
	Refutation, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	1.79
	Recognition, Revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	3	5.36

Table 5 Continued

Paracrisis Response Strategy (*n* and %)[a]	Single and Combined Response Strategies	*n*[b]	%[b]
Reference to Organizational Values (8, 14.29%)	Reference to Organizational Values	1	1.79
	Refutation, Recognition, & Reference to Organizational Values	3	5.36
	Refutation, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	1	1.79
	Recognition, Revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	3	5.36
Disassociation (0, 0%)	N/A	0	0

Total Number of Faux Pas Paracrises: 56

Note. [a] represents the *n* size and percentage of faux pas paracrises that were addressed with a primary paracrisis response strategy divided by the total number of faux pas paracrises. [b] represents the *n* size and percentage of faux pas paracrises that were addressed with single or combined response strategies divided by the total number of faux pas paracrises.

Regarding the combined use of response strategies, the three combined response strategies that recurred most often are: (1) refutation, recognition, and revision (37.5%), (2) recognition and revision (14.29%), and (3) refutation and revision (10.71%). Such combined uses can be coherent as an organization might deny bad intention, acknowledge the validity of an accusation, and take corrective actions (i.e., delete an offensive tweet) to manage a faux pas.

Single and Combined Response Strategies for Guilt by Association Paracrises

Table 6 reports the response strategies applied to address guilt by association paracrises. The cluster of guilt by association is unique in that an organization is

perceived negatively not because of its own action, inaction, or existing policy, but because of its association with a negatively viewed entity. While an organization can use dissociation to sever its connection with a negatively viewed entity to reduce crisis risk, this study found that disassociation (15.63%) was used less frequently than refusal (28.13%), refutation (46.82%), recognition (21.88%), revision (28.13%), and reference to organizational values (34.38%). This is probably because denying association with a negatively viewed entity often comes at a tangible cost, ranging from firing an employee involved in racial profiling at workplace (Clarke-Billings, 2016), to terminating a partnership with a controversial celebrity hunter (Mirabella & Barker, 2016), to a business owner's self-resignation because of his offensive remarks on political, religious, and feminist issues (Lindelof, 2017).

Furthermore, when an entity is viewed negatively by some publics because of a complicated, divisive issue, using disassociation to sever its connection with such an entity would fail to address different concerns in the arena and might even make an organization looks inconsistent given its previous connection with the entity. In such cases, an organization might consider other response strategies to manage crisis risk.

Table 6 Strategies Used to Address Guilt by Association Paracrises

Paracrisis Response Strategy (*n* and %)[a]	Single and Combined Response Strategies	*n*[b]	%[b]
Refusal (9, 28.13%)	Refusal	5	15.63
	Refusal & Revision	2	6.25
	Refusal & Disassociation	1	3.13
	Refusal & Reference to Organizational Values	1	3.13
Refutation (15, 46.82%)	Refutation	5	15.63
	Refutation & Reference to Organizational Values	5	15.63
	Refutation, Recognition, Reference to Organizational Values, & Disassociation	2	6.25
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	1	3.13
	Refutation, Recognition, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	2	6.25
Repression (0, 0%)	N/A	0	0.00
Recognition (7, 21.88%)	Refutation, Recognition, & Reference to Organizational Values	2	6.25
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	1	3.13
	Refutation, Recognition, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	2	6.25
	Recognition & Revision	2	6.25
Revision (9, 28.13%)	Revision	2	6.25
	Refusal & Revision	2	6.25
	Refutation, Recognition, & Revision	1	3.13
	Refutation, Recognition, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	2	6.25
	Recognition & Revision	2	6.25
Reference to Organizational Values (11, 34.38%)	Refusal & Reference to Organizational Values	1	3.13
	Refutation & Reference to Organizational Values	5	15.63
	Refutation, Recognition, Reference to Organizational Values, & Disassociation	2	6.25
	Refutation, Recognition, revision, & Reference to Organizational Values	2	6.25
	Reference to Organizational Values & Disassociation	1	3.13

Table 6 Continued

Paracrisis Response Strategy (*n* and %)[a]	Single and Combined Response Strategies	*n*[b]	%[b]
	Disassociation	1	3.13
	Refusal & Disassociation	1	3.13
	Reference to Organizational Values & Disassociation	1	3.13
Disassociation (5, 15.63%)	Refutation, Recognition, Reference to Organizational Values, & Disassociation	2	6.25

Total Number of Guilt by Association Paracrises: 32

Note. [a] represents the n size and percentage of faux pas paracrises that were addressed with a primary paracrisis response strategy divided by the total number of guilt by association paracrises. b represents the n size and percentage of guilt by association paracrises that were addressed with single or combined response strategies divided by the total number of guilt by association paracrises.

The combined use of refutation and reference to organizational values (15.63%) stood out among 12 different combined uses of response strategies applied to address guilt by association paracrises. Compared with refutation as a stand-alone response strategy (15.63%), this combined use might be more effective if an organization's refusal against an accusation is in line with its long-term practices and values.

For example, Under Armour was denounced as divisive after its CEO, Kevin Plank, called Trump a "real asset" for the country in a CNBC interview (Bhasin, 2017). Though Plank's opinion on Trump cannot be equated to the company's stance on issues, disassociation might not be an effective response strategy as a CEO often is viewed as the face of a company. Instead, Under Armour used refusal to argue that Plank only

supported Trump's business policies, not his social viewpoints. Plank soon released two statements to further address this paracrisis by emphasizing the company's commitment to "developing innovative ways to support and invest in American jobs and manufacturing" (Bhasin, 2017). With specific evidence on their long-term strategies for domestic manufacturing, Plank was able to reinforce his argument on why he and the company have supported Trump's business policies. Additionally, Plank highlighted the company's values regarding equal rights, diversity, and immigration issues to further refute the accusation of being divisive. In this way, using refusal coupled with references to organizational values might be more effective than using disassociation or refusal as a stand-alone strategy.

Response Strategies for Social Media Misuse, Misinformation, and Social Media Account Hacking Paracrises

Because this data set has very limited cases of social media misuse, misinformation, and social media account hacking paracrises (See Table 3), no convincing response strategy patterns can be discerned for these three clusters. Compared with the three paracrisis clusters reviewed earlier, these three clusters are relatively easier to manage because the loci of responsibility and control are less ambiguous. For example, social media misuse paracrises are situations when an organization violates social media ethos, as in the case of DiGorno Pizza's offensive misuse of #WhyIStayed. Since DiGorno was fully responsible for abusing an emotionally-laden hashtag to promote its products, the company should use (1)

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recognition to admit and apologize for its senseless social media misuse, and (2) revision to delete the promotional tweet ""#WhyIStayed You had pizza." Refutation should be used very cautiously because denying its intention to sell its products by taking advantage of a serious trendy hashtag might not be convincing.

For misinformation paracrises, the most appropriate response strategy is *refutation* that denies a falsified charge and provides corrective information. Repression such as deleting comments might only be considered if the comments violate social platform rules and/or prevalent social media ethos. For social media account hacking, *refutation* can be used to deny the agency of posting offensive social media content, together with *recognition* to acknowledge the inappropriateness of content posted by hackers, and *revision* to delete the content and promise future action to prevent similar paracrises from occurring again.

To sum up, there is no panacea that could be applied across all paracrisis clusters. To choose effective response strategies, an organization would need to understand various voices on the arena, evaluate the costs and implication of (not) taking actions, and ensure the coherence of paracrisis communication.

Discussion

On the one hand, the availability of social media platforms has created opportunities for organizations to engage in real-time, interactive communication with stakeholders. On the other hand, organizations are now compelled to face and address paracrises as a new form of risk that requires public responses. Additionally, these online

threats may attract the attention of practitioners keen to sell their services and mainstream media who may be drawn to a paracrisis' conflict elements. Though trade journals and some research have labeled these threats as "social media crises," this term focuses more on the platform rather than the varied reasons for these incidents.

This investigation confirms the vagueness and inadequacy of the term "social media crises" as it obscures important differences between crisis threats requiring public risk communication and other online incidents, as well as differences among various types of crisis threats emerging in online environments. By sifting through trade publications and news media coverage on "social media crises" over the time frame of four consecutive years, this study suggests that the term "paracrisis" is more useful and can distinguish crisis threats requiring public risk communication from mere incidents, negative online feedbacks, and/or trolling that have few negative consequences.

Specifically, this case series shows that while customers' online complaints are often referred as "social media crises," they are actually customer relations problems that can be addressed by the function of customer relation management rather than by risk or crisis management communication. Customer relations problems, as well as other operational problems that are spread online, such as online labor rights protests, are not paracrises because paracrises are closely aligned with stakeholders' corporate social responsibility (CSR) associations with an organization, *not* corporate ability (CA) associations.

Brown and Dacin (1997) distinguished two types of corporate associations stakeholders have with a company, CA associations and CSR associations. Sohn and Larisy (2012, 2014) extended this distinction to the field of crisis communication to draw the differences between two types of reputational crises: CA reputational crises and CSR reputational crises. CA reputational crises are critical events "adversely affects reputation associated with expertise of products and service, technological innovation, and industry leadership", whereas CSR reputational crises are major events that "pose a threat to reputation associated with norms and values cherished by society and socially expected obligation" (Sohn and Lariscy, 2014, p. 25).

If we extend this CA-CSR distinction to view online crisis threats, it is clear that paracrises are CSR crisis threats triggered by accusations or challenges contingent upon social obligations. In contrast, customer complaints and other operational problems spread online are CA incidents that might have the potential to evolve into a CA crisis if not addressed properly. But before a CA incident shows signs of escalation, intervention should be delivered from a corresponding operational function, *not* crisis communication professionals. The only situation when paracrisis communication is necessary for a CA problem is when an organization treats its customers or employees in unfair or unjust ways, which can be linked to CSR. But the reasons for the paracrises would be the unfair or unjust treatment, not products or services.

Besides further illustrating what is and what is not a paracrisis, this study also contributes to paracrisis research by testing, refining, and expanding Coombs and

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Holladay's conceptual work on the typologies of paracrisis clusters (RQ1) and response strategies (RQ2) (Coombs, 2017; 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012, 2015) through a series case study. Though case studies are valuable tools in theory-building (Yin, 2009), often cases are selected because they "stand out" from other cases due to factors like exceptional controversy or miserable failure. Describing a range of cases that have been systematically selected and presumably are free from researcher bias helps to ensure the external validity of the typologies derived from the cases. Furthermore, connecting the typology of response strategies to the typology paracrisis clusters (RQ3) represents the first step towards building an organizational paracrisis communication framework. As such, this study will contribute to paracrisis communication research in several ways.

Firstly, developing a classification of paracrisis clusters is an essential step towards further theory development in paracrisis communication. A weakness in existing paracrisis research is the tendency to draw conclusions for paracrisis management communication without considering the differences among various paracrisis clusters.

For example, Kim, Zhang, & Zhang (2016) identified humorous self-mocking as the most effective response strategy. Drawing partly from Kim et al.'s (2016) research findings, Honisch (2018) then found that a humorous strategy was the least effective strategy compared with reform, refusal, and refute strategies. What Kim et al. (2016) examined should be classified as a faux pas paracrisis that arose when a company sent a Weibo tweet that unintentionally exaggerated product sales numbers. Arguably, humor is a not a response strategy, but rather a *form* of response strategy. The response strategy

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was actually recognition and refutation: Alibaba's CEO used humor to acknowledge the company's mistake to exaggerate its sales number and to deny the accused intention to literately falsify figures to promote itself.

In contrast, what Honisch (2018) investigated seemed to be challenge paracrises where companies were challenged for their contracts with factories experiencing labor rights conflicts. Humor as a form of response strategy might not be appropriate because a challenge paracrisis is often related with issues more serious than a faulty sales figure. Therefore, the discrepancy in the effectiveness of response strategies can be at least partially explained by the fact that these two studies were examining different paracrisis clusters; thus, their conclusions are incommensurable.

As such, without a clear understanding of varied reasons for paracrisis development that could sort paracrises into different clusters, scholarly efforts to test the effectiveness of paracrisis response strategies may have limited heuristic value and flawed practical implications. In other words, future work on response strategies based on a consensus understanding of paracrisis clusters will be more productive in generating theories to guide practice.

Secondly, this study contributes to paracrisis research through the identification of a set of response strategies gleaned from the analysis of actual communication practices. Coombs and Holladay (2015) developed an inventory of response strategies for challenge paracrises by drawing from the crisis literature and the rhetoric of agitation and control rather than through the unobtrusive observation of naturally-occurring

strategies. This study further refined and expanded the inventory of responses to all paracrisis clusters. These seven paracrisis response strategies identified in the current investigation support Coombs' (2017) argument that paracrisis responses are variations of crisis responses. Though paracrisis response strategies might resemble crisis response strategies, they may appear to differ when applied to paracrisis communication practices.

For example, the refutation paracrisis response strategy might look like the denial strategy used for crisis communication, which also includes the tactic of attacking the accuser. The point is that in actual situations, denial as a crisis response strategy is used differently from refutation as a paracrisis response strategy. When using the denial strategy to manage a crisis, an organization either denies the existence of a crisis or denies its responsibility for causing the crisis. Therefore, denial is a highly defensive strategy that cannot be used with more accommodative strategies such as correction action. For example, for a technical error crisis (i.e., operational error crisis), it is not appropriate to use the denial strategy (which claims there is no crisis) together with either a compensation strategy (which provides money to victims) or with an excuse strategy (which minimizes the organization's culpability for the crisis) because the two sets of strategies send t inconsistent messages about the situation. However, as shown in Table 3, refutation frequently was used in combination with other more "accommodative" strategies such as recognition and/or revision to manage challenge and faux pas paracrises. An organization can use refutation to deny its intention to cause harm, recognition to admit the validity of an accusation, and revision to take action to

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preclude similar incidents from happening again. Such combined use of strategies underlies the dynamic of agitation and control during paracrisis communication

Arguably, this dynamic is what separates paracrisis response strategies from crisis response strategies. Agitation exists when people outside the establishment advocate changes from the establishment. In response to agitation, the establishment uses control responses, including avoidance, suppression, adjustment, and capitulation (Bowers, Ochs, Jensen, & Schulz, 2009). Coombs and Holladay (2015b) identify the parallels in agitation-control dynamics between social movements and challenge paracrises and modified the four control responses into the domain of paracrisis communication.

As discussed before, a crisis is a negative event or situation where important stakeholder expectations on safety, economic interests, and/or fundamental ethical issues are violated. The negative outcomes of a crisis can be measured by damages experienced by important stakeholders and/or the organization itself. However, for any paracrisis, there is likely to be dissensus among stakeholders regarding the existence and/or severity of the crisis risk. Though the existence and severity of a crisis also is largely subjective, the existence of a paracrisis and perceptions of its severity may be even more so as a paracrisis is related with social obligations and is thus more open to stakeholders' interpretation. Therefore, when addressing a paracrisis communicatively constructed by multiple and sometimes opposing voices, an organization may consider using combined response strategies to address multiple concerns from different stakeholders. The

effectiveness of using multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory response strategies to respond to paracrisis is a researchable question that may further support the distinction between crisis and paracrisis.

Thirdly, by connecting organizations' uses of response strategies with different paracrisis clusters, this study provides an essential step towards building a coherent framework on organizational paracrisis communication with rich possibilities for developing and testing hypotheses. Take challenge paracrises for example. As reviewed earlier, refutation and refusal as more "defensive" strategies were used more frequently than revision and recognition as more "accommodative" ones. It is likely that contextual factors related with a CSR challenge might affect organizations' selections of response strategies.

When being challenged for less contestable issues, an organization might use "accommodative" strategies such as revision and/or recognition; but if a challenge involves more contestable or divisive issues, an organization might be more likely to consider the use of refusal (i.e., deliberately making no response) to avoid the risk of alienating important stakeholders whose issue stances are different from the challengers'.

In 2018, the Rock Center for Corporate Governance at Stanford University conducted a survey on CEO activism and found that Americans' attitudes towards CEO activism varied by issues (Larcker, Miles, Tayan, & Wright-Violich, 2018). Most Americans were found to be in favor of environmental issues such as clean air or water (78%) and renewable energy (65%) and widespread social issues such as healthcare

(68%) and income inequality (66%). While the focus of this survey was CEO's advocacy impacts, it might also showcase that the publics tend to have less divisive expectations for companies regarding these issues. Thus, when an organization is challenged as irresponsible or unethical in one of these issue arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), revision and recognition might be more effective, as suggested by Honisch's (2018) experimental study on a challenge paracrisis regarding a labor rights issue.

However, an organization might be more cautious when using recognition and revision to address a challenge paracrisis involving controversial, divisive issues. The survey on CEO activism suggested that while 40% of Americans supported CEO activism on gender issues, 37 did not; 43% supported activism on LGBTQ rights, 32% did not; and although 45% favored activism on racial issues, 29% did not. Abortion, politics, and religion are all found to be issues with net-unfavorable reactions, meaning more Americans agree that CEOs should *not* use their position and influence to advocate for these issues. Furthermore, more Americans tend to *decrease* their purchasing if they do not agree with a CEO's advocacy stance than to increase their purchasing because they support the CEO's advocacy position (Larcker et al., 2018).

Given the publics' tendency to decrease purchasing (Larcker et al., 2018) because of disagreement with an organization's advocacy position, it is possible that if a company makes a revision to address a challenge paracrisis involving a divisive issue, the company might draw more attention to the challenge and risk estranging more stakeholders than they could appease with its corrective action. This probably explains

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why refusal was used frequently to address more than a third of challenge paracrises in this data set; and why organizations sometimes made "quiet" revisions, i.e. implemented actions suggested by a challenge but refrained from making direct, explicit public statements.

Actually, the salience of divisive issues is not limited to challenge paracrises; the above-mentioned issues also underlie accusations against unintentional organizational actions (i.e., faux pas paracrises) and organizations' association with a controversial entity (i.e., guilt by association paracrises). For example, Pepsi and Coca-Cola both experienced a faux pas paracrises for publishing a Russian map including Crimea, a controversial area over which the Ukraine also claims sovereignty. When Pepsi used refusal and declined to make any comments, Coca-Cola apologized and published a new map without Crimea, which then triggered another round of protests from Russia (Beshisky, 2016). Because of this backfire, Coca-Cola seemed to attract longer and heavier media attention than Pepsi. Thus, for paracrises on divisive issues, refusal might be effective if an organization would not wish to take sides s and risk losing stakeholders; revision might also be used, but ideally in combination with other response strategies to deliver a more subtle yet coherent message that respects different voices in the arena.

Apart from the nature of issues involved in a paracrisis, an organization's own values are likely to play an essential role in deciding which response strategies can be taken. Recent advertising campaigns such as Nike's advertainment featuring Colin

Kaepernick, a former NFL quarterback and national-anthem protest leader, suggest that companies are increasingly taking public positions on issues that are not directly related with their business but are in line with their organizational values. Meanwhile, the publics have increasingly expected and pressured organizations to make responses when they are not satisfied with an organization's (in)action regarding CSR issues. This investigation found that reference to organizational values was used together with recognition, revision, and/or refutation to address paracrises related with various issue arenas on race, gender, religions and immigration. It is possible that by referring to organizational values, a paracrisis statement might be more effective in account acceptance (i.e., effectively defend the organization's stance), as it suggests that the organization's action, inaction, and/or revision is in line with its intrinsic, long-standing values rather than out of some opportunistic concerns.

Conclusion

So far, few researchers have examined these types of online risks, termed paracrises. Because this research is in its infancy, foundational work is needed to first, determine if the paracrisis concept is viable as distinct from crisis, and second, to better understand the nature of paracrises and how organizations engage in paracrisis communication. This research represents the first study to identify paracrisis clusters and response strategies applied to address these clusters in naturally-occurring paracrises experienced by organizations of different sizes and from all three sectors. The nascent

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empirical research on paracrisis communication will benefit from this study's description of how organizations communicate to manage risks posed by paracrises.

Limitation and Future Research Directions

That being said, Study 1 is limited in its theoretical contributions because it is a descriptive study seeking to identify typologies of paracrisis clusters and response strategies with high external validity. Nevertheless, it represents an essential first step in developing sound typologies. Future work could build on this study to conduct further studies to examine and test response strategies used to address different paracrisis clusters. For example, analytic studies can be conducted to explore whether reference to organizational values would actually increase account acceptance for different paracrisis clusters.

Secondly, this study is limited in that the typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies were developed without insider knowledge on how the organizations made sense of the paracrises and what were their intended communication goals behind their paracrisis responses. There might be situations where the author's categorization of response strategies did not fully capture an organization's own sense-making process. For example, an organization might not respond to a press request for a statement simply because they did not see the necessity of doing so; but the author would code this lack of response as refusal and speculate that the organization was doing so to avoid alienating other stakeholders. Although the author made substantial efforts to reduce the possibility of subjective interpretations by collecting media coverage on organizations' reflections

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after a paracrisis it remains unknown how organizations' own sense-making and decision-making processes might refine or enrich the typologies.

Thirdly, when focusing on organizations' responses for paracrises, this study did not examine other voices in the arena and how voices responded to the organizations' communications. This weakness has limited this study in two respects. First, without examining voices after releasing a paracrisis statement, the reactions to and the effectiveness of paracrisis responses remains unknown. Moreover, in collecting and describing response strategies, the researcher assumes these responses were effective. These paracrises (crisis risks) did not escalate into crisis. Second, this study assumes that using different response strategies would help to address different concerns in the arena. But without actually looking into the content of other voices in the arena, this assumption remains a speculation that needs future empirical examination. Future research can also examine other voices to understand how different stakeholders interpret and interact with an organizations' paracrisis communication efforts.

This study also tends to privilege organizations in paracrises by focusing on building an organizational paracrisis communication framework that is intended to mitigate crisis risk. Future research can also take a critical perspective to study how an organization might dominate an arena with its discourse and resources, and how different, alternative voices and tensions might be suppressed from proposing more fundamental changes.

In addition, another limitation of this study is the selection of cases that were reported in English. Although several paracrises that occurred in Asia and Europe were included in the data set, most of the cases feature companies located in or headquartered in the US. Given paracrises' nature as socially constructed processes, future research should also investigate how national cultures or intercultural differences might affect an organization's paracrisis communication practices. Cultural context is likely to influence "what counts" as a paracrisis as well as the perceived impetus of the paracrisis. Differences in cultural values are likely to influence perceptions of appropriate responses. Additionally, formalized laws and policies as well as systems of government should affect perceptions of available response options

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CHAPTER IV

STUDY 2

Chapter IV presents Study 2 which seeks to gain heuristic knowledge on paracrisis monitoring and diagnosing by examining one paracrisis' evolution process on Twitter. Using a big data approach, Study 2 investigates the paracrisis' evolution pattern over time and the identities and network structures of social media influencers (SMIs) who spurred the evolution. The organization of Chapter IV is as follows: (1) a literature review to establish the rationale and research questions for Study 2; (2) methods used to address the research questions; (3) results and discussion, and (4) conclusion, including theoretical and practical implications and limitations of Study 2.

Overview

Both researchers and practitioners claim that risks unfolding on social media may evolve in highly uncertain and complicated ways. While there are many cases when one online accusation or challenge against an organization evolves into a paracrisis or even a crisis, understanding on how an accusation or challenge might trigger a paracrisis is still very limited. One way to close this knowledge gap is to identify patterns of paracrisis evolution through case studies on various naturally-occurring paracrises. As an initial effort to do so, Study 2 tracks the #DeleteUber movement, a challenge paracrisis that originated in Twitter and led 200,000 Uber users to delete their accounts within three days. But because this paracrisis did not actually brought major reputational or

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operational damages for the organization, it did not escalate into a crisis. Specifically, this study seeks to gain understanding on paracrisis evolution by looking into the variables of time, social media influencers' account and network characteristics, and traditional media coverage's roles in the evolution process. The following section presents a more detailed literature review that informs the research questions for this study.

Literature Review

Work in crisis communication recommends a timely response within 24 hours after a crisis hits, because a rapid, appropriate, and ethical response can increase the organization's ability to protect stakeholders and influence the publics' crisis understanding and perception, including their perceived crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2014). Arguably, the time frame of 24 hours might even be shortened considering social media's affordance for both asynchronous and synchronous communication. However, for paracrises, it is possible the recommended time strategy may differ.

In contrast to exigencies posed by a crisis, a paracrisis represents only a *crisis risk or threat*. Although organizations' strategic responses to address a paracrisis would be necessary (Coombs & Holladay, 2015a), an immediate public response to a crisis risk is not always desirable. To assess the potential for a challenge to evolve into a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), crisis managers should evaluate its escalating *likelihood* and *potential impact*, which vary extensively from one case to another, because a paracrisis may evolve in complicated, uncertain ways.

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A paracrisis could rapidly escalate into a crisis, since an accusation potentially can diffuse at an exponential rate on social media and might, in turn, attract traditional media coverage (Pang, Hassan & Chong, 2014). For example, in the case of the prank video circulated by two Domino's Pizza employees, it took only one day for this visual threat to go viral and evolve into a crisis (York, 2009). But not all paracrises have such escalating potentials. After all, many social media sites feature niche-based, fragmented communities (Tampere, Tampere & Abel, 2016). An online accusation, although potentially visible to all, might only be viewed by a community of users and never go viral. Even when initial diffusion of the accusation seems rapid, its spread may stall soon due to users' information overload, myriad distractions, and short attention spans (Gomez-Carrasco & Michelon, 2017; Purcell et al., 2012; Tapscott, 2009). In such scenarios, a premature paracrisis statement might attract unwanted attention rather than address stakeholder concerns and potential reputational threats.

Furthermore, wide reach alone does not necessitate high crisis likelihood; sometimes simply the news elements of an accusation itself, such as those involving animals, sports, and having the newsworthiness of deviance (Valenzuela, Piña, & Ramírez, 2017) is likely to attract heavy online information sharing, no matter whether or not the accusation actually threatens stakeholders or the organization's reputation. Unfortunately, both academic and practitioner literatures are quick to label *any* negative publicity or event for an organization that garner social media and traditional media attention as a "crisis," regardless of the actual risk severity. Often such "crises" tend to

hold media attention for a short period of time and quickly "blow over," having no serious ramifications for the organization aside from inspiring clever memes, social media shares, or late-night talk show jokes. While it is very likely that organizations' timing strategies for paracrisis communication is different from those of crisis communication, currently few studies actually differentiate paracrisis from crisis, let alone exploring organizations' timing strategies for paracrisis communication, which should be based on sophisticated understanding on paracrisis evolution patterns.

Perhaps the study most relevant to understanding paracrisis evolution patterns is the multiple case study research conducted by Pang, Hassan, and Chong (2014), which analyzed the life spans of five crises triggered on social media that were then covered by traditional offline media. To examine how crises developed on and off social media, the authors studied both online and offline data and found that if an accusation against an organization involves engaging visuals, celebrities, and/or resonates with other stakeholders' pre-existing negative experiences, it can travel quickly online and become a social media hype (Pang, 2013), a situation when social media users demonstrated intense interest and engagement in online conversation. If the accusation includes the news values (Treadwell & Treadwell, 2004) of novelty or conflict, mainstream, offline media would most likely cover it, which then legitimizes the accusation as a crisis and add momentum to social media discussion which would last and taper off after offline traditional media coverage fades away (Pang et al., 2014).

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While the five crises examined by Pang et al. (2014) all began with a pre-crisis stage fermenting online, their model of crisis life span seems limited in that it does not elaborate on possible variations of paracrises evolutions, or in the words, how and when crisis threats evolve into a crises. An a priori approach examining crisis threats that had already become crises (as in Pang et al, 2014) cannot sufficiently account for the evolution patterns of paracrises that do not escalate into crises. Furthermore, recent media-related changes also press scholars to test and perhaps update Pang et al.'s research findings from a decade ago to more contemporary (para)crises. For example, as publics in the Western world report less trust in mass media (e.g., Müller 2013), one might question if a paracrisis still requires the coverage from traditional mass media to become a crisis. Additionally, how might recent changes in social networking sites' technological affordances, including burgeoning niche communities, and user demography affect the dissemination and escalation of a challenge crisis threat? Thus, research focusing on paracrises is needed to further understanding of paracrises as distinct from crises.

Content analysis on a naturally-occurring paracrisis cases would effectively answer the above-mentioned questions. However, extant data-based case studies on crisis communication in social media mainly take *manual approaches* to sample, code, and analyze content, which are fruitful in understanding how different voices on an rhetorical arena Frandsen & Johansen, 2016) co-construct crisis discourse (e.g. Brown & Billings, 2013). But because of the manual limitation on the amount of data that can be

processed, when a case involves large amount of social media data, it is risky to claim a selected sample is representative and the results from sampled voices can be generalized to understanding the entire arena.

In order to take the entire social media dataset into consideration, this study used mainly computational methods to collect and analyze data. #DeleteUber was selected for Study 2 as this particular paracrisis gained heavy attention from both traditional and social media. This is a challenge paracrisis involving divisive issues and would likely attract plural voices to join the arena. The first research question builds on and extends Pang et al.'s (2014) research findings to ask:

RQ 1: How did the #DeleteUber paracrisis evolve over time online on Twitter?

Twitter data for this case were collected because Twitter was where the paracrisis originated and gained the most attention as compared to other social media sites that also shared information about the paracrisis. All tweets with the hashtag #DeleteUber were collected to examine the temporal pattern of paracrisis evolution.

Roles of Traditional News Media in Shaping Paracrisis Evolution

The roles of traditional news media have been frequently explored in communication literature. As communication channels, traditional news media often are reported as more credible than social media, and publics are more to be more likely to share messages from traditional media than from social media (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). Furthermore, traditional news media remain influential in shaping the publics' crisis framing. For instance, Ven der Meer's (2013)

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case study revealed that while the publics initially developed speculative framings based on their personal interpretations, they later aligned their frames to be consistent with the frames provided by extended news media coverage. Specifically regarding the life span of a crisis on social and traditional media, Pang et al. (2014)'s research highlighted traditional news media's role in elevating a risk into a crisis.

However, in recent years, public trust in traditional news media has declined (e.g., Müller 2013). Moreover, the rise of "fake news" (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018) or "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (p. 1094), further questions traditional media's long-standing institutional functions in agenda setting and agenda building. For paracrises entangled with divisive socio-political issues, attributions of organizational culpability may be less contingent on facts than on personal interpretations of facts. Considering journalism's longstanding norms of impartiality and objectivity, much uncertainty still exists on whether traditional news media, especially mainstream ones, would hold a company responsible for (not) taking stances on such issues. Without clear, explicit attributions of crisis responsibility, news media coverage may not legitimatize a paracrisis as a crisis; and consequently might not add much momentum to paracrisis escalation. To test such assumption, the second question is posed:

RQ 2: Did news coverage from traditional media escalate the evolution of the #DeleteUber paracrisis to a crisis status?

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Understanding SMIs' Account Identities and Content Diffusion Patterns

In addition to crystalizing knowledge on paracrisis' life span patterns temporally, understanding social media influencers is another imperative task for paracrisis management. SMIs are social media users who play a significant role in disseminating opinions and shape publics' attitudes (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). While no empirical research has attested to the significance of SMIs during paracrisis or crisis communication, social media studies in crisis communication and related fields both suggest that some users are more powerful than others in creating and diffusing content.

Firstly, according to Social Media Crisis Communication model (SMCC), there are three types of social media users in a crisis setting: (1) influential social media creators, (2) social media followers, and (3) social media inactives (Austin, Fisher Liu, & Jin, 2012). Influential social media creators generate crisis information for followers to consume. Applying the SMCC model to a paracrisis setting, we might assume that influential social media creators could be SMIs who largely shape the publics' interpretations of a paracrisis. Secondly, empirical studies in related fields also confirm the importance of SMIs, because the majority of social media accounts passively retweeted content created by others. For instance, during a French activism movement, 70% of the tweets were retweets (Giglietto & Lee, 2017); among tweets regarding Washington shooting of four police officers, retweets take more than 50% of all the tweets (Heverin & Zach, 2010). Meanwhile, social network studies also show that

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influential social media users can initiate a deluge of message diffusion (De Choudhury et al., 2010).

Traditionally, SMIs are presumed to be individuals and organizations with strong public images, such as famous athletes, politicians, musicians, and social media accounts owned by mainstream media and established activism organizations. Yet since 2000s, social media have enabled "ordinary" users to develop engaging public images within various online communities. Recent marketing research and trade publications have begun to notice such users and address them as "micro-influencers," "niche-influencers," or "micro-celebrities" (e.g., Ang & Welling, 2017). For brands targeting generations of "digital natives," identifying and engaging micro-influencers is now key to marketing success and reputation management (Montecchi & Nobbs, 2018). While their follower bases are smaller than SMIs with strong public images, micro-influencers tend to have stronger connections with their followers and thus provide "the best combination of engagement and broad reach" (Markerly, 2018).

Identifying SMIs can be challenging during pressing moments like paracrises, when an organization is compelled to scan the environment, evaluate known and previously unknown stakeholders (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011), and choose response strategies accordingly. Unlike SMIs who work with marketing professionals to promote products and services, SMIs during paracrises might be unknown to the organization before or even during the evolution of a paracrisis. Given micro-influencers' marketing impacts, it's worthwhile to question whether micro-influencers

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also play significant roles during paracrisis evolution; and if so, how might these influencers be characterized. What's more, knowledge on SMIs during paracrises would help organizations better understand the salience of SMIs (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) and develop effective paracrisis responses, if necessary. After all, an organization may only engage a limited number of SMIs for dialogic paracrisis communication on social media; and even one-way communication may need to address voices from key SMIs who can shape publics' (para)crisis perceptions.

To enrich our understanding of the natures and roles of SMIs in the development of #DeleteUber, the following research questions are posed:

RQ 3: Who are the SMIs during #DeleteUber on Twitter?

RQ 4: How might their accounts be characterized?

Any SMI can participate in paracrisis communication. Some might instigate a challenge and remain influential during the entire communication process until the paracrisis loses momentum or until the organization makes satisfactory responses, as in the example of Greenpeace's "Unfriend Coal" campaigns against Facebook (Katz-Kimchi & Manosevitch, 2015). But some might only launch a challenge and then other SMIs would step in to actively spread the challenge, as in the example of Domino's Pizza's prank video (Clifford, 2009). Besides, some SMIs might gradually exhaust their reach in a social network and cease to gain any further attention as all possible interested users become satiated with their content. Since SMIs' influences might vary across the evolution process of a paracrisis, a further research question is raised:

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RQ 5: How might SMIs change over time during #DeleteUber on Twitter?

In sum, the three research questions are posed to enhance our understanding of social media influencers on Twitter during the #Delete Uber paracrisis. Answers to these questions will contribute to the under-researched area of social media influencers as well as enhance our appreciation of the dynamic nature of social media influence.

SMIs' Content Diffusion Structures as Overlooked in Public-centric Crisis Research

SMIs impact the development of a paracrisis mainly via two communication dimensions: (1) *content creation* and (2) *content sharing*. For the purposes of this project, SMIs are conceptualized as those who are capable at both *creating* and *sharing* messages. Thus, users who are highly influential simply because they repost others' content are not the focus of this study are not the focus of this study.

Inspired by RAT, scholars have begun to take a multivocal approach to examine crisis communication produced by a multitude of senders and receivers (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). However, most crisis studies inspired by RAT focus on the dimension of *content creation*, analyzing the responses of faithholders and hateholders (Luoma-aho, 2015) to crises and organizations' crisis responses (e.g., Brown & Billings, 2013; Johansen, Johansen, & Weckesser, 2016). Surprisingly few empirical studies have examined how SMIs *share* their content during crises. Apart from providing engaging content, a SMI would need to be well-positioned in a network to disseminate the content. Before the prevalence of social media, Coombs (1998) had already emphasized the significance of positions with in a social network: "the greater the density and centrality

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of a stakeholder in a network, the more power that stakeholder has in the relationship"

(Coombs, 1998, p. 294; also see Coombs & Holladay, 2015b).

Research into SMIs' content diffusion patterns would not only address this research gap in multivocal research on crisis communication, but also provide practical insights for practitioners to further understand and prioritize SMIs. Recalling marketing research on micro-influencers, social media users' account-level variables, such as numbers of followers, followees and total counts of "likes" received, might not be sufficient indicators of their impacts during paracrises. To complement these variables, their network positions should also be examined. Emerging research on SMIs with strong public images also suggests the importance of different content diffusion patterns. For instance, Bhattacharya and Ram (2012) examined major news agencies' content diffusion on Twitter and found BBC's contents were more able to reach users far beyond its immediate follower base compared to the *Guardian*'s. Their study also suggested that larger follower sizes could not always guarantee larger numbers of retweets. Hence, to gain deeper insight into the content diffusion side of SMIs' impact during paracrises, this study explores how different key SMIs disseminate original content within the network of #DeleteUber. Therefore, the last research question is:

RQ 6: What are representative SMIs' volumes and extends in spreading their original tweets in the form of retweets?

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Method

To address these research questions, the author conducted a case study on the #DeleteUber paracrisis by using computational time series analysis and social network analysis with a large data set of Tweets, along with a textual analysis of offline news coverage. After a brief review of the case background, this section will describe the data collection process and the methods used to address the six research questions.

Case Background and Description

On Friday, January 27, 2017, President Trump issued an executive order to halt the US refugee program for 120 days, stop indefinitely the acceptance of refugees from Syria, and bar citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US for at least the next 90 days (Shear & Cooper, 2017). Though supported by some individuals and organizations seeking immigration restrictions, this executive order was widely criticized and condemned by Democrats, religious groups, academics, and many others as inhumane and discriminatory. Most business leaders of Silicon Valley also reacted negatively towards the order. One of them was Travis Kalanick, CEO of Uber and a member of Trump's economic advisory board. On 3:30 pm, Saturday, January 27, Kalanick emailed Uber employees, noting the order's impact on "a dozen or so employees" and promising compensation for drivers who might be barred from entering the U.S.. Also on the same afternoon, The New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), a non-profit group representing 19,000 taxi drivers in the City, called for a temporary stoppage of pick-ups and drop-offs from 6 pm to 7 pm on Saturday at the John F.

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Kennedy International Airport, where hundreds of protestors already gathered after people affected by the order were detained or turned away. According to NYTWA, their members and other cab drivers joined the strike in solidarity (Papenfuss, 2017). At 7:49 pm, Uber New York (@Uber_NYC) sent a tweet to remove its surge pricing: "surge pricing has been turned off at #JFK Airport. This may result in longer wait times. Please be patient." Surge pricing is a function that increases the cost of a ride during times of high demand. Uber had been criticized in the past for using surge pricing to profit unduly in times of emergency. This time, some interpreted the tweet as an opportunistic attempt to capitalize on the strike, although it was sent 49 minutes *after* the protest ended. Nevertheless, Uber did not encourage its drivers to join the strike. The hashtag #DeleteUber went viral for much of Saturday night, January 28, as well as on Sunday, January 29, when many Twitter and Facebook users sent screenshots of themselves deleting their Uber accounts. According to a *New York Times'* report, more than 200,000 Uber accounts were deleted as a result of the #DeleteUber protest on social media (Isaac, 2017). The next Thursday, February 2, Kalanick resigned from Trump's economic advisory board and explained in an internal email to employees "there are many ways we will continue to advocate for just change on immigration, but staying on the council was going to get in the way of that" (Isaac, 2017).

Data collection

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Two sets of data were collected and analyzed. The first and main set of data consists of 210, 892 tweets sent during the #DeleteUber paracrisis that involves 46,324 distinct Twitter accounts. Activity-based sampling (De Choudhury et al., 2010) was used, as the author collected all tweet activities using the hashtag "DeleteUber." The time frame for data collection was from 4:00 pm, January 28th, half an hour after Uber's CEO sent an email to employees regarding the immigration ban, to January 30th, 9:00 pm, when the tweet volume steadily plummeted close to the level prior to #DeleteUber, without any signs of regaining momentum. To collect a complete sample of tweets without constraints from Twitter's free application programming interface (Morstatter, Pfeffer, Liu, & Carley, 2013), tweets were obtained from DiscoverText, a web-based social media crawler and text analytic tool. The second dataset includes 18 news articles identified in LexisNexis published between January 29 and early February that contain keyword #DeleteUber.

Case Study with a Big Data Approach

In the study of socially mediated crisis communication, the case study method has been used frequently for its strengths in allowing researcher to unobtrusively observe publics (Holladay & Coombs, 2013). Given this study's focus on paracrisis as a relatively new crisis concept, a case study method is particularly fit to test previous findings and under-studied theories and to gain new understandings (Eisenhardt, 1989). The six research questions are all essentially "*who*," "*how*," or *"what"* questions that can be best answered by analyzing spontaneous data collected in real-time (Yin, 2009).

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As discussed earlier, to increase the analytic precision of social media data analysis, computational analyses was used to optimize the strength of the large data set of tweets. Additionally, a textual analysis on the second data set of news coverage was conducted to gain understanding on the case and on traditional media's possible (para)crisis interpretations. By doing so, the author hopes to preserve both the algorithmic accuracy in depicting temporal changes and structural patterns as well as the human sensitivity (Lewis, Zamith, & Hermida, 2013) to discuss a corporate paracrisis intertwined with divisive social and political issues. The following section describes analyses used to address the research questions.

Computational Time Series Analysis

To answer RQ 1 concerning the paracrisis evolution on Twitter, the author first used the time series analysis tool provided by DiscoverText to plot how the tweet volumes changed per hour over the 65-hour time span. This method was possible because each tweet contains its own metadata of the exact time when a tweet was posted. In this way, all 210, 892 tweets were taken into computation to generate a precise temporal trajectory of #DeleteUber evolution.

RQ 2 examined the impacts of traditional news media during the paracrisis evolution. To answer this question, the author compared #DeleteUber's temporal development on Twitter with offline news media coverage, with attention to the times when mainstream media began their coverage. This temporal analysis on the paracrisis' life span serves to examine if offline news media fueled social media communication. In

addition, all 18 offline news reports were analyzed to discover how traditional media described the case, especially how, if at all, might this paracrisis be legitimized as a crisis. This analysis was especially important because it could reveal whether this paracrisis hit a crisis stage, and if so, whether the media legitimized the paracrisis.

Mixed Analysis on Identifying and Categorizing SMIs

Social network analysis (SNA) was used to answer the three research questions on SMIs (RQs3-5). While this method is still quite new to organizational crisis studies, it has demonstrated strong analytic advantages in identifying social media users' structural positions and assessing their influence within a network (del Fresno García, Daly, & Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2016). From a SNA perspective, the first dataset of tweets can be viewed as a social network where 46,324 Twitter users, or vertices, were connected with each other via edges, i.e. the activities of retweeting and mentioning.

RQ3 and RQ4 sought to identify and categorize SMIs over the entire paracrisis evolution process. To answer RQ3, the author calculated and ranked the total number of retweets each Twitter account received. This method was used because this study operationalizes SMIs as those who are effective in disseminating their original content. In addition, for possible reference and comparison, two typical SNA metrics, (1) in-degree centrality and (2) betweenness centrality, were examined. *In-degree centrality* as used here refers to the number of mentioned and retweeted a vertex or a Twitter account received. A vertex with a high in-degree value indicates a large number of accounts in this network either regarding the particular user's tweet(s) as worthy sharing or that the

user should be noticed in the content created by other users. *Betweenness centrality* indicates the level of importance a Twitter user has in controlling the information flow. This metric can be calculated based on how many times a Twitter user or a vertex emerges in the shortest paths between other vertices (Freeman, 1978). NodeXL Pro, a general-purpose social network application founded by the Social Media Research Foundation (Smith et al., 2010) was used to calculate and rank all users on these three metrics.

  Determining SMIs. There are no operational rules or consensus for determining how many top-ranking social media users should be considered as SMIs within a network; rather, the decision is left to the researcher's judgment. For example, when exploring patterns of Twitter communication after the 2015 Charlie Hebdo Shooting, Giglietto and Lee (2017) focused on five Twitter accounts that authored the most retweeted tweets. To develop a relatively comprehensive description of SMIs, an indirect approach was taken by first examining which tweets were *most influential* in terms of *retweet counts they gained*, and then identifying the Twitter user accounts posting these tweets. Among 60,681 original tweets, 9,922 tweets were retweeted at least once. The retweet counts for all 9,922 tweets is a heavily right-skewed distribution ($Max = 18,469$, $M = 15.46$, $Mdn= 1$, $SD = 267.13$). The author thus decided to focus on the top 230 most frequently retweeted tweets, because although this subset of tweets only includes 2.31% of all 9,992 tweets, cumulatively they contribute to 70.31% of the total number of retweets received from all original tweets. Since this subset of 230 tweets was posted by

192 distinct accounts, these 192 accounts were selected as SMIs for further analysis. Using this method I am confident the sample of SMIs is sufficient to capture SMIs of different account types.

Content Analysis of SMI Categories. RQ4 seeks to categorize SMIs based on their account features. Content analysis was used to examine 192 SMIs' account profiles, which include their account descriptions, statuses of Twitter verification, and other information such as profile photos and size of followers. This analysis produced four major categories of SMIs.

RQ 5 explores how SMIs change over time. Following Giglietto and Lee's (2017) study, I pinpointed three peak hours when Tweet volumes per hour reached an apex. I then applied text-mining technologies provided by DiscoverText to create three sub-data sets with tweets posted during those three hours to identify the 10 most retweeted accounts during each hour.

Ego Network Analysis to Examine Key SMIs' Content Diffusion Structures

RQ 6 addresses key SMIs' information diffusion structures. Since it's impossible to discuss all 192 SMIs' content diffusion patterns, the author selected eight SMIs that are mostly retweeted from different categories and sub-categories of SMIs. A series of ego-network analyses were then conducted to examine and compare the volumes and extends of their content dissemination. An ego network is a social network formed by a given vertex (ego) and all other vertices (alters) with whom the ego has edges or connections (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, p. 1172). In the Twitter platform, SMIs as egos

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are at the center of information cascades, i.e., the SMI disseminates content that is then disseminated by alters. Level-1 alters are those who immediately retweeted an ego's tweet(s); level-2 alters are those who then retweeted the information for their immediate alters, i.e. the ego's level-1 alters, and so on. To examine different SMIs' information diffusion extents and structures, I compared the percentages and numbers of vertices contained within each level of the ego network cascades. To visually illustrate the difference among different levels of reach, the most retweeted SMI was selected to generate four graphs on the all four levels of reaches.

Results

Life Span of #DeleteUber Paracrisis

The first two research questions address the evolution of the #DeleteUber paracrisis on the sub-arenas of Twitter and traditional offline media. Figure 3 presents the temporal analysis that answers RQ 1. In line with previous research (e.g., Pang et al., 2014), social media allowed paracrisis information to travel quickly. During the hour of the most intense activity, 16,119 tweets were posted; among 1039 Twitter accounts that disclosed their geographic locations, 80% were from the U.S. and the remainder were from European, Asian, and South American countries.
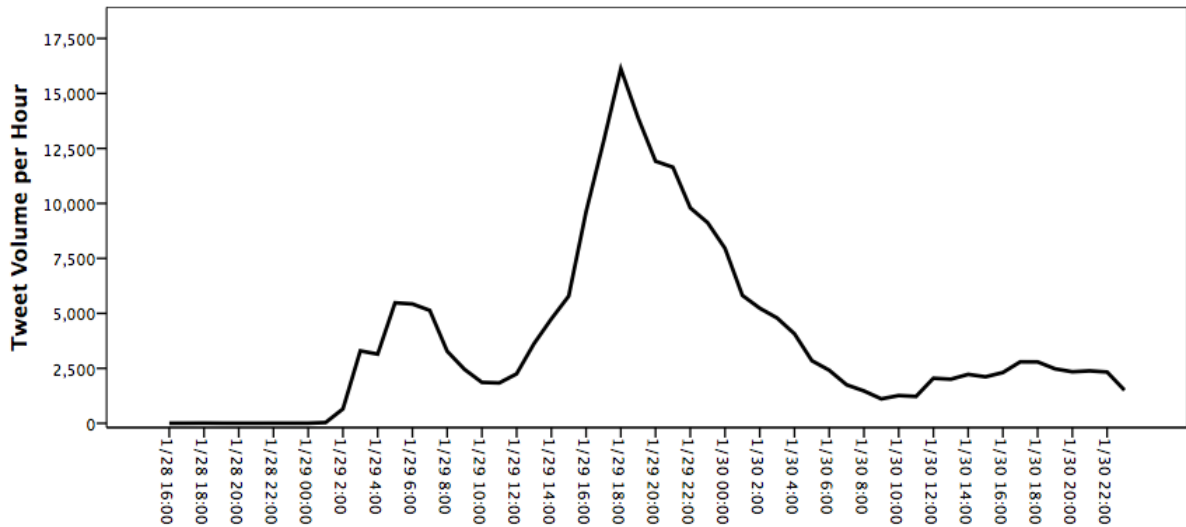
Figure 3 #DeleteUber's Temporal Development On Twitter

Notes. The horizontal axis represents the incremental time change of the paracrisis evolution by every two hours. The vertical axis represents the total volume of tweets posted per hour. The three peak hours where tweet volume climaxed are 3 am, 5 am, and 6 pm on January 29. Offline media, such as *The Daily Telegraph*, first covered the story on January 30, when Tweets volume steadily tapered off. Mainstream media such as *The New York Times* continued to cover the story from January 31 to February 7, when the paracrisis completed lost momentum on Twitter.

Despite the intense tweet volumes and wide geographic scope of #DeleteUber, it remains debatable whether #DeleteUber eventually evolved from a paracrisis into a crisis. As reviewed in Chapter II , though definitions of organizational crisis vary to some extent, scholars generally agree that a crisis results in major reputational and operational damages for the organization, and may include the possibility of endangering human lives, environments or properties (e.g., Coombs, 2019; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Kaman, 2005; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Coombs especially (2004) cautioned against the

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confusion of *incident* with *crisis*: an incident is of minor significance and does not harm the organizational routine. In contrast, a crisis *does have,* or has the potential to have, major impact(s) on the organization. A crisis is also perceptual because the violation of important stakeholder expectations on safety, environment, health, and/or economic issues constitutes a crisis.

Given this understanding of the nature of crises, #DeleteUber did not enter a crisis stage because (1) #DeleteUber did not disrupt Uber's operations (e.g., see Barton, 2001; Coombs, 2019), (2) nor did it inflict significant, sustained reputational harm, which is often seen as a hallmark of a crisis (e.g., Sohn & Lariscy, 2014), (3) Kalanick's resignation from Trump's advisory board does not seem to be a corrective action taken to manage a crisis, and (4) coverage by traditional mainstream media was did not legitimize #DeleteUber as a crisis trigger. The following subsection will elaborate on these four reasons.

To begin with, #DeleteUber has two major consequences. First, 200,000 Uber users deleted their accounts, presumably as the result of this online movement. Yet this might not represent major damage, because the deleted accounts comprised only 0.5% of Uber's monthly active users (Shen, 2017) and did not impede Uber's daily operation. Research comparing Uber and Lyft's IOS and Android app download numbers after #DeleteUber shows the damage was only fleeting and did not affect the ecosystem of ridesharing apps (Williams, 2017).

Another consequence of #DeleteUber would be Kalanick's resignation from Trump's business advisory board five days after #DeleteUber emerged on Twitter. While without inside information, we cannot convincingly infer Uber's motivation or rationale for this decision, the author argues that the resignation is more of a revision as a *proactive* paracrisis response than a crisis outcome or response. Firstly, the pressure for Kalanick to resign from the advisory broad did not mount to a crisis. As a matter of fact, other CEOs on the board with also faced internal and external criticism for their relationships with Trump (Muoio, 2017). Though Kalanick was the first to resign, 15 top executives quit Trump's business councils before they were dissolved (Ballinger, 2017). No evidence showed that these 15 companies faced a crisis because of because of their associations with Trump. Besides, in an internal email to employees, Kalanick explained his resignation, saying "there are many ways we will continue to advocate for just change on immigration, but staying on the council was going to get in the way of that" (Issac, 2017). Thus, his resignation could be interpreted as more of an effort to use *revision* as a paracrisis response strategy to address challenges than a corrective action taken to manage a crisis.

In addition, despite the instant, widespreading challenges again Uber, it cannot be concluded that the company violated important stakeholder expectations on safety, environment, health, and/or economic issues. Firstly, the company's active users are an important stakeholder group and did not seem to change their consumption. Secondly and more importantly, the issues involved in this case were interpreted by different,

sometimes even polarizing voices in the arena, as the political divides have been intensified (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Assessing if and when #DeleteUber evolved into a crisis could be informed further by examining how coverage from traditional media affected its status. Though Pang et al. (2014)'s study of organizational crises concluded offline media coverage would legitimize crisis threats and elevate them to crises, this case demonstrates this pattern may not hold for all paracrises. Firstly, unlike in Pang et al.'s (2014) model, the life span of the #DeleteUber paracrisis was not prolonged after mainstream media coverage (Figure 3). In fact, when most mainstream media joined the paracrisis arena on January 30 and later, #DeleteUber had already faded on the Twitter sub-arena. Secondly, the very limited mainstream media that entered the arena when the hashtag was still trendy did not seem to generate much momentum to the escalation. Among the top 192 SMIs, only three are accounts owned by mainstream media; and the most retweeted traditional media account, CNN en Español @CNNEE) only ranked 23rd in terms of retweets counts, well behind many individual and niche media accounts. Last but not least, very few mainstream media explicitly attributed crisis responsibility to Uber; instead, they described the accusations against Uber as one-sided claims rather than objective facts (e.g., Shen, 2017). For paracrises involving controversial or even divisive social and political issues, mainstream media tend to avoid blaming companies for their actions or inactions because publics, as a whole, lack consensus on judgments of right or wrong. News media are reluctant to enter such contentious debates. Arguably, this might

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be the most important reason why Pang et al.'s (2014) crisis life span model could not

extend to this case, as none of their cases involved divisive social and political issues

and challenges like #DeleteUber.

Identifying and Prioritizing SMIs

RQ 3 and RQ 4 seek to identify and categorize SMIs. Due to space limits, Table

7 reports the top 10 Twitter users, accompanied by their status of Twitter verification

and account descriptions. Among 192 SMIs, 26 are accounts owned by verified

organizations, 4 by unverified organizations, 57 by verified individuals, and 102 by

unverified individuals.

Table 7 Top 10 SMIs during #DeleteUber's Evolution on Twitter

SMI ID	SMI Category	Retweet Counts	Account Description
@MikeLynch09	Unverified Individual	18,470	"higher ed professional | educator | @bentleyu & @UConnHESA alumnus | social media & tech enthusiast | coffee lover | striving to dare greatly | views are my own"
@GeorgeTakei	Verified Individual	15,780	" Some know me as Mr. Sulu from Star Trek but I hope all know me as a believer in, and a fighter for, the equality and dignity of all human beings."
@moisturizeds	Unverified Individual	5,473	"The outburst I had at JoAnn's Fabrics is not reflective of who I am."
@shannoncoulter	Verified Individual	4,629	"Co-founder of #GrabYourWallet. Maker of lists. Eater of tacos. Ann who? Retweets are not endorsements. Email: shannon@grabyourwallet.org"
@Bro_Pair	Unverified Individual	3,361	"BASW 2015. Seen in Rolling Stone, VICE, Gawker, Jacobin, Daily Beast. d.q.osullivan@gmail.com"

Table 7 Continued

SMI ID	SMI Category	Retweet Counts	Account Description
@thefader	Verified Niche Media	2,943	NYC-based music magazine

SMI ID	SMI Category	Retweet Counts	Account Description
@DKMatai	Unverified Individual	2,892	"Entrepreneur Founder Investor QBRAIN #Quantum #Blockchain #Robo #AI #Nano QiLabs Scientist Engineer #FinTech #InsTech #QueensAward mi2g ATCA Philanthropia"
@JoltedToad	Unverified Individual	2,502	"Social media justice warrior. Nerd culture. Atheist. #FactsNotFeelings"
@EricRMurphy	Unverified Individual	2,433	"Security worker. Union member. Tweets = official position of my employer."
@keyawnce	Unverified Individual	2,370	"https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpU kkjgHdT43CM0bsOwSCng?app=desktop"

Of 159 individual SMIs, 49 account descriptions included interests in social and/or political issue(s) (e.g., "Writer, feminist, activist, and unionist"). This finding suggests many individual SMIs were neither hateholders nor faithholders with strong pre-existing attitudes (Luoma-aho, 2015) towards Uber; rather, they were vocal on this sub-arena mainly because of the issues intertwined with #DeleteUber. A strong example is @shannoncoulter, a co-founder of the #GrabYourWallet movement that has boycotted all large companies with presumed Trump associations. After Kalanick resigned from Trump's advisory broad, @shannoncoulter stopped promoting #DeleteUber and tweeted

"@travisk thank you very much for resigning from Donald's Economic & Policy Forum. As a woman in the tech world, it means a lot to me."

Of the 26 verified organizations, 24 were professional media houses. Following recent journalism studies on online media sources (Painter, Kristiansen, & Schäfer, 2018; Vargo & Guo, 2017), the author organized 24 Twitter accounts owned by media houses into four categories: (1) traditional mainstream media with social media extensions (e.g., @CBSNews; $n = 4$), (2) digital-born general media (e.g. @Mashable; $n = 5$), (3) digital-born partisan media (e.g., @RawStory, $n = 3$), (4) niche media targeting specialized interests that might or might not be digital born (e.g., @TeenVogue, $n = 10$) and (5) news media funded by a foreign government (e.g., @AJENews, $n = 2$). This finding has several implications for paracrisis and crisis communication research.

Firstly, previous crisis studies often fail to include the digital extensions of traditional news sources in social media because they typically compare the roles of traditional mainstream media with social media to explore channel effects and publics' information-seeking behaviors. But as digital journalism evolves, many traditional mainstream media actively use social media platforms to promote their own news reporting (Malik & Pfeffer, 2016). This paracrisis case also demonstrated that some traditional mainstream media also could be influencers on Twitter, as their news reports were retweeted frequently. Therefore, scholars should not assume traditional mainstream media and social media are mutually exclusive sub-arenas.

Secondly, the impacts of digital-born media have been understudied in paracrisis and crisis literature. Digital-born media refer to news media organizations launched on digital platforms vs. those who are digital extension of traditional media (Painter et al., 2018). They vary extensively in content focus, audience size, bias, self-identification as media companies or technology companies, and non-profit or for-profit status (Nicholls, Shabbir, & Nielsen, 2016; Painter et al., 2018). Given the social and political context of #DeleteUber, this study distinguished digital-born, general media from digital-born, partisan media. It is noteworthy that digital-born, general media, such as BuzzFeed, Mashable, and Vox, have begun to engage in serious journalism (Tandoc & Foo, 2018) and have expanded their presences internationally (Küng, 2015). Compared with legacy media, these emerging players excel in engaging online audiences and using various social media platforms to distribute their content (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017). In this case, all SMIs who are digital-born, general media tweeted their news stories ahead of their traditional mainstream media counterparts. For example, @Mashable, the most retweeted digital-born, general media account tweeted their coverage nearly 5 hours earlier than @CBSNews, the most retweeted traditional mainstream media account.

Another type of understudied SMI identified in this case study is digital-born, partisan media. For example, influential twitter accounts owned by @Slate and @RawStory both identify themselves as media with a liberal or progressive stance. While partisanship is not new to offline media, social media platforms allow partisan media to reach audiences interested in issues and certain interpretations of issues that

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might not be covered by general, presumably nonpartisan media. Similar to individual SMIs devoted to political and/or social causes, digital-born, partisan media might not be interested in for-profit companies like Uber unless they get involved into ideological challenges or accusations. As companies increasingly become involved in social and political issues, influential digital-born, partisan media would be assigned high priority on companies' watch lists for environmental scanning.

Furthermore, several niche media that are seemingly irrelevant to a technology company like Uber emerged as SMIs. For example, the most retweeted media account of all 26 verified organizational SMIs is @thefader, a New York-based music magazine. This magazine reported the paracrisis because a famous rapper publicly announced he would not use Uber due to the #DeleteUber boycott. The magazine's single tweet on this story received more retweets than all accounts owned by traditional mainstream media combined.

In addition, to further explore differences in the number of retweets received by the five categories of media, a one-way ANOVA test was performed, using media type as the independent variable and number of retweets as the dependent variable. No significant retweet difference was found among the five media types. This result provides additional support for the idea companies should focus not only on traditional news media but also on niche and partisan media, especially those that effectively engage various online communities.

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Flux in SMIs' influence and composition

RQ 5 examines possible changes in SMIs identities and influence over time.

Table 8 reports the top 10 most retweeted accounts in terms of tweet volumes during the

three peak hours, i.e., 3 am, 5 am, and 6 pm on January 29. The table includes 25 distinct

Twitter accounts, with only three accounts ranked in the top 10 twice and one ranked in

the top 10 across all three time periods. In addition, the top two most frequently

retweeted accounts throughout the #DeleteUber paracrisis didn't enter the sub-arena of

Twitter until after the first two peak hours. Although only the top 10 SMIs during three

peak hours were identified, it is likely that most SMIs could not remain influential

during the entire process as they might exhaust their reach and their original tweets

might lose audience's attention. Meanwhile, new voices might enter and gain influence

in this sub-arena.

Table 8 Top 10 SMIs during Three Peak Hours

Peak Hour 1	Peak Hour 2	Peak Hour 3
@Bro_Pair*	@moisturizeds*	@GeorgeTakei
@EricRMurphy	@shannoncoulter*	@MikeLynch09
@Lubchansky*	@jordantarwater	@lynseyarce
@adamjohnsonNYC	@Bro_Pair*	@YouDonKnowMe
@scottbix	@cathyparkhong	@MarkDice
@merrittk	@HITEXECUTIVE	@eveewing
@KeeganNYC	@ChicagoActivis1	@TeenVogue
@moisturizeds*	@Lubchansky*	@ChiCityMaven
@transgamerthink	@eidvisuals	@shannoncoulter*
@virgiltexas	@LeeCamp	@moisturizeds*

Notes. Twitter accounts followed by * indicates the accounts ranked top 10 at least twice
during the three peak hours.

Previous research indicates that during crises, social media users tend to trust social media coverage more than traditional news media coverage (Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014). In this paracrisis case, "social media coverage" came from a multitude of individual and organizational Twitter accounts, including traditional mainstream media. To further understand the impacts of various SMIs, the author examined some of the most retweeted SMIs' ego network structures.

SMIs' ego network structures

To explore SMIs' ego network structures during a paracrisis, his study focused on only the most retweeted SMIs from seven main categories. These seven categories include verified individuals, unverified individuals, unverified organization, and the four types of verified media SMIs discussed earlier. Table 9 lists details of these ego networks, including each SMI's number of followers, number of first-level nodes, total nodes within each input ego network, and their maximum levels of reach. First-level nodes are Twitter users who retweeted one of the seven SMIs' tweets directly; second-level nodes are those who retweeted first-level nodes' retweets and so on. These seven ego networks were then further compared on the percentage of nodes within each of their levels (Figure 4).

Table 9 Seven SMIs' Ego Network Details

SMI ID	SMI Category	Twitter Followers	First level nodes	Total nodes within input ego network	Maximum level
@MikeLynch09	Unverified individual	3063	4,438	4,556	4
@GeorgeTakei	Verified Individual	2,086,524	3,725	7,544	9
@thefader	Niche media	465,030	704	3,402	12
SMI ID	SMI Category	Twitter Followers	First level nodes	Total nodes within input ego network	Maximum level
@Mashable	Digital-born, genera media	8,252,667	334	3,047	10
@CNNEE	Traditional mainstream media	14,730,118	206	296	3
@AJENews	Media funded by a foreign government	1,180,714	155	178	3
@NYTWA	Unverified Organization	7212	232	2,825	13
@thedailybeast	Digital-born, partisan media	1,020,973	115	116	1

Note. First level vertices refers to alters who directly retweeted an ego's tweet(s) as compared to second level vertices who retweeted first level vertices' retweet and so on. Maximum level refers to the amount of levels an ego had in its ego network that allow the ego's tweet(s) to spread.
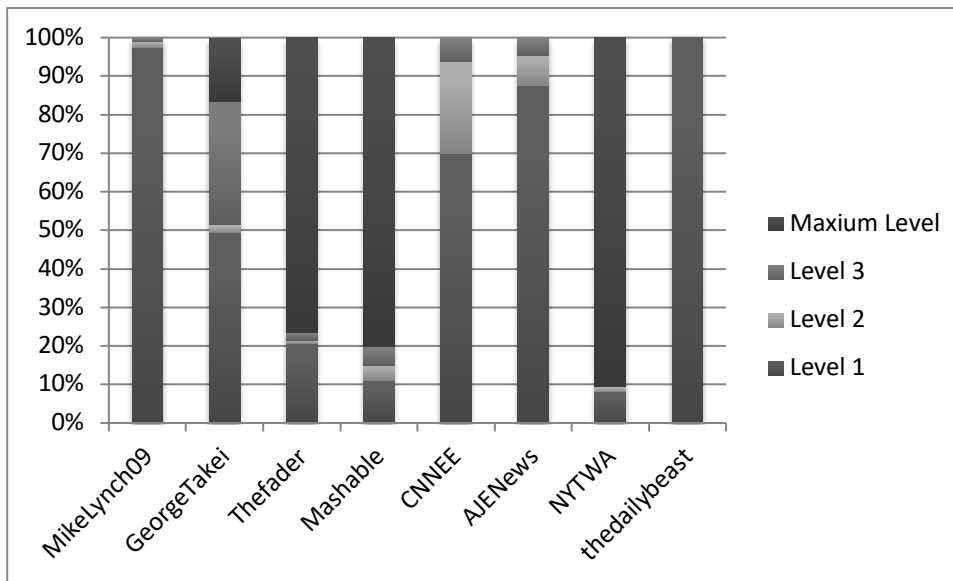
Figure 4 Seven SMIs' Nodes Percentages At Different Levels
Note. The horizontal axis represents seven most retweeted SMIs from their respective
SMI categories. The vertical axis represents the percentage of vertice contains within
each of their levels. Level 1 refers to vertices that retweeted a SMI's tweet(s), Level 2
refers to vertices that retweeted Level 1 vertices, Level 3 vertices that retweeted Leve 2,
and maxium level refers to vertices that retweeted the retweet(s) from vertices at Level 3
and beyond, if an SMI has more than 3 levels of reach in the ego network.

To visually illustrate the diffusion dynamics with an ego network,

@MikeLynch09, the most retweeted SMI, was selected as an example. The figures

depict his ego network diffusion within Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and Level 4 reaches.

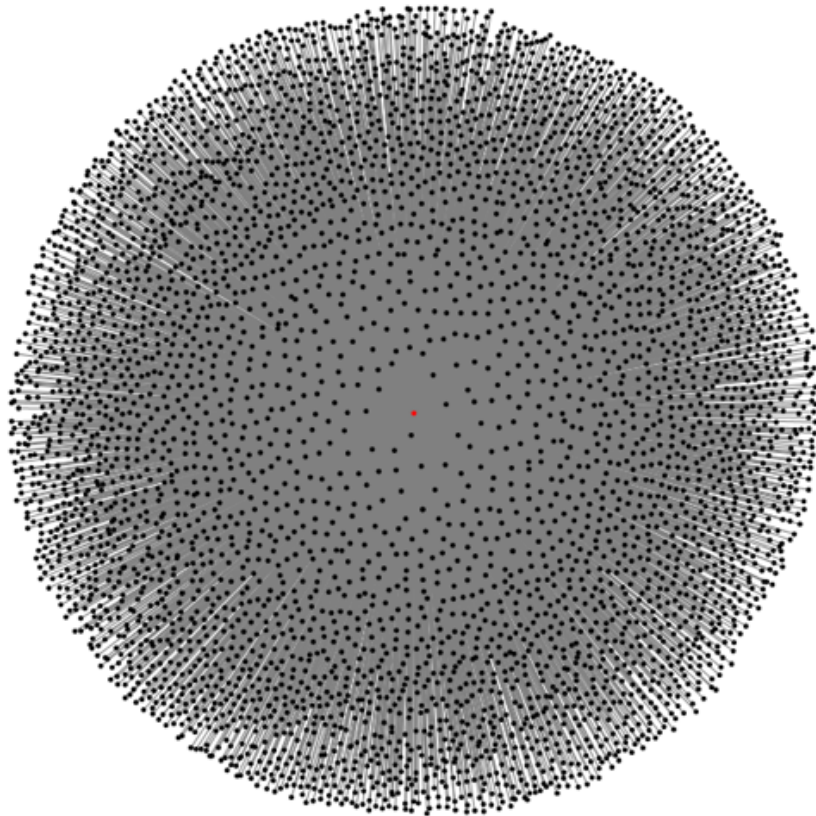Figures 5 to 8 present the visual results.

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Figure 5 @Mikelynch09's Level-1 ego network
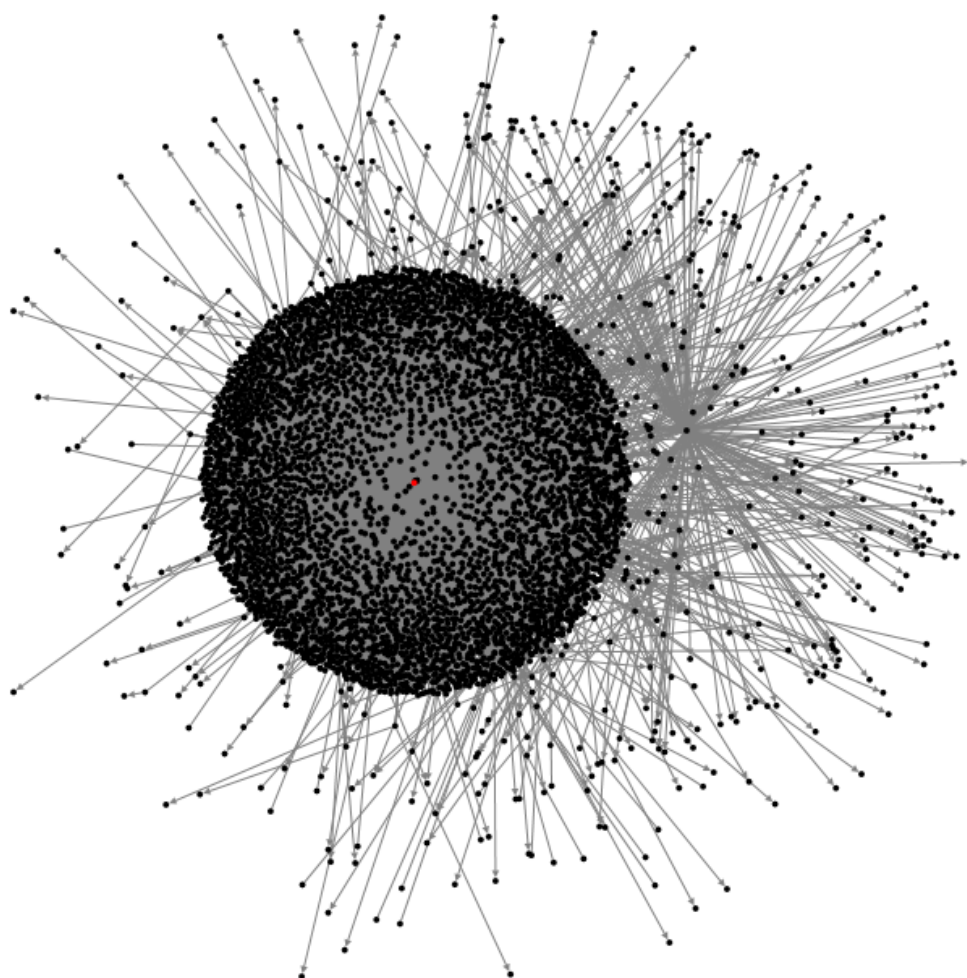*Note.* The red dot in the center of the graph represents @ MikeLynch09.

Figure 6 @Mikelynch09's Level-2 ego network
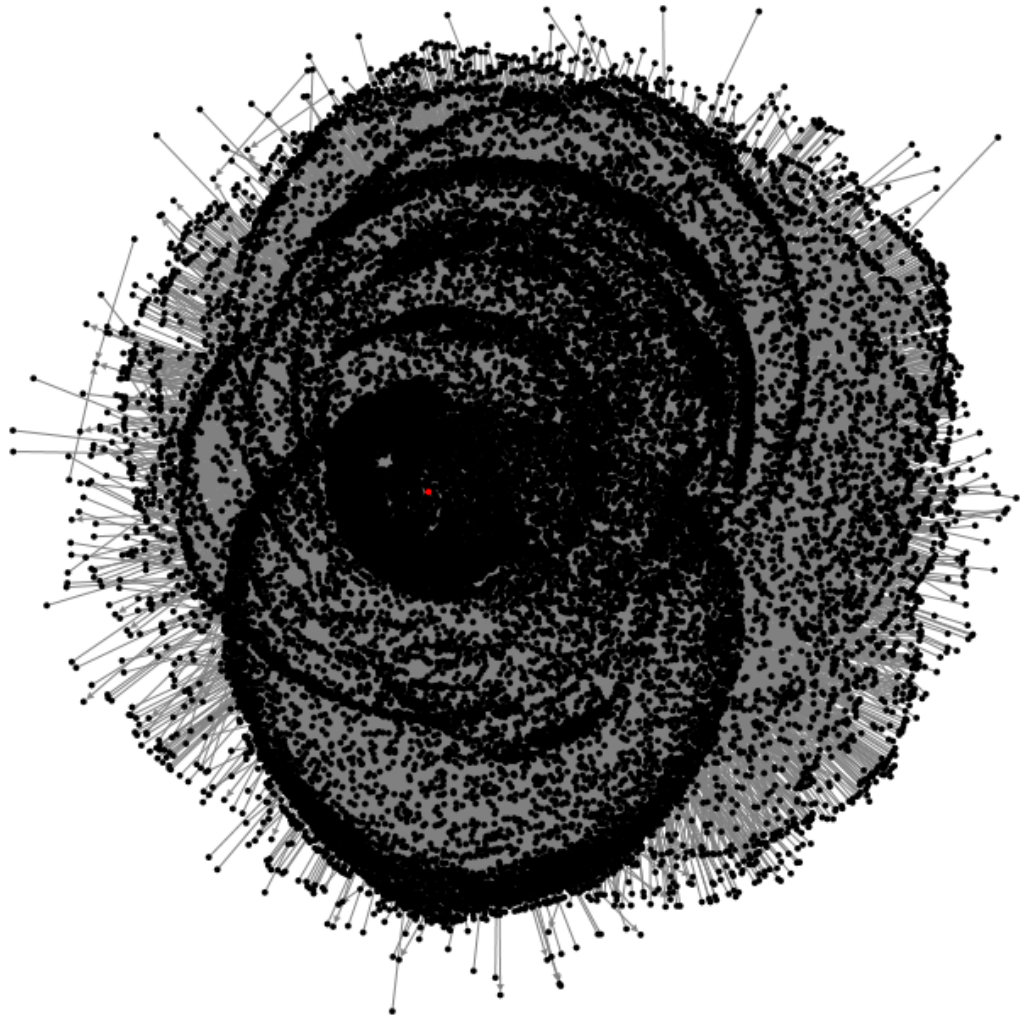*Note.* The red dot represents @ MikeLynch09.

Figure 7 @Mikelynch09's Level-3 ego network
Note. The red dot represents @ MikeLynch09.
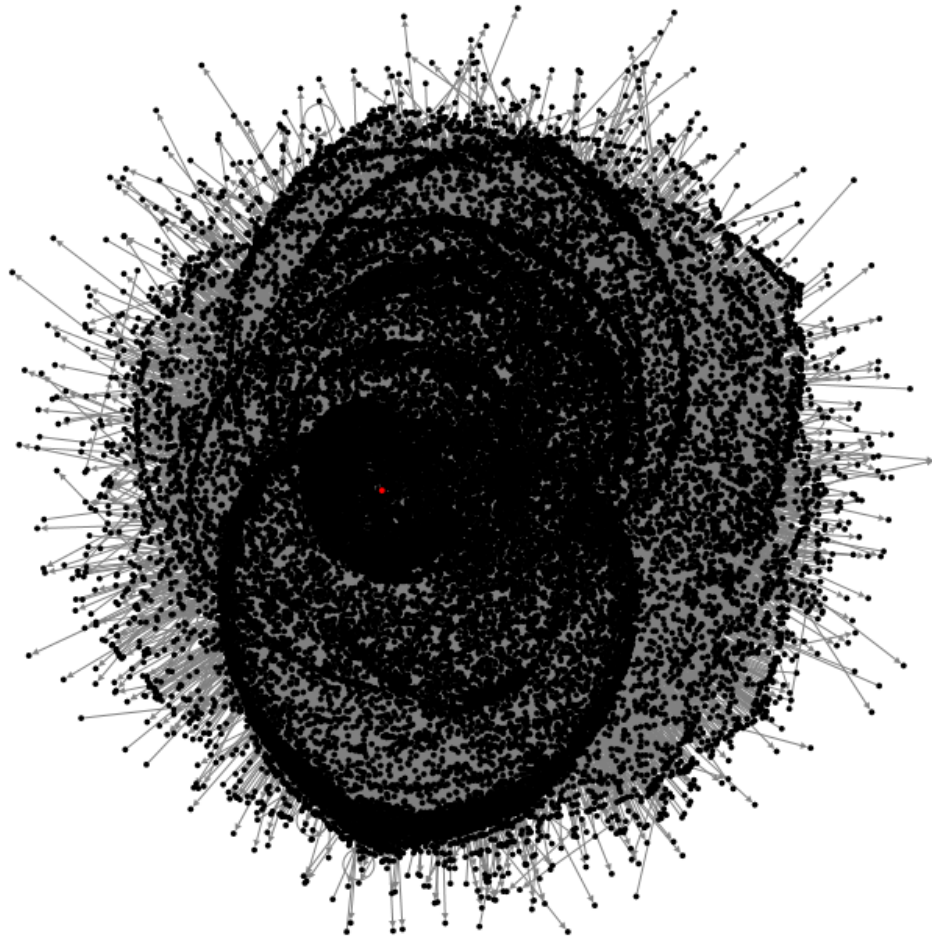
Figure 8 @Mikelynch09's Level-4 ego network, i.e. the complete ego network
Note. The red dot represents @ MikeLynch09.

As shown in Table 12 and Figure 4, sizes of follower base do not correspond to

Twitter users' influences in message dissemination. To illustrate, @MikeLynch09 with

only 3,063 followers was able to attract more edges than @CNNEE, whose follower size

was overwhelmingly larger than @MikeLynch09 as an unverifed individual user. A

closer loook at Figures 5 to 8 show how @ MikeLynch09's tweet cascaded as the content

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was retweeted by users beyond his immediate reach up to four levels. This result echos marketing research findings on micro-influencers' signifcance and potential in generating content virality.

Furthermore, content diffusion patterns seem to affect SMIs' reaches. For example, @thedailybeast, a digital-born media that is nonpartisan but not neutral, gained retweets mostly from its first-level alters; in contrast, @TheFader had its single tweet shared more by alters beyond its first three levels than by its immediate followers. It is possible that @TheFader's content was able to travel through many levels because many Twitter users peceived the potential virality of @TheFader's content that involved the news value of celebritiy. Also, @TheFader gained retweets from other SMIs, such as @Bro_Pair, a heavily retweeted SMI and fifth-level alter whose retweet seemed to help @TheFader's tweet go viral again. At Level 5, @TheFader seemed to exhaust its reach, as the number of Level-5 alters only took 2.12% of all alters within @TheFader's input ego network. But the number of Level-6 alters dramatically increased and took 40.65% of the total alter counts. Thus, results for RQ6 attest to the importance of SMIs' network structures in disseminating content and affecting paracrisis evolution.

Conclusion

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to theory building concerning paracrisis evolution and the roles of SMIs in the process. Firstly, with empirical evidence derived from a big data case study, this research demonstrates features of paracrisis evolution and challenges

previous research findings on crises' life spans on and off social media (Pang et al., 2014). There's a word missing in the highlighted sentence. I'm not sure what you want to say here Coombs (2018) points out that a crisis is contestable because of three elements: crisis existence, crisis severity, and crisis responsibility. Compared with a crisis, a paracrisis may be more contestable on all three elements. In the example of #DeleteUber, despite the social media firestorm, general, non-partisan media all refrained from blaming Uber directly for causing harms due to the ideological divisiveness that fueled the social media hype. When general, non-partisan media, either traditional or digital born, do not hold organizations responsible for causing tangible harms, the coverage itself cannot legitimize a paracrisis as becoming a crisis.

The distinction between a paracrisis and a crisis is instructive for managers who struggle to address "social media crises" appropriately. Note that neither "social media hype" nor coverage from traditional mainstream media would provide conclusive signals for the paracrisis escalating into a crisis. On the one hand, managers should closely monitor emerging paracrises but recognize that convening the crisis management team probably is not necessary. On the other hand, managers should be cautious when managing paracrises because their communication transpires within potentially the full view of all publics, including hateholders (Luoma-aho, 2015) as well as those who are highly committed to the issues underlying a paracrisis. Insensitive public responses could fuel a paracrisis that might otherwise lose momentum online.

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Sensitive paracrisis communication is not possible without sophisticated knowledge on SMIs both in general and during particular paracrisis situations. By examining SMIs' influence in terms of retweets they gained, this study further reveals the complexity of their identities. Since various types of individuals and media houses can be SMIs, risk and crisis communication research should examine social media as more nuanced intersections of messages and channels rather than merely as channels distinct from traditional media. Additionally, crisis scholars and practitioners should direct attention to the roles of digital-born media such as Slate, Buzzfeed, and Mashable during precrisis and crisis stages, as their influence during the #DeleteUber paracrisis is no coincidence. Recent journalism research has begun to recognize their foray into serious, ethical journalism (e.g., Tandoc & Foo, 2018; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2017) and found elite media are more likely to follow the agenda set by digital-born media rather than the other way round (e.g, Vargo & Guo, 2017). For practitioners, media monitoring and relationship building with digital-born media are especially crucial to understanding and responding to potential paracrisis. Though partisan media are less likely to provide favorable coverage if they are not satisfied with a company's business actions or involvement in socio-political issues, managers' timely communication with digital-born, general media is desirable because they could disseminate more credibly a company's response to wider social media audiences.

Apart from revealing the nuanced social media presence of media houses, this study also attests to the importance of individual SMIs, especially micro-influencers.

Within offline health campaigns, Boster, Kotowski, Andrews, and Serota (2011) identified three factors that make certain members influential during campaigns: connectivity, persuasiveness, and expertise in the focal area. Though the persuasiveness of specific messages and SMI expertise are not the foci of this study, it did reveal how connectivity impacts SMI's message diffusion on Twitter. SMIs with limited follower sizes might have strong relational connections with followers, as their followers' retweet rates can be much higher than publicly established accounts with larger follower bases. If other SMIs find their messages worthy of sharing, they might retweet and consequently transfer their social media reach to SMIs who are retweeted. Many micro influencers' accounts described strong interests in social, political and environmental issues. Their roles in escalating the #DeleteUber paracrisis affirm the significance of individual activists in challenging firms.

Finally, this study enriches research methods for paracrisis and crisis communication research. Despite growing interest in taking a multivocal perspective to study crisis communication via social media, most extant studies on organizational crises still rely on manual methods to collect and analyze relatively small data sets. This might be problematic in gaining comprehensive understanding when the focal paracrisis or crisis case involves a large amount of social media data that exceeds the analysis capacity of human beings. Using computational methods to describe the #DeleteUber paracrisis evolution on Twitter, this study showcases how such methods can produce more precise research findings that contribute to theory development. Additionally,

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rather than analyzing *content* generated by publics as in most studies examining publics'
communication during organizational crises, this study examined the operation of social
network *structures* underlying and sustaining content dissemination. This method of
analysis effectively complements current research, as the structures that enable content
to spread is arguably as important as the content itself.

Limitation

This study is limited in that it only examined only one single case evolving on
one single social media site. Previous research indicates that while Twitter and YouTube
are often used to raise an issue, Facebook and blogs might excel in escalating the issue
beyond immediate stakeholders (e.g., Pang et al., 2014). Meanwhile, a Pew research
study found Twitter was not representative of public opinions in the wider world context
(Mitchell & Hitlin, 2013). Thus, future studies could examine paracrisis cases on various
digital sites to see how a paracrisis might evolve on and among different sub-arena
platforms.

Another limitation is that this study only examined a single type of paracrisis, a
challenge paracrisis, which is likely to be the most difficult to manage. Future research
should examine other clusters to generate more sophisticated understanding on paracrisis
evolution. In addition, alternative metrics to operationalize SMIs may be explored to
generate more comprehensive understanding. This study operationalize SMIs as those
who gained most retweets for their original content. Yet retweet might be motivated by
complicated reasons and is only one indicator of influence. Future research should

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develop alternative operational definitions of SMIs to better understand powerful voices in an arena.

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

With the constant and increasing connectivity afforded by social media, few organizations can be immune from online crisis threats. Unfortunately, nearly a decade after the concept of "social media crisis" was raised, today's organizations are still struggling to understand and address online risks. One of the most important reasons for this continuous struggle is the lack of understanding on the uniqueness of crisis risks emerging in online environments. Often times, "social media crises" are used to refer to both risks and crises spreading on social media sites. But as almost all crises today involve the channels of social media, the term "social media crises" tend to overemphasize the platforms for communication without considering the contents of the communication.

To address the potential to exaggerate the risks associated with negative online comments about an organization and its practices, Coombs and Holladay (2012b) conceptualize the term "paracrisis" to distinguish crisis risks from crises emerging in digital media. As "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (p. 409), paracrises require public responses from an organization that are variations of crisis responses (Coombs, 2017). Coombs and Holladay also propose an inventory of paracrisis response strategies to address challenge paracrises (Coombs & Holladay, 2015b). Coombs (2015a) later went on to describe additional forms of paracrises that organizations might face, including *customer service*,

misuse of social media, and *venting.* In a more recent work, Coombs (2019) revised the paracrisis typology to include four clusters: (1) *faux pas*, (2) *rumor(s)*, (3) *challenge(s),* and (4) *collateral damage*.

As a nascent field, paracrisis communication research has begun to gain increasing scholarly attention over the past few years. Several analytical studies have been conducted to examine organizational paracrisis response strategies (e.g., Honisch, 2018; Lim, 2017; Roh, 2017), which further attest to the viability of paracrisis as a concept distinct from crisis and the necessity to differentiate organization paracrisis responses from crisis responses. However, previous studies tended to treat all paracrises as the same, and this failure to distinguish between types of paracrises creates conceptual confusion for both paracrisis types and paracrisis responses. But as paracrisis research is still in its infancy, it is imperative to first solidify a conceptual consensus so that future studies would better advance theories in this field. Specifically, foundational, observational studies are needed to (1) further determine whether the concept of paracrisis is viable, (2) gain more understanding on the reasons for paracrises and organizations' paracrisis communication practices, and (3) investigate how paracrises, as crisis threats contingent on the publics' interpretations of social obligation, are communicatively constructed by different voices in a rhetorical arena, especially the sub-arenas of social media sites.

This dissertation seeks address the above-mentioned goals via two distinct yet complementary studies. Study 1 uses a case series study and content analysis to identify and analyze a corpus of paracrises occurring over four consecutive years to refine and

expand the typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies, and to connect clusters with response strategies. Study 2 focuses on one single paracrisis case to analyze its evolution on a social media platform to gain initial understanding on paracrisis evolution patterns and the identities and network structures of social media influencers (SMIs) who largely shaped the evolution process.

While Study 1 aims to generate comprehensive understanding of organizations' paracrisis communication practices and to develop an organizational paracrisis communication framework with external validity, Study 2 addresses the distinctions between a paracrisis and a crisis by providing an in-depth analysis of a large social media data set. Taken together, these two studies clarify the differences between paracrises and crises, develop a framework that relates paracrisis clusters to response strategies, and reveal how a paracrisis might be structurally shaped by SMIs on a social media sub-arena. By employing (1) a case series to provide conceptual clarity through an externally valid process (Study 1) and an in-depth case to develop knowledge of paracrisis evolution (Study 2), this dissertation answers foundational questions and holds implications for future research and practice.

This final chapter presents the implications of the research reported in this dissertation and addresses limitations and future research directions. The first section reviews key findings from the two studies. Next, the implications of these findings for paracrisis communication theories, methodologies, and practices are discussed. Finally, the limitations of the studies are addressed, and future research directions are offered.

Review of Key Research Findings

Key Research Findings of Study 1

This dissertation presented two separate but interrelated studies. This section focuses on Study 1. Study 1 presents a case series study based on a systematic identification of "social media crises" as well as other online risks covered by traditional media, digital-born media, and trade publication articles over the time span of four years. By analyzing and comparing these cases, the author further clarifies the distinctions between paracrises that requires risk communication interventions and operational problems that are often labelled as "social media crises" but should be better managed by other management functions.

Besides further distinguishing paracrises from operational problems, this case series study proposed a paracrisis communication framework by refining and expanding conceptual typologies on paracrisis clusters (Coombs, 2017; 2018) and response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2015b), and articulating connections between paracrisis clusters and response strategies. Firstly, based on Coombs' conceptual work (2017; 2018), Study 1 refined and expanded paracrisis clusters. Social media hacking as a new paracrisis type was identified, faux pas paracrises were clarified and expanded into two distinct sub-types, and paracrisis cluster descriptions were revised to provide more precise accounts for naturally-occurring paracrises.

Secondly, a typology of paracrisis response strategies was developed by identifying and extending the inventory of response strategies for CSR-based challenges

(Coombs & Holladay, 2015b) to all seven paracrisis types. Furthermore, by connecting the uses of paracrisis response strategies with paracrisis clusters, this study initiates the effort to build a communication framework that has the potentials to guide organizational paracrisis communication.

The research findings on the uses of response strategies, especially the combined uses of response strategies, highlights the dynamics of agitation-control (Coombs & Holladay, 2015a) that underlie all paracrisis communication processes in rhetorical arenas. As discussed in Chapter III, compared with a crisis, a paracrisis' existence and severity might be more open to stakeholders' interpretations, because a paracrisis is always intertwined with the publics' perceptions of an organization's social obligations. To address plural and sometimes opposing voices that communicatively construct a paracrisis situation, an organization might consider using more than one response strategy in a single response statement to address various concerns arising in a rhetorical arena. In fact, the results revealed the majority of paracrisis cases were addressed using multiple response strategies.

Key Research Findings of Study 2

While Study 1 aims to develop an organizational paracrisis communication framework through a case series study examining a large collection of naturally-occurring cases, Study 2 dives deeper into the evolution process of one single paracrisis, #DeleteUber, so as to gain initial understanding of paracrisis evolution on Twitter.

By examining the temporal development of #DeleteUber on Twitter in conjunction with mainstream media coverage's of this paracrisis' short-termed and long-

termed outcomes, this study found that neither an intense backlash on social media nor traditional media coverage is a marker for crisis. This research finding calls into question previous research on crisis threat escalation online and offline (Pang, Hassan, & Chong, 2014), and illustrates different implications of paracrises and crises. That being said, the above findings were obtained with hindsight, as the author examined evidence on short-term and long-term outcomes of the #DeleteUber incident to evaluate whether crisis damage was evident. When confronted with an ongoing paracrisis, an organization might closely monitor its evolution by identifying SMIs and scanning their content diffusion processes online.

As perhaps the first study to examine SMIs during an organizational crisis risk situation, Study 2 found that SMIs who excelled at creating and disseminating original content contributed to the majority of Twitter content posted during the paracrisis evolution process. This study also revealed that individual micro influencers, digital-born media, and niche media can all be SMIs whose original content concerning the paracrisis and paracrisis interpretations is widely disseminated on Twitter. In addition to gaining understanding on the various identities of SMIs, this study also examined their ego network structures that allowed the content to travel widely. Results indicate the sizes of follower base do not correspond to Twitter users' influence in message dissemination. Additionally, content diffusion patterns, such as the levels of reach and connections with other SMIs, might affect SMIs' content diffusion during the paracrisis evoluiton process.

To sum up, Study 2 complements Study 1 by providing more nuanced knowledge on paracrisis evolution on Twitter as involving time variables, social media influencers with different account and network features, and traditional media coverage. The following section will summarize the implications of these two studies.

Implications

This dissertation contributes to paracrisis communication research through a case series study seeking to explore the viability of paracrisis as a distinct concept, building a framework on organizational paracrisis communication (Study 1), and gaining in-depth, more nuanced knowledge on paracrisis evolution on Twitter (Study 2). These two studies offer theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of risk and crisis communication as well as practical implications for social media practitioners. This section will address in turn the implications in these three areas.

Theoretical Implications

Examining Paracrisis as a Viable, Distinct Concept

This dissertation contributes to the theory building on paracrisis communication in mainly three ways: examining paracrisis as a viable concept distinct from crisis, developing a preliminary framework on organizational paracrisis communication, and documenting the evolution of a paracrisis on Twitter as well as in traditional media. To begin with, this dissertation further attests to the vitality of paracrisis as a distinct concept by (1) collecting and analyzing a corpus of cases occurring from 2014 to 2017 and (2) examining a paracrisis' evolution process on Twitter.

Most case studies in crisis communication literature examine a single or a few high-profile crises that have peculiar features (e.g., serious crisis outcomes, highly unusual situations, and intense media attention). While these studies may provide in-depth knowledge on specific crises, their implications might be limited, unless a number of case studies are conducted and reveal similar results (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). To overcome case study's deficiencies in generalizability, Study 1 examined a wide, diverse range of cases from four years of traditional mainstream media coverage, digital-born media coverage, and trade publication articles that either contain key phrases such as "social media crisis" or cover a challenge paracrisis. In this way, Study 1 captures both the overall characteristics of crisis threats in digital environments and special elements that might be overlooked in previous literature. This method of data collection supports the external validity of the cases.

Based on the case series that occurred naturally and were systemically collected, the author concludes that paracrisis, as "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior and requires public response from the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b, p.409), is a viable conceptualization that is closely related to but distinct from the conceptualizations of crisis. As presented in Chapter III, the 143 paracrisis cases were collected systematically from various media outlets ranging from *The New York Times* to *Mashable* to *Ad Age* to *Utah Business*. All 143 crisis risks were important enough to be reported by one or more media outlets, although the levels of importance may vary as different outlets target at different audiences.

All 143 paracrises identified through this method fit into the conceptualization of paracrisis for three reasons. Firstly, they were *publicly visible* as they were spread on social media, and the visibility might be further expanded by media outlets that picked up the stories. Secondly, all cases required a form of *public response from the organization*, including a deliberate silence when the media requested comments. Thus, they were all managed under the full view of potentially all publics.

Thirdly, all cases were triggered by a *challenge* or *accusation* regarding *social obligations*, as illustrated the descriptions of six paracrisis clusters, including social media account hacking. Although being hacked might resemble a corporate ability (CA) problem, social media account hacking is more closely related with social obligations. This particular type of hacking features insensitive, controversial or even outrageous content posted by the hacker(s) who hijacked an organization's social media account(s). While other hackings are operational failures with serious negative implications for customers and other important stakeholders, this particular type of hacking only poses crisis risk when the publics attribute problematic content from the hacker(s) to the organization. Thus, it is still about social obligations, not operational capacities.

In addition to showcasing the viability of paracrisis as a distinct concept, the data collection and screening process also found the term "social media crisis" was often used to refer to (1) paracrises that posed crisis risks but did not have crisis implications and (2) incidents that should be addressed by management functions other than crisis management communication. As discussed in Chapter III, such incidents are not paracrises because they are related to an organization's operational capacity, not its

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social obligations. However, they might become corporate ability crises if not addressed appropriately. For example, they might morph into paracrises only when organizations do not treat consumers or employees fairly in addressing the problem and thus violate social obligations to their publics.

Besides distinguishing a paracrisis from an operational incident that might pose corporate ability crisis risk, it is also important to understand if and when a paracrisis might become a crisis, because paracrises and crises require different management interventions, including response strategies. Study 2 addresses this research purpose by conducting an in-depth single case study on a high-profile challenge paracrisis to gain initial insight. Based on research findings gleaned from big social media data and mainstream traditional media coverage, this dissertation found that neither intense yet short-term online backlash nor coverage by traditional mainstream media is a convincing sign of crisis, which challenges prevalent assumptions and earlier research findings regarding markers for crises emerging in social media (Pang, Hassan, & Chong, 2014). Although Study 2 focused on only one paracrisis, the results demonstrate future studies examining "social media crises" might need to be more cautious and draw distinctions between paracrises as crisis threats and full-blown crises.

Building a Preliminary Framework on Organizational Paracrisis Communication

This research is used to develop two typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies with high external validity by refining and expanding Coombs and Holladay's conceptual work on paracrisis clusters (Coombs, 2017; 2018) and response strategies for challenge paracrises (Coombs & Holladay, 2015b). The typology of

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paracrisis clusters demonstrates the ambiguous term "social media crisis" is problematic because it obscures not only differences among paracrises, crises, and operational incidents, but also among different types of paracrises. Though a variety of online communications may be labeled "social media crises," it is not the uses of social media platforms themselves that present problems. Rather, it is the *contents* of the communications via social media that should garner researcher and practitioner interest.

Through a systematic investigation, Study 1 also identifies paracrisis types that might have been overlooked before, such as social media account hacking and Type II faux pas. These types occur less frequently than other clusters, and might be less interesting for media to cover, compared with challenge paracrises that involve important issues and/or reflect news values like conflict, oddity, and human interest. But because social media account hacking is qualitatively different from other paracrisis clusters and Type II faux pas differs from Type I faux pas, they should be studied as distinct types of paracrisis.

Unfortunately, current paracrisis research (e.g. Honisch, 2018; Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016; Roh, 2017) may draw potentially erroneous conclusions about paracrisis management communication because it does not consider important differences among paracrisis clusters. Mixing paracrisis clusters problematic because different paracrises may require different response strategies. By developing a typology on paracrisis clusters, the findings of this dissertation are valuable to researchers who seek to develop more effective studies that are based on these meaningful differences among paracrisis types. Because Study 1 reveals different geneses for these clusters, researchers who

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neglect these distinctions may overlook important characteristics that should be incorporated into their research designs. Failing to do so could lead to fruitless comparisons among vastly different clusters.

The typology on paracrisis response strategies addresses the differences between paracrisis response strategies and crisis response strategies. As discussed in Chapter III, addressing a paracrisis with a crisis response strategy might not only increase the publics' perceived levels of crisis responsibility, but also fail to address the agitation-control dynamics characterizing paracrisis communication. Thus, this dissertation urges scholars to be more cautious when testing crisis response strategies for analytic studies on paracrises.

In addition, this research is important because it identifies and elaborates on organizations' uses of combined response strategies in public statements or statement(s) designed to address paracrises. This research finding further enriches our understanding on organizations' paracrisis communication practices and offers inspiration for analytic research that has not yet looked into various combinations of response strategies for paracrisis communication.

Furthermore, by connecting paracrisis clusters with response strategies, this research builds a preliminary framework for organizational paracrisis communication that generates rich possibilities for future analytic studies. Specifically, this framework addresses how paracrisis clusters might affect the choices of response strategies.

As recommended by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) reviewed in Chapter II, to repair an organizational reputation tarnished by a crisis, a crisis manager

should select crisis response strategies by first assessing the attributed crisis responsibility to decide which crisis cluster best characterizes the crisis. While crisis history and prior relational reputation as mitigating factors should also be considered, crisis clusters classified by different levels of attributed crisis responsibility largely dictate what response strategies should be most effective.

However, for paracrises, clusters' implications for response strategies might be more complicated and less direct. As presented in Table 3 in Chapter III that lists the frequencies of all single and combined response strategies used to manage six paracrisis clusters, although some response strategies were used more frequently than others, no assumptions can be made about which single or combined response strategies might be most effective for each clusters. But this is not to say paracrisis clusters do not affect the selection of response strategies. A limitation of SCCT is that it assumes the publics have a consensus on the attributed crisis responsibility, and does not consider the possible differences among the various voices in a rhetorical arena. Since a paracrisis is largely about social obligations constructed by various voices, it would not be reasonable to ignore the possible differences, especially for more complicated paracrisis clusters such as challenge, faux pas, and guilt by association.

For challenge, faux pas, and guilt by association paracrises, this research argues that contextual factors should be taken into consideration. If a challenge or accusation is related with a less contestable issue, such as environmental protection and general social welfare, more "accommodative" strategies such as revision and/or recognition might be used. If a more contestable or divisive issue is involved, contradictory voices might

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compete for attention and influence in the arena. If an organization wishes to avoid the risk of alienating important stakeholders, its social media practitioners might consider *refusal*, i.e., deliberately making no response.

The three remaining paracrisis clusters, social media misuse, misinformation, and social media account hacking, are relatively easier to address. Although no discernable response patterns could be identified in Study 1 due to the limited number of observed cases, tentative recommendations on response strategies were offered based on the objections or problems underpinning the development of these paracrises. But because Study 1 simply identified paracrisis clusters and their associated response(s), it may be premature to evaluate which strategy and/or combinations of strategies could address most effectively the paracrises.

Extending RAT to Paracrisis Communication Research

This dissertation also seeks to extend Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016, 2018) to paracrisis communication as produced by a multitude of voices in a rhetorical arena. So far, studies inspired by RAT tend to focus on analyzing how faithholders and hateholders (Luoma-aho, 2015) respond to crises and organizations' crisis responses (e.g., Brown & Billings, 2013; Johansen, Johansen, & Weckesser, 2016). This research suggests that RAT is also a good fit for paracrisis communication. When a challenge or an accusation is raised on social media, an rhetorical arena opens for potentially all publics.

While Study 1 privileges organizational voices by focusing on organizational response strategies, the research finding on combined uses of response strategies

suggests that it is important to understand, prioritizes, and respond to voices of different stakeholders in an arena. For example, as discussed in Chapter III, some organizations used *revision* and *refusal* to manage a guilt by association paracrisis involving a divisive issue, as they implemented quite revisions to sever a connection with a negatively viewed entity, without stating their purpose in doing so. While Study 1 does not examine an organization's motivation or rationale for doing so, it is reasonable to assume that revision was used to address the concerns of challengers and those who agree with them, and refusal was used to avoid alienating other important stakeholders who might view the entity as positive. Before selecting paracrisis response strategies, organizations might need to listen to different voices in a rhetorical arena and decide which voices they would address in their paracrisis responses.

Study 2 shifts attention from organizational responses to understand SMIs' communication practices during a paracrisis evolution process on the sub-arena (Coombs & Holladay, 2014) of Twitter. Unlike previous RAT-based research that examined *content* created by faithholders and hateholders during crises (e.g., Brown & Billings, 2013; Johansen et al., 2016), Study 2 examines the *structures* that allow the content to spread in a social networking site. Before the prevalence of social media, Coombs (1998) had pointed out the significance of network structures in evaluating stakeholders' power. But few analytic researches have examined how SMIs *share* their content during crises (see also Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; 2015b). Given this knowledge gap, Raupp (2019) made a recent call to extend multivocal crisis research through the use of network analysis. By examining and comparing the ego network

structures of different SMIs, Study 2 echoes this call in the context of paracrises and addresses the knowledge gap by revealing the importance of ego network structures during paracrisis communication.

In addition, this research also unveils identity features of social media influencers who largely shaped the #DeleteUber paracrisis. Results revealed that individuals with and without established pubic images, digital-born media with and without salient ideology biases, and traditional media's extensions on social media were all shaping the evolution process by having their original tweets widely spread. Recalling current RAT studies' focus on faithholders and hateholders, this research suggests that individuals and organizations with no salient pre-existing attitudes towards an organization might also participate in the rhetorical arena, if they are strongly committed to the issue involved.

Coombs and Holladay (2014) posit that a rhetorical arena consists of many sub-arenas or spaces where discussion on a crisis occurs, and that crisis managers need understand publics' crisis communication in various arenas, which might affect the effectiveness of organizational crisis response(s). Extant studies have examined communicative interactions in different sub-arenas, including a corporate blog and the comment section of an online news report (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), a corporate Facebook page (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016), Sina Weibo, a Chinese social media platform (Zhao, 2017), and newspapers (Raupp, 2019).

Extending the concept of sub-arena to paracrisis research, Study 2 examined the #DeleteUber paracrisis' evolution on the sub-arenas of Twitter and traditional mass media. On one hand, the sub-arena of traditional mass media reported #DeleteUber as an

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incident originating from and fermenting in the social media sub-arenas, and some traditional media outlets entered the sub-arena of Twitter via their official Twitter accounts and became Twitter SMIs during the #DeleteUber evolution. On the other hand, as a challenge paracrisis, #DeleteUber's evolution on Twitter did not gain further momentum after the majority of traditional mass media reported this case, which differs from Pang et al.'s (2014) research finding. Based on this discrepancy, the author infers that the interaction patterns (i.e., crisis risk information migration from one sub-arena to another) among different sub-arenas might differ from one paracrisis to another. Future research might examine different paracrises, including those that evolved into crises, to better understand how interactions among sub-arenas contribute to paracrisis evolution.

To sum up, all paracrises are not the same in terms of their genesis and evolution patterns on different sub-arenas. To better help organizations address online risks, it is important to have clear foundational understanding on paracrisis clusters and paracrisis response strategies, and to understand paracrises as communicatively constructed by different voices in a rhetorical arena.

Methodological Implications

Along with the theoretical implications presented above, this dissertation also offers three main methodological implications for paracrisis communication as a burgeoning field as well as for communication research in general. This sections presents the three methodological implications regarding (1) adapting case series study to communication research in general, (2) applying computational big data case study for (para)crisis research, and (3) enriching RAT research with social network analysis.

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Adapting Case Series Study to Communication Research

Study 1 is perhaps the first study to graft the method of case series study from clinical research onto communication research. Methodologically, Study 1 illustrates how this observational method, with its focus on analyzing and comparing a large, diverse sample of cases, might be instrumental to developing accurate descriptions and classifications for nascent research domains' lack of a consensus on definitions and variables. By infusing case series study with data collection principles developed for focused case studies(Yin, 2009) and constant comparative analysis, Study 1 adapts this clinical research method to communication research focusing on text-based data and offers insights on how this method might be used for research directed toward communication interventions. Systematically collected case series provide a corpus of evidence with strong external validity and can be applied to a variety of communication contexts, allowing scholars to generate reasonable hypotheses for further communication theory development.

Applying Computational Big Data Case Study for (Para)crisis Research

While Study 1 introduces a new research method into communication research, Study 2 enriches research methods for paracrisis and crisis communication research by conducting a focused case study using computational method to collect and analyze big data. Despite growing interest in the spread of crisis online, most studies examining the publics' crisis communication in social media still use manual methods to collect, sample, and analyze relatively small data sets (e.g., Brown & Billings, 2013; Johansen et al., 2016). Although these studies provide insights into the sampled publics' crisis discourses,

manual methods are not ideally suited to generating more comprehensive, precise research findings for crises and paracrises that engender large amount sof social media data.

As one of the few studies using computational methods for organizational (para)crisis research, Study 2 illustrates the strengths of this method for analyzing various concerns related to the "who's" of paracrisis development as well as the "how's" of paracrisis development. For example, Study 2's time series analysis provides a precise description of the #DeleteUber paracrisis' complete evolution process on Twitter by taking all tweets with #DeleteUber into consideration. . Future research that examines paracrisis life spans on social media might use similar methods to enable comparisons among different paracrisis clusters.

Examining Sub-arenas with Social Network Analysis

As a relatively new approach to crisis communication, RAT employs a multivocal approach to understand crises as consisting of communication among a multitude of senders and receivers (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, 2016). RAT distinguishes itself from other crisis theories by conceptualizing crisis communication as a more dynamic, complicated process that arises from the voices of multiple crisis communicators and as such does not privilege the voice of the organizations in crises. As a relatively "young" theory, RAT offers provocative alternatives to its predecessors. The theory's strengths are its heuristic value and conceptual contributions.

However, the broad scope of the theory, coupled with difficulties in operationalizing explanatory concepts, may have limited the amount of research

conducted thus far. As researchers strive to apply ideas derived from RAT, additional insights into macro (patterns of interaction and relationships among voices) and micro components and parameters (senders and receivers, contexts, media, genre, and texts) of the (para)crisis arena should emerge (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, 2018). Researchers who wish to use RAT as a foundation of their work will need to complicate their thinking as well as their research methods when studying paracrisis communication.

As most of these studies use content analysis to examine hateholders and faithholders' crisis discourses, the possible participation of other voices and the structures that simultaneously enable and constrain the communication interactions within the arena are largely overlooked. To enrich RAT-based empirical research, Raupp (2019) recently urges scholars to extend RAT with network analysis. Her research examines the sub-arenas (Coombs & Holladay, 2014) of newspapers during the Volkswagen emission crisis, where Volkswagen was the most prominent voice, and voices from NGOs and affected stakeholders were rarely introduced (Raupp, 2019).

Echoing Raupp's (2019) call for extending RAT with social network research, the author uses social network analysis to examine the voices of SMIs during a paracrisis on the sub-arena of Twitter. The author investigates both relationship data, i.e., interactions among vertices, and attribute data, i.e., vertices' property information (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Freeman, 1978). To examine relationship data, SMIs ego networks were analyzed, compared, and visualized to reveal how the structures sustained SMIs' spreading of tweets. Regarding attribute data, SMIs' Twitter profiles were analyzed and categorized to map out their user identities.

Based on the above network analysis, the author suggest that SNA is particularly fit to study paracrisis communication in a rhetorical arena from a macro perspective. As reviewed in Chapter II, Frandsen and Johansen (2016) poisit that RAT draws upon two perspectives, macro and micro, to understand crisis communication. A macro perspective provides an overview of interactions among voices by examining all voices and and communication processes in a rhetorical arena, and a micro perspectivefocuses on individual communicative processes in terms of context, media, genre, and text. With its unique strengths inanalyzing interactions, SNA can be used to reveal voices beyond those of the organization,hateholders, and faithholders, and to understand how some voices gain more influence via communicative interactions. Recalling Raupp's (2019) study, it can be assumed that the composition of powerful voices vary by sub-arenas and by (para)crisis. By examining both attribute and relation data, researchers can use SNA to test this assumption and to enrich knowledge on paracrises as constructed by different voices in different sub-arenas.

Practical Implications

Many management fields are plagued by the gap between research and practice (Ven & Johnson, 2006). As a burgeoning field, paracrisis communication is no exception. While some researchers tend to overamplify the negative consequences of paracrises and address them as crises, most practitioners are actually well aware of the differences between online threats and crises. As discussed in Chapter II, Van den Hurk (2013), a crisis communication professional, distinguished four types of crises based on their threat levels. Many practitioners have recognized the differences between a paracrisis

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and a crisis as well as the need to offer different response strategies. Though the term "paracrisis" may not have entered their professional vocabulary, they recognize a paracrisis as a crisis risk rather than a crisis.

Because of the paucity of research in paracrisis communication, practitioners might still feel uncertain or unprepared when addressing these online threats. The research findings of this dissertation might reduce practitioners' uncertainty in addressing paracrises by (1) complicating their understanding of paracrises clusters and response strategies and (2) proposing suggestions for media monitoring.

Complicating Understanding on Paracrisis Clusters and Response Strategies

Because the concept of paracrisis has not yet been fully integrated into risk and crisis communication vocabulary and research, social media practitioners are likely to rely on their experiences and/or intuitions to understand, assess, and address paracrises. As the term "social media crisis" is used ambiguously to address operational incidents, paracrises, and crises spreading on the channels of social media, practitioners might be limited in conceptualizing paracrises as a distinct form of crisis risk that covers different clusters, and might be addressed with paracrisis response strategies that differ from crisis response strategies.

In situations where knowledge is limited, the two typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies would help to reduce practitioners' uncertainty with strong external validity (Cronbach & Shapiro, 1982). The typology on paracrisis clusters would help practitioners to develop a more sophisticated understanding on "social media crises" and enable them to address rising online threats in a more time-efficient way.

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This may be particularly helpful when an unexpected online threat cannot be accounted for by a practitioner's past experiences, either because the online negative backlash seems overwhelming or the organization is not prepared for a social issue or even a "wicked problem" it is pressured to address.

Realizing the qualitative differences among different paracrisis clusters might also prepare a practitioner to choose effective response strategies. As discussed earlier, different paracrisis clusters might be managed by different single and/or combined response strategies. While practitioners can be capable of delivering effective paracrisis responses by drawing upon their experiences and intuitions, the typology on clusters and response strategies may highlight the importance of listening to different voices and systematize their understanding on paracrisis communication as distinct from crisis communication.

Although Study 1 does not assess the effectiveness of response strategies, there are cases when an organization did not seem to address a paracrisis appropriately. For instance, on a night when the Houston Rockets played Dallas Mavericks, it posted a tweet that read " Shhhhh. Just close your eyes. It will all be over soon," with a gun emoji pointing at a horse emoji. The horse emoji presumably represents the Mavericks, whose mascot is a horse. Because this tweet angered some publics, the Rockets fired its digital communication manager, which upset more publics and triggered another online backlash. Many traditional media outlets, such as *The Washington Times*, also reported the Maverick's overreaction to the Tweet and criticized the sports team for firing an employee over "a dumb, but harmless tweet" (Gaines, 2015).

In this case, the Houston Rockets seemed to offer a crisis response to this *faux pas* paracrisis. Rather than firing its manager, the sports team could have addressed this paracrisis more effectively by using *recognition* to admit the mistake and apologize for it, *refutation* to deny the intention to offend others, and *revision* to delete the tweet and promise future improvement.

To sum up, the two typologies on paracrisis clusters and response strategies might enable social media practitioners to develop more accurate conceptualizations of online threats, provide appropriate responses, and avoid resorting to crisis response strategies that may increase publics' perception of crisis responsibility. As discussed in Chapter III, because organizations of all sizes and from all sectors are susceptible to paracrises, the two typologies would be especially important and informative for novice practitioners and practitioners working for small organizations who might lack experience with online threats and thus experience heightened uncertainty when facing a paracrisis.

Suggestions for Media Monitoring

Practitioners are increasingly aware of the importance of social media monitoring. Many large companies, such as Marriot, have developed their own social media centers to analyze social media content for the purposes of client engagement and brand promotion (Golden & Caruso-Cabrera, 2016). Other organizations have retained the services of external consultancies in social media monitoring. Meanwhile, social media monitoring tools, such as Social Mention, Quora, HootSuite, and Google Alert are available to organizations at relatively lower costs. These tools enable organizations to

continually monitor their social media presence as well as the presence of their competitors (He, Zha, & Li, 2013).

However, academic research on social media monitoring tends to focus on the contexts of marketing and customer service (e.g., Lee, 2018; Zhang & Vos, 2014); there is a dearth of practice-focused, scholarly crisis research regarding on how to conduct media monitoring for the purposes of organizational (para)crisis communication (with the exception of (Ruggiero & Vos, 2014). To address this gap, the author proposes the examination of two interrelated types of media monitoring with different goals. These two types are (1) real-time media monitoring and (2) non-real-time media monitoring. Both types encompass social media monitoring and traditional media monitoring.

Real-time Media Monitoring

The goals of real-time social media monitoring for paracrisis identification and management would be to observe paracrises' evolution trajectories on social media sites, analyze powerful voices in important sub-arena(s), and evaluate publics' responses to the organizations' (in)actions and paracrisis responses. Real-time, minute-by-minute media monitoring should be activated when an organization identifies a challenge or accusation circulating in social media site(s).

So far, real-time social media monitoring for marketing purposes uses tools such as keyword analysis, complaint detection, and alerts from online reviews or comments (Lee, 2018), all of which can be adapted to scan for paracrises. Based on Study 2's research findings, the author suggests that SNA should also be considered when monitoring a paracrisis' evolution online. Specifically, for the sub-arena of Twitter,

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given SMIs' predominate influence suggested in Study 2, an organization can identify

SMIs and plot their ego networks. When scanning social media sites to identify SMIs,

organizations should not overlook individual social media users with limited follower

sizes. If such users are adept at generating content that corresponds to social media ethos

and have strong relational connections with followers, they might actually be micro

influencers with the potential to gain a large number of retweets. Digital-born media

might also be SMIs, given that they played a critical role in spreading their coverage on

#DeleteUber and were found to set the agenda for traditional media in recent studies

(e.g., Vargo & Guo, 2017). Extra attention might be directed to SMIs whose content is

able to travel to more than two reaches, which might signal the content is deemed

worthy of sharing by various online communities.

When assessing a paracrisis, it is also important to monitor traditional media,

including their extensions on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. If

traditional media reports hold an organization responsible for causing serious negative

consequences, this might signal that a paracrisis might become a crisis.

Non-real-time Media Monitoring

The goals of non-real-time media monitoring are to keep an organization abreast

of the publics' changing expectations for an organization's social obligations and to

identify different influencers that might shape a paracrisis' evolution process.

Organizations are confronted with various challenges and accusations, as a multitude of

stakeholders, such as customers, activists, NGOs, and the general public, have

increasingly pressured companies to fulfil their social obligations beyond simply making

profits and engaging in charitable actions (Voegtlin & Pless, 2014). Addressing these online threats can be especially challenging when divisive, "hot button" issues are involved and influencers in an arena contribute contradictory voices.

To proactively prepare for these paracrises, social media practitioners can regularly engage in non-real-time traditional and social media monitoring to track possible changes in social values, norms, and expectations concerning an organization's social obligations. Meanwhile, important influencers in the arenas of controversial or "hot button" issues (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) can be identified. When a paracrisis related to such issues arises, it is likely that a multitude of stakeholders could become active in the arena, communicating with, against, and past each other to compete for attention and influence. Knowledge on issue influencers gained before a paracrisis would allow practitioners to assess the salience (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) of different voices and understand their stances in a more timely fashion.

According to an annual study on brands' social engagement conducted by Lithium Technologies in 2017, only one percent of the brands build relationships with advocates and influencers, who, according to a *PR Newswire* article (Lithium Technologies, 2017), would be a resource to turn to "in the event of a social media crisis". Indeed, given SMIs' influence during the #DeleteUber paracrisis, after identifying influencers both in general and during paracrises, an organization might take one step further to cultivate relationships with powerful voices that might speak for, to, and past an organization, including active faithholders, issue influencers whose stances

align with the organization, and digital-born media that can disseminate more credibly a company's response to wider social media audiences.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This dissertation used two studies to gain insights into paracrisis communication practices (Study 1) the process of paracrisis evolution (Study 2). As with all research, both studies involve limitations. This section discusses the two studies' limitations and offers several suggestions for further research in this area.

Study 1

Study 1 presents descriptive research that identifies the typologies of paracrisis clusters and response strategies and articulates their connections through examining a corpus of naturally-occurring cases. Although the research method was designed to enhance the external validity of the two typologies, theories on organizational paracrisis communication cannot be developed without taking analytic steps to test the effectiveness of response strategies. A series of experiments, quasi-experiments, and case studies could be conducted to test which single paracrisis response strategy or combined use of strategies is most effective to manage a certain paracrisis cluster, so that the descriptive framework identified in this study can be improved to offer practical suggestions as grounded in analytical research.

This study also suggests that contextual factors might affect organizations' choices of response strategies but does not elaborate these contextual factors or examine the possible impacts of contextual impactors. Future research should examine further potential contextual factors and specify if and how these factors influence paracrisis

development and the selection of response strategies. This would require the collection and analysis of a large number of cases. Ideally, practitioners could be interviewed to gain their perspectives on the influence of contextual factors in decision making processes. It is likely that the contextual factors include the nature of underlying social issues, organizational resources, organizational values, industry, and national cultural differences. Scholars might also explore how these contextual factors could affect organizations' selection of response strategies, and moderate or mediate the effectiveness of organizations' public responses.

Moreover, it may be necessary to consider if "effectiveness" in paracrisis communication is commensurate with "effectiveness" in crisis communication. Compared to typical indicators of effectiveness in crisis communication (e.g., word of mouth, behavioral intention, and reputation), is it possible that different dependent measures of effectiveness should be developed for paracrisis communication? For instance, challenge paracrises arising from divisive social issues perhaps are the most difficult to address, due to multiple, often conflicting voices in the arena. For such paracrises, do we need different assessments of response effectiveness? Future research that addresses the effectiveness of paracrisis response strategies might identify different dependent measures to examine if those outcomes would be a better fit for paracrisis communication.

Moreover, consistent with the multivocal approach endorsed by RAT, the idea that voices will *agree* on what constitutes an effective response is questionable. Additionally, it seems unlikely that divergent voices are equally important to the

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organization. Since stakeholders differ in their salience (Mitchell et al., 1997), some voices may be valued more highly over others. Thus, when analyzing the effectiveness of an organization's public response, focused case study or experimental research might complicate the understanding of "publics" and examine different publics/voices' reactions.

While it is important to generate knowledge on the "effectiveness" of organizations' public responses, it should also be noted that a paracrisis addressed by an organization might also be an issues management practice and/or part of a large-scale social movement pursued by activists. To align with a multivocal approach, critical lenses might be introduced to paracrisis communication to study whether and how the voices of various stakeholders may be marginalized in different sub-arenas, and what communication strategies might empower voices that are less heard.

Because this study relied upon category descriptions based on previous research as well as new, researcher-generated clusters, assessments of coding reliabilities were needed. Intracoder reliability were computed to verify the consistency of the coder. Though confidence in the distinctiveness of category description and coding were augmented through definitions offered in the previous research (Coombs, 2017; 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012b, 2015a) as well as additions and refinements to the category descriptions, coding reliability should be a primary concern in future research. Future research should continue verify the reliability by assessing intercoder reliability as well as intracoder reliability.

Additionally, the reliability of the two typologies is only tested by through intracoder reliability. Although the author is confident in the reliability, reliability, because they were identified based on previous research and the results for intracoder reliability are satisfying, a follow-up step would be to conduct intercoder reliability to further identify possible categorizing deficiencies, if any.

Study 2

Study 2 is also limited in only generating descriptive understanding on one single challenge paracrisis. First, since paracrises might evolve in unexpected and complicated ways, no conclusive guidelines can be drawn by only examining a high-profile challenge paracrisis that might be more complicated in evolution patterns than other clusters. To complicate scholars and practitioners' understanding on paracrisis evolutions, a series of paracrises can be examined, using similar methods employed in Study 2. Apart from studying challenge paracrises, other paracrisis such as faux pas and guilt by association, could also be investigated to explore possible differences in evolution patterns.

Second, this study only examined the sub-arena of Twitter. The research finding on Twitter SMIs' social media account features and ego network structures might not be generated to other platforms, as different social media sites features different technological affordance and user bases. Twitter might not represent public opinions in the wider world. Future research should study additional sub-arenas, including but not limited to social media sites, and investigate differences and possible dynamic interaction among different sub-arenas.

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Third, the operational definition of SMIs for Study 2 only focuses on the counts of retweets. Considering the publics' complicated motivations for retweeting (Macskassy & Michelson, 2011), future research can include other indicators, such as the publics' sentiment reactions to SMIs' original content. In addition to examining SMIs' identities and ego network structures, the publics' reaction to and interpretation of paracrises could also be studied to gain more nuanced insights on how various voices co-construct the processes of paracrisis communication.

Study 2 analyzed traditional media coverage on the short-term and long-term consequences of the #DeleteUber incident, and concluded that this paracrisis did not evolve into a full-blown crisis. Case series studies could be conducted to explore situations where paracrises eventually turns into crises, so as to enrich our knowledge on antecedent variables that might contribute to paracrisis escalation. For example, would an inappropriate paracrisis response lead to a crisis? Would continuous attacks from powerful voices incur a crisis? When an organization experiences a series of paracrises (e.g., has a history of paracrises), would the organization eventually face a crisis due to the aggregated risks of each paracrisis?

Additionally, are there cases where a paracrisis is prolongs as a crisis risk is not reduced or amplified? It is likely that in some situations, challengers and their supporters are persistent with their protests as they do not accept organizations' responses. Since the challenge has already been raised and addressed, would such situation still qualify as a paracrisis? Or would they fit better into the realm of issues management? Future research might also study the possible interplay between paracrisis communication and

issues management when a crisis risk tends to linger, so as to optimize the strategic efforts in these two connected fields.

Study 2 contributes to RAT studies by shifting the focus from *content* to *structures*. But since the analysis on SMIs' attribute data suggest the importance of issue influencers in the sub-arena, future research might not only study the communication content of faithholders and hateholders who have strong preexisting attitudes towards an organization but also the content of other powerful voices.

This dissertation proposes two interrelated types of media monitoring in the context of paracrisis communication that might shed light on the practices. But the suggestions on media monitoring, especially social media monitoring are limited, because current research has not yet generate a thorough understanding on organizations' concerns and constraints on this area. Actually, a logistic limitation that might refrain crisis scholars from making more contribution to social media monitoring practices would be the lack of full access to either large companies' self-developed social media monitoring centers or popular social media monitoring tools. To address this shortcoming, more engaged scholarship research might be employed, so that scholars and practitioners could leverage different strengths to coproduce knowledge (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). While large companies might resort to various resources to build and operate customized social media monitoring systems, many small organizations with limited revenues might experience greater uncertainty when selecting, applying, and adjusting various social media tools in the context of (para)crisis communication. Scholars might seek collaboration with smaller organizations to explore

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effective analytics and develop guidelines that would benefit similar organizations with pressing budget concerns.

Conclusion

From a social media company being charged for its use of unclean energy to a Twitter firestorm (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014) on a Spanish fashion retailer's insensitive product design, it seems that no organizations can be completely immune to paracrises. Rather than bemoaning challenges posted by online risks, organizations should always scan the social media environments to identify risks, monitor their evolution systematically and decide if, when, and how to make public responses.

This dissertation enriches research on paracrisis communication as an understudied area of risk and crisis communication research by making theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions. Taken as a whole, this dissertation suggests that in today's complex environment, organizations should constantly monitor different voices interacting in paracrisis arenas, enact various response strategies accordingly, and at the same time, strive to be consistent with their organizational values and identities, especially when being challenged over divisive issues.

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