Responding To Low Severity Crises With Humour: The Effects On Organizational Reputation

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ABSTRACT

RESPONDING TO LOW SEVERITY CRISIS WITH HUMOUR: THE EFFECTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION

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The objective of this research was to determine whether a humorous crisis response made by an organization, to a low severity crisis, would have a significant effect on the organization’s reputation. This thesis investigated the mediating role of the level of perceived severity (by the consumers) of the crisis on the relationship between a humorous crisis response and organizational reputation. This thesis explored the moderating role of message delivery type on the level of perceived severity of a humorous response. Results demonstrated that there was no significant moderated mediation relationship, but the rational response was found to decrease perceived severity, thereby increasing organizational reputation. These results contribute to various aspects of the crisis management literature, but also provide substantial implications for public relations practitioners and marketing researchers involved in the communications industry.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The crisis management literature focuses on how organizations respond to a variety of negative occurrences, or crises. A crisis is defined as an unpredictable event, within an organizational setting, that has an impact on the operations and business of the organization or company, and ultimately leads to a negative perception of the company among its consumers, stakeholders, shareholders, and the general public (Coombs, 2012).

An organization’s response to a crisis depends on not only the crisis type itself but also on the severity level of the crisis, as well as who is involved in the crisis (Zhou & Ki, 2018). In March of 2018, Facebook was involved in a privacy scandal – considered an organizational misconduct – after it was discovered that, for over two years, Facebook failed to protect the privacy of their users by leaking their information to third party companies, most notably Cambridge Analytica, who used it in political campaigns, such as Brexit and the 2016 US Presidential Elections (Thompson & Stelter, 2018; Tasker, 2018). “We have a responsibility to protect your information. If we can’t, we don’t deserve it,” said Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s founder and CEO, who employed full-page ads in seven British newspapers and three American ones to apologize to the public for the Cambridge Analytica data privacy scandal (Statt, 2018). In that same year, Starbucks had a highly publicized scandal after employees at a store in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, racially profiled two African-American customers, which resulted in policemen escorting the customers out (Siegel, 2018). Starbucks, as a company, not only apologized, but also organized mandatory anti-bias training for their North American employees. Starbucks closed more than 9000 stores across the US and Canada for one afternoon and hosted a sensitivity training session in order to prevent similar issues from occurring again (Dangerfield, 2018).
Brand crises are types of crises that threaten an organization’s perceived ability to deliver expected benefits, thereby not only weakening brand equity (Dutta & Pullig, 2011) but also the organization’s reputation (Coombs, 2007), and causing uncertainty among the organization’s stakeholders (Sandman, 2006; Seeger, 2006; Heath, 2006; as cited in Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). According to Dutta and Pullig (2011), brand crises are divided into two categories: performance-related and values-related crises. The cases previously described are examples of values-related crises, which are defined as any social or ethical issue encompassing the core values adopted by the brand (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). In the example, Facebook and Starbucks chose to respond to the audiences’ backlash by apologizing on behalf of those employees who were involved. The current study will investigate humour as a response type to a values-related crisis in order to test the effectiveness and impact on organizational reputation.

W. Timothy Coombs was one of the first to introduce and discuss different types of crisis response strategies for addressing crises (1995; 1997). He built off previous researchers such as Benoit (1992), Allen, and Caillouet (1994). Examples of core crisis response strategies include techniques such as denial, apology, and apologia, which are defined in this thesis in the next section (Coombs et al., 2010). However, in 2017, researchers Xiao, Cauberghe, and Hudders chose to focus on a response type that was not identified in Coombs’ seminal work: humour, especially in the context when the crisis was rumoured and not confirmed. While the crisis response literature has effectively examined the use of apologizing, denying, and other response types (Bradford & Garrett, 1995), little to no research has been actively trying to discuss how humour could be applied as a response type. The present study fills this gap by answering the following research question: how will humour, as a crisis response type, affect the reputation of an organization, in a low severity crisis situation?
Addressing this question is crucial because understanding the effects of humour-based responses would not only help organizations address low-severity crisis situations more emphatically (Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018), but it would also evaluate a common suggestion by public relations professionals, who have recommended humour as a response in light of the recent upsurge of misconducts, poor service, dissatisfied consumers, and scandals (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003; Avidar, 2012). Because it is important for response strategies to be appropriate and reasonable for the crisis, this research will examine humour as a response strategy to low severity and low risk crises (for example, poor satisfactory services), as it would be difficult to justify using humour in a high severity crisis, such as a sexual misconduct racial profiling, or workplace violence (Reid, 2000).

This thesis will present and discuss a review of the relevant literature on crisis response strategies, organizational reputation, and use of humour in marketing, and then identify a gap in the existing literature. Then, the focus will shift to the conceptual model that leads to the proposed hypotheses. Next, the proposed methodology will be discussed, as well as the expected results of data analysis. Finally, a discussion of the findings, contributions, limitations, and potential research directions will be included.
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the extant research pertaining to crisis response strategies, including consumer responses to crises and methods of communication. As well, the use of humour in marketing will be reviewed in order to illustrate humour’s suitability for application as a crisis response strategy. The present literature review begins with an introduction on crisis management and the different response strategies by both the firms and the consumers, followed by an overview of the potential effects of humour as a crisis response type. And finally, a discussion on the gap in the literature, research question and what led to the prediction of the hypotheses in this research.

2.1 Crisis Management

One of the most challenging moments for a firm is dealing with an organizational crisis (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017; James & Wooten, 2005; Kahn, Barton, & Fellows, 2013; Mitroff, 2005; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Organizational crises can be acute, mainly public, and can be a challenging threat to the organization and its stakeholders (James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011). Crises can be provoked by any financial fraudulent activities, employee misconducts, or (life) threatening product safety problems (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012). Several researchers have found interest in crisis management and have studied different elements and what factors determine the likelihood of a successful attempt at managing a crisis (James et al., 2011; Kahn et al., 2013; Prewitt & Weil, 2014). Crisis research has looked at different aspects of crisis management; academics and practitioners have focused their research on crisis types (Brockner & James, 2008; Connelly, Ketchen, Gangloff, & Shook, 2016), response types (Dowell, Shackell, & Stuart, 2011; Gomulya & Boeker, 2014), response strategies (Lafley, 2009), and the roles that the leaders and executives have when dealing with a
crisis (Wooten & James, 2008; Wowak, Mannor, & Wowak, 2015). Collectively, research on crisis management highlights the need to tailor crisis response strategies to the specific crisis situations, as not all response strategies are equally effective in all circumstances.

2.1.1 Different types of crisis. Coombs introduced the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), an evidence-based framework, to better understand “how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication” (Coombs, 2007a, p. 163). The SCCT describes how perceptions of a crisis can affect not only the crisis response selected, but also the effect of the crisis response on outcomes such as organizational reputation, emotions, and purchase intentions (Coombs, 2007b). To begin, an organization must assess the crisis situation in order to evaluate the level of reputational threat the company is facing. There are three specific factors that determine the level of reputational threat: (1) initial crisis responsibility, (2) crisis history, and (3) relationship history/prior reputation (Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs, 2007b). In order to examine the effectiveness of a crisis response strategy in minimizing damage to the organizational reputation, it is necessary to identify the reputational threat posed by a crisis situation. In recent years, researchers are continuing to use SCCT and applying it to modern strategies being used to tackle crises. Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016) were trying to understand the use of social media as a form of communication by organizations who are in crisis. Ki and Nekmat (2014) were also looking at these effects but on Facebook by Fortune 500 companies.

Another aspect of a crisis that will determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of a crisis response strategy is severity. Researchers have studied and analyzed the concept of crisis severity and its effects on the consumers, the industry, and an organization’s reputation (Zhou & Ki, 2018). The concept was first introduced in Coomb’s (1995) publication describing the SCCT,
where he also proposed that crisis situations can change perspective as the “damage” (i.e., the severity) of the event varies. Previously, severity referred to physical damages only; however, now it is defined as “the amount of damage generated by a crisis including financial, human, and environmental damage” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 169). Generally, when an event is labelled as severe, consumers are more likely to put all the blame and responsibility on the organization because consumers find it easier to blame those who are primarily involved. This ultimately leads to a high chance of the organization’s reputation being affected negatively, as well as their brand image worsening, as the crisis becomes more severe (Coombs, 1998). This is especially the case for faux pas incidents. The crisis type matrix is founded on attribution theory (Coombs, 1995). The first dimension, internal-external, corresponds to the locus of control component of attribution theory. Internal refers to a crisis that originated within the organization itself. For example, a crisis caused by a decision made by someone in a management or executive position. External means that the crisis began outside of the organization. The second dimension, intentional-unintentional, corresponds to the controllability element of attribution theory. Intentional means that the crisis was committed on purpose, whereas unintentional means that the crisis was caused by accident.

Figure 1. Crisis type matrix (Coombs, 1995)
A *faux pas* incident is described as an “unintentional action that an external agent tried to transform into a crisis” (Coombs, 1995, p. 455). It occurs when an organization takes action that they believe is appropriate or justified. Because the company believes this to be true, they have no intention to do wrong. However, the external agents challenge the appropriateness of the organization’s action, resulting in consumer outrage, protests and/or boycotting behaviour. For example, social responsibilities tend to be the focal point for most *faux pas* incidents (Coombs, 1995).

Within the marketing industry, especially in consulting, business matrices are created to easily represent, manipulate, and study linear relationships between a finite number of factors. Matrices depict the interaction of these factors as well as the outcome of the interaction. An example of a matrix used in the marketing industry is the growth-share matrix, created by Bruce D. Henderson, the founder of the Boston Consulting Group. This matrix had lasting effects not only on practitioners in the field but also on academics within marketing and other disciplines (Morrison & Wensley, 1991). The importance of the matrix in figure 1 is that Coombs introduced the matrix to illustrate that crisis types are defined by the overlap of two dimensions at different degrees.

Coombs’ crisis type matrix summarizes the factors that create each crisis type in a clear and concise manner. As Coombs describes, “the dimensions must be orthogonal so that when the dimensions are crossed, mutually exclusive crisis types are formed” (1995, p. 454).

**2.1.2 Crisis response types.** The crisis response literature has described a collection of crisis response strategies, all of which are founded on an understanding of the relationship between crisis type and crisis response strategy. Coombs (1995) first constructed these guidelines by defining crisis management and conveying the theoretical approach used to create
these guidelines. The arsenal of crisis-response strategies is comprised of messages designed to repair organizational image. In 1997, Benoit had suggested a list of different strategies when examining facework (i.e., interpersonal efforts to repair images) and apologia (i.e., the rhetorical genre of self-defence). Then, Allen and Caillouet (1994) drew from the impression management literature in order to develop their strategies. Together, the proposed strategies form an integrated repertoire of crisis-response strategies. Table 1 below categorizes the five strategies by Allen and Caillouet, Benoit, and Coombs according to their similarities.

Table 1. Crisis-response strategies (Benoit, 1992; Coombs, 1994; Allen & Caillouet, 1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonexistence Strategies</th>
<th>Denial</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clarification</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attack</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intimidation</td>
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<td>Distance Strategies</td>
<td>Excuse</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a. Denial of intention</td>
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<td>b. Denial of volition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>a. Minimizing injury</td>
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<td>b. Victim deserving</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Misrepresentation of the crisis event</td>
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<td>Ingratiation Strategies</td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
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<td>Praising Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mortification Strategies</td>
<td>Remediation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Repentance</td>
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<td>Rectification</td>
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Presently, we will review and characterize the core crisis response strategies outlined in the literature. First, the nonexistence strategy seeks to eliminate the crisis as much as possible. There are four subtypes of the nonexistence strategy: denial, clarification, attack, and intimidation. Denial is simply a statement by the firm claiming that nothing happened – there is no crisis (Benoit, 1997; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990). Second,
clarification extends denial with an explanation as to why there is no crisis. Third, the attack is a more aggressive strategy; it confronts those who accuse and “wrongly” report the nonexistent crisis (Benoit, 1997). Finally, intimidation is the most aggressive strategy. It is when an organization threatens to use their power, such as lawsuits and physical violence, to confirm that they are not involved.

Unlike nonexistence, the distance strategies will acknowledge the crisis but will try to create public acceptance of the crisis while weakening the linkage between the crisis and the organization (Benoit, 1992; Coombs, 1994; Allen & Caillouet, 1994). There are two subtypes of distance strategies, excuse and justification, which also divide further. The excuse strategy tries to minimize the organization’s responsibility associated with the crisis. The excuse strategy is further subdivided into denial of intention and denial of volition. Justification seeks to minimize the damage associated with the crisis by justifying why they are not responsible. Within this category are tactics that include denying the seriousness of an injury, claiming that the victim deserved what happened, and claiming that the crisis event has been misrepresented (Coombs, 2002; 2007).

Next are ingratiation strategies, which aim to gain public approval after the crisis has occurred. There are three subcategories: bolstering, transcendence, and praising others. Bolstering occurs when an organization reminds the consumers of pre-existing positive characteristics or acts of the organization, such as charitable events or donations (Ice, 1991). This helps to “soften the blow” by reminding the consumers why they are a morally good company. With the transcendence tactic, the organization tries to make the crisis seem larger in a more desirable context (Benoit, 1992). This technique tries to make the organization seem more relatable to the general public and the consumers. The third technique is praising, which is
essentially used when wanting to win over the approval from the target audience (Benoit, 1992; Coombs, 1994).

The goal of the mortification strategies is to win the forgiveness of the general public and create an opportunity for acceptance by the consumers of the crisis. The three subtypes of the mortification strategy are remediation, repentance, and rectification. Xie and Peng (2009) explored this strategy by researching whether corporations can repair customer trust after negative publicity. By asking their participants different questionnaires, they focused on three trusting factors: competence, benevolence, and integrity, which lead to elicit forgiveness. Xie and Peng (2009) found that rebuilding a trustworthy image and earning consumer forgiveness are crucial steps in repairing consumer trust.

According to the results, rebuilding a trustworthy image and earning consumer forgiveness are crucial steps in repairing consumer trust. A remediation strategy is when an organization willingly offers some form of compensation, such as money, goods, services, or aid (Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990). Repentance explicitly involves asking for forgiveness. Essentially, the organization will apologize to the public and hope that the severity of the crisis will lessen as people accept their apology and ultimately forgive the organization (Marcus & Goodman, 1994; Coombs, 1995). Rectification is the final technique and involves taking public action to prevent any future recurrence of the crisis (Benoit, 1997).

The final strategy is suffering. The motive behind suffering is to win sympathy from the public. This strategy is used to the organization’s benefit by portraying them as an unfair victim (Berg & Robb, 1992; as cited in Coombs 1995).

Researchers have primarily focused their attention on the strategies and techniques described above, however, Xiao, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) have examined a crisis
response strategy subtype that has received little academic attention: humour. While the expression of emotions in crisis communications has been studied extensively, researchers have focused primarily on negative emotions, such as sadness, shame, and regret (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2013; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; as cited in Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Some researchers, however, have urged public relations practitioners and marketers to not only use humour but any positive emotion, as a form of corporate expression (Davies, 2011).

The value of applying humour to a crisis response strategy is based on the idea that humour humanizes the message that the organization is trying to convey, which could ultimately lead to improving the organization’s relationship with their stakeholders (Kelleher, 2009; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018). While Xiao and colleagues (2017) examine the application of humour in a confirmed crisis versus rumoured crisis situation, the widespread use of social media for both crisis response communication and the exchange of humour calls for an examination of the effectiveness of humour as a crisis response online versus offline. Delineating the conditions under which the use of humour as a crisis response could be beneficial or detrimental to an organization’s reputation will not only inform practitioners of when (not) to use humour, but also contribute to the body of crisis management literature that aims to understand how positive emotions can be utilized in crisis management communications. Although Xiao and his colleagues have interesting and new findings, they suggested that there was more than could be explored. They suggested exploring humour in different product categories, different response strategies, and simply different humour styles (Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Because humour is a new response subtype, no previous research has identified which response strategy it would be categorized yet. The current study will be exploring this concept.
2.2 Organizational reputation and crisis response types

The concept of a brand is described as a “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competition” (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, p. 368). When a company is marketing itself in a competitive industry, it is engaging in corporate branding. The primary focus of corporate brands is on internal and external stakeholders. With a corporate brand, comes corporate identity; there is no difference between a brand identity and corporate brand identity, other than it includes other elements such corporate culture, strategy, structure, history, business activities and market scope, unless there is more than one brand (Burke, Martin, & Cooper, 2011). A corporate brand sets a high expectation for its consumers by promising exactly what they will be delivering. Given this, a company can communicate to its audience and the public its corporate identity, but a brand’s image and reputation is out of the company’s control and results from the impressions left from the company’s behaviour (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Reputation is earned, not given. A corporate reputation, different from a brand reputation, is influenced by many external factors — it is the acquisition of a favourable opinion among key stakeholder groups (Balmer, 2001). Although a good corporate reputation may give the organization a competitive advantage, it is up to them to maintain the perceived reputation.

2.2.1 Value of organizational reputation. Reputation holds a lot of value; if not financial value, then the emotional value to both the consumers and those within the company (Honey, 2013). The result of emotional value can also lead to financial value. Organizational reputation has been described as a backward-looking asset, but with forward-looking benefits; it is the goodwill consumers ascribe to a brand based on their previous encounters with the said
brand (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995; as cited in Dahlén, Granlund, & Grenros, 2009). Although reputation is intangible, it does have financial implications, and has effects on the attraction of new consumers, the generation of investment interest, the recruitment of top employer talent, and the motivation of current employees and improvement of job satisfaction (Davies et al., 2003; as cited in Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Brands that have a strong organizational reputation tend to be associated with a higher level of awareness in their markets, with positive increases in organizational reputation (Burke, Martin, & Cooper, 2011). Wartick (1992) defined a reputation as an aggregated evaluation that stakeholders make about how well an organization is meeting the said stakeholders’ expectations based on its past behaviours. Consumers’ perception of a corporation’s overall reputation is critical as consumers want to be associated with companies that have a good reputation (Roberts, 2002; Heikkurinen, 2010; as cited in Kim, Hur, & Yeo, 2015). Corporate and organizational reputations can be assessed based on external sources; for example, business-related magazines like Fortune’s Most Admired Companies ranking or Consumer Reports. Having a strong reputation is widely recognized as a valuable, but intangible, asset. Because of this, corporate brands work hard to protect their reputation.

### 2.2.2 Threats to organizational reputation

Because of the value of a positive organizational reputation, much academic attention has been devoted to understanding factors that threaten organizational reputation. In reputational research, researchers often do not base their work on documented information from affected organizations (Greyser, 2009). Companies that have been studied empirically tend to be those that successfully overcome dangerous situations, such as the notable crisis of Johnson & Johnson/Tylenol, where seven people died after taking cyanide-lace Tylenol capsules (Snyder, 1983). Researcher Stephen Greyser (2009) has focused his studies on the what, why, and how of recognizing corporate brand crises through
a synthesis of organizational experiences with threats to organizational reputation, in order to offer guidelines for analytic approaches and organizational actions or responses. A company may face reputational threats in many ways, but Greyser (2009) found that the most serious and troubling of them all are those that affect the distinctive attributes and characteristics. Research has indicated that a threat to an organization’s reputation is a product-harm crisis or a product recall situation (Berman, 1999; Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2003; Mowen, 1980; as cited in Laufer & Coombs, 2006).

2.3 Addressing crises

Understandably, a crisis leads to negative outcomes such as reputational damage, however, there are opportunities to learn from the crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007; as cited in Xiao, Hudders, Claeys, & Cauberghe, 2018). Benoit (1997) stated that the perception of a brand held by its consumers is always more important than reality. It is not about whether the business is responsible for the crisis or not, but rather being thought of as responsible for the crisis. Similarly, an important aspect is not whether a crisis in itself is offensive, but whether it is believed by the audience to be offensive. It is crucial to consider which audience may be the most affected in times of crisis, depending on the type (Lee, 2004). The more an organization is perceived to be responsible for a crisis, the more reputational damage the crisis may cause (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). As such, it is important to execute the most appropriate response to a crisis to protect the organization’s reputation. Crisis response can be given in the form of instructing crisis information (i.e., informing people what they should do), adjusting the information on the crisis (i.e., correcting miscommunication), and organizing reputation repair strategies (i.e., denial, justification, rebuild of SCCT). As previously discussed, denial is often used by companies who are caught in
scandals. The risk with using this technique is that any forced compliance can have negative effects on consumer perceptions, highlighting the importance of selecting the most appropriate response for the crisis.

2.3.1 Organizational reputation and perceived severity. Because reputational threats can come in many forms; assessing the seriousness, or the perceived severity, of crisis, is key in order to understand what response strategies should be utilized in order to protect the organization’s reputation. Originally, severity was quantified using an unbiased criterium such as the number of injured victims or the degree of severity that their injuries are (Kouabenan et al., 2001); however, to emphasize the importance of consumer perceptions, an alternative measure of perceived severity has been to examine the differences between observers’ judgements on severity. The severity of a crisis can depend on how the consumers perceive it, which contributes to perceived organizational reputation (Phillips, 1985; as cited in Laufer, Gillespie, McBride, & Gonzalez, 2005). Fiske and Taylor (1991) have explained the impact of crisis severity on consumer perceptions as follows: “as the consequences of an action become more severe, they become more unpleasant, and the notion that they might be accidental becomes less tolerable. The fear that the same thing might involve the self becomes a realistic possibility. Seeing the actions as avoidable and blaming a person for their occurrence makes the actions more predictable and hence avoidable by the self” (p. 85). The study of severity and its effects on consumers has been researched (Laufer, Gillespie, McBride, & Gonzalez, 2005). These researchers found as the consumers’ perception of the crisis’ severity increases, more blame is being put on the firm. Research has found that there is a positive significant relationship between the severity of a crisis and the measures of responsibility and blame (Robbennolt, 2000; Burger, 1981; as cited in Laufer, Gillespie, McBride, & Gonzalez, 2005). However, an important element
in a crisis in the past corporate behaviour and reputation. If a company already has a favourable
pre-existing reputation, then less crisis responsibility will be put on to that company. On the
other hand, if a company has a negative pre-existing reputation then consumers will put more
blame on that company (Laufer & Coombs, 2006).

2.4 Consumer response to crises

2.4.1 Attribution Theory. Researchers have examined the process by which individuals
perceive and evaluate causation as well as the consequences of such evaluations. First developed
in social psychology, attribution theory refers to the perception of inference of cause (Kelley &
Michela, 1980). Attribution theory was first introduced by Harold Kelley (1967), who applied an
attributional approach to the attitude and persuasion literature within psychology. Attribution
theory was not widely recognized in the marketing discipline until Valerie Folkes (1984) applied
it to purchase behaviour. She believed that “a theoretical model was needed to map out
relationships between specific thoughts about product failure and specific complaining
behaviours” (Folkes, 1984, p.398). Several phenomena were examined through the lens of
attribution theory: source credibility (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; as cited in Folkes, 1988), the
effects of coupons and other promotional incentives on consumers’ attitudes (Scott, 1977; as
cited in Folkes, 1988) and children’s inferences about advertisers’ motives (Robertson &
Rossiter, 1974; as cited in Folkes, 1988). The application of attribution theory in research
highlights the relationship between consumers’ attitudes and their behaviours (Folkes, 1988).
Attribution theory describes the process by which individuals evaluate the intentions and
motivations of others based on their own feelings, beliefs, and intentions.

Weiner (1986) developed a theory to the structure of peoples’ casual attributions, but also
mending the gap between attributions and emotional responses to outcomes. Specifically, he
distinguished the three main concepts of attributions: locus of causality, controllability, and stability. First, locus of causality refers to the location of the problem – is it internal (the firm) or external (the consumer)? Second, controllability refers to the degree to which the crisis is volitional or nonvolitional. Third, stability refers to the frequency of a crisis: is it relatively temporary (fluctuate over time) or is it constant (remaining stable over time)? (Folkes, 1981; Mick & Faure, 1998).

Based on attribution theory, the initial emotional response to an outcome, such as a crisis, is outcome-dependent (i.e., whether the outcome was positive or negative) and attribution-independent. Following that, consumers make an attribution for the outcome and evaluate it based on the locus of causality, controllability, and stability of the outcome, which results in further emotions that are attribution-dependent Mick and Faurne (1998). While attributions are primarily tied to the outcome, research has shown that consumers’ attributions can be modified in three ways: by influencing the consumers’ motivations, by controlling the information available, and by creating certain beliefs (Folkes, 1988, p. 555). Research suggests that consumers choose to believe that other consumers share the same preferences and consumption habits as themselves (Folkes, 1988).

Consumers will often look for a cause of reason to any event that occurred (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). This phenomenon is similarly related to Weiner’s (1985) attribution theory. The concept of this theory is to develop the idea that people look for causes of events, but especially if the event itself is negative or unexpected. Speculating the cause of a crisis is common among consumers, in fact, evaluating the crisis responsibility can help determine the cause (Shim & Yang, 2016). A crisis has four central factors that influence the attributions the consumers make regarding the crisis: crisis type, veracity of evidence, damage and performance history (Coombs,
1995). Given this, consumers can then decide whether crisis responsibility is high or low. Previous research shows that an increased crisis attribution is positively correlated with reputational threat (Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The present study will be exploring whether attribution theory can explain if a positive response like humour will be effective amongst the consumers. Specifically, applying attribution theory, we set out to examine if the damage aspect of a crisis (Coombs, 1995) can be influenced by the utilization of humour in a crisis response, thereby leading to changes in organizational reputation. Identifying whether such a relationship exists and whether, and under what conditions, it is more effective than traditional (rational) response types opens an avenue for research and practice in which crisis management is not shrouded in negative emotions, but positive ones like humour.

2.5 The use of humour in marketing

Humour has been used in advertisement, promotion, product packaging, endorsements, as well as in post-crisis reputation repair (Vigso, 2013; Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Humour is made up of manipulated humour from the sender, and perceived humour from the receiver (Speck, 1991). There are several types of humour, ranging from the classic “comic wit”, to satire, to full comedy, to sentimental humour, and sentimental comedy (Weiberger & Gulas, 1992). The use of humour can draw more attention, enhance likeability, reduce counterarguments, and it does not impede the comprehension of the message it is trying to deliver (Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2018). Humour tends to be perceived as light hearted, less serious, informal, and approachable (Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018). However, most humour attempts, regardless if they are provocative or not, can be risky due to the fact that
failing to be funny can backfire at any moment and can detrimentally offend an audience (Beard, 2008; Flaherty et al., 2004; as cited in Warren & McGraw, 2016).

2.5.1 Humour in business. It has been suggested by business journals that humour is important for effective performance in the workplace (Beard, 2014). Not only does it increase productivity and overall well-being, professionals are using humour in many different fields, beyond just business and consumers (Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018). It’s important to note that these results were found in the United States of America.

Since the 1920s, businesses have been dissuaded from using humour in media. It has been stated that “people do not buy from clowns” (Hopkins, 1923; as cited in Weinberger & Gulas, 1992), and that if something were to be made funny, consumers would not only not pick up on it, but may also not find the message or the brand behind it serious enough (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). There was a rise in humorous advertisements in the early 1990s, where television ads, radio ads, and even print advertisement were beginning to entertain its consumers rather than just informing them. While the use of humour is common in advertising, the efficacy of humour as a communications device remains uncertain (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Research finds that an advertisement that is successfully funny will not harm the advertised brand (Eisend, 2009). As mentioned, the use of humour has the potential to backfire; but this can be alleviated by creating an advertisement that can amuse and entertain consumers simultaneously.

2.5.2 Humour in crisis. The use of humour as a type of message delivery can be complicated, especially in a crisis communication scenario. On one hand, using humour can be perceived as more relatable, more human, and more empathic (Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018). The humorously framed crisis responses can reduce the perceived severity of the negative event, leading to positive effects on organizational reputation. On the other hand, there is the
potential that the use of humour may lead to a decrease in perceived sincerity of the organizational response, because humour can reflect a lack of concern and empathy for a serious situation (Sorensen, 2008; Vigsø, 2013; Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Humour’s potential to influence perceived sincerity, especially in a crisis, is notable because sincerity is an important aspect contributing to organizational reputation, and especially the repair of organizational reputation post-crisis (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014(A); Claeys et al., 2013).

Interestingly, when communicated through social media, humorously framed crisis responses and messages seem to have beneficial effects due to the medium’s interactive nature (e.g., it allows for the opportunity to initiate conversation between brands and consumers, and developing that relationship among stakeholders). Strengthening this relationship will also strengthen the link between social media and the human voice.

### 2.5.3 Humour in social media.

Social media is a popular method for consumers to communicate negative, positive, or neutral information about a brand. Consumers are increasingly using online tools—such as social media platforms, blogs, etc.—to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about products, services, and brands which they consume and interact with (Gupta & Harris, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; as cited in Huete-Alcocer, 2017). This consumer-led spread of information about a brand, product, or service, can have lasting effects on the company (Lee & Cranage, 2014; Luo, 2009; as cited in Weitzl, Hutzinger, & Einwiller, 2018). The rapid growth of consumers’ online communication through social media has gained the attention of not only industry professionals, but academics as well (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). The current study will be exploring if this same effect pertains to the news of a crisis.

Given that social media are forums of human expression and communication, they are often characterized by humour. Researchers have suggested that since the 2016 Presidential
Elections in the United States, there has been a rise of satirical humour in political commentary online (Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018). Davis, Love, and Killen (2018) alluded to humour’s complex nature by posing the following question: are individuals using humour to make substantive (political) claims or are they simply drawing on political content as a source of material for jokes and humorous content? These researchers argued that it could be both.

2.6 Message delivery

Ruth and York (2004) built on Keller’s (1998) notion that reputation is based on not only the firm’s actions, but its communications about these actions to consumers. These authors investigated ways in which companies with weak reputations can communicate performance improvements, and boost their stakeholders’ attitudes, especially their consumers. They examined the persuasive effects of three important characteristics of communication: (1) the source that delivers the message, (2) whether the information is presented numerically or verbally, and (3) the reference point used to express performance improvement. They found that the source of the information interacts with both the reference point and information type to affect attitude change toward the company. The ‘consistency’ between source and information type or reference point determines the impact on degree of attitude change.

Public relations practitioners who use media organizations as message sources that comment on firms’ activities are viewed as influential in persuading an individual’s belief on the firm (Fombrun, 1996; Duncan & Moriarty, 1997, 1998; as cited in Ruth & York, 2005). Past research has shown that numeric information is easier to understand (Viswanathan & Childers, 1996). An example of numeric information is comparing “32 miles per gallon” versus “high gas mileage”. Reference points are baseline standards of comparison (Kahneman, 1992; Fiegenbaum et al., 1996; as cited Ruth & York, 2005). The most common reference points used to report
performance information are trend analyses and benchmarking against competitors. To explain further, trend analyses are internal reference points that compared the company’s current performance with its own past performance (Pearce & Robinson, 1994). Benchmarking is the opposite; an external reference point in which the company compares its current performance with other companies in the industry (Ghoshal & Westney, 1991; Mennon & Launders, 1987). It was found that any organization that chose to express sadness in their communication strategy minimizes reputational damage, compared to organizations that use more rational responses (Claeys et al., 2013). In 2016, researchers Roshan, Warren, and Carr explored the possibility of using social media for crisis communication among businesses’ stakeholders. Traditional theories on crisis communication (Coombs, 1994) do not represent the social media context, and it is worth questioning whether it would have similar results online. Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016) performed a qualitative analysis on the use of social media as a crisis communication tool, specifically focusing on Facebook and Twitter and found that organizations lacked awareness of and often did not respond to their stakeholders’ messages or did not consider crisis response strategies that could potentially increase reputational risk. However, no quantitative measures were performed.

2.7 Gap in the literature

Research suggests that humour is used in a situation where a crisis is considered to be rumoured, consumers perceived the severity level of the crisis to be low and put less responsibility on the organization (Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). When a crisis is considered to be low in its severity level or ambiguous, humour serves to minimize the public’s perception of the severity of the threat posed by the crisis. This aligns with other risk
communication research that suggests that humour can decrease the perceived severity of a given negative event (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Nabi et al., 2016).

Moreover, would similar results be obtained if the crisis communications strategy (i.e., the response type) were to be delivered online or offline? The use of social media within the crisis literature has not been investigated in terms of the effects of delivery type (online vs. offline) on the consumers’ perception of the organization. The current study will investigate the effects of a humorous apology versus a rational apology response strategy. The response types will be using apology as the communication strategy since it is the most favourably used strategy both in research and industry, as well as had the most significance results in past research (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). An apology is defined as any admission of responsibility and having regrets about an unfortunate or unwanted event (Hargie et al., 2010). Apologizing makes a victim of the unwanted event feel better and is more willing to accept forgiveness (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2013).

The current study will investigate the effects of a humorous crisis response on organizational reputation (gap #1). It will also examine the mediating role of level of perceived severity by the consumers of the crisis on the relationship between a humorous crisis response and organizational reputation (gap #2). Finally, the present study will examine the moderating role of message delivery type on the perceived severity of a humorous message (gap #3). See figure 2 below for the conceptual model.
2.8 Hypotheses

When a crisis occurs, it has a very high impact on an organization’s reputation (Pearson & Clair, 1998). While research has examined the effectiveness of response strategies such as apology, denial, and others (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Coombs et al., 2010; Dutta & Pullig, 2011), to the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been any discussion on if humour could be used an appropriate crisis response strategy and how a humorous crisis communication should be delivered. The current study will aim to fill this gap.

If an organization were to give an apologetic statement, could it perhaps be considered light hearted if delivered in a humorous tone? Could using this method cause any harm or damage to the organization’s reputation? Based on findings that suggest that an organization’s relationship with its stakeholders could be improved by the use of humour (Kelleher, 2009; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018), and in line with research in risk communication, we expect that humour will result in decreased severity, which will impact organizational reputation (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Nabi, 2016). Given Xiao et al.’s (2017) findings, that in a rumoured crisis situation perceived severity mediates the relationship between message framing and reputation, we hypothesize that the following will occur in the event of a low severity crisis:
**Hypothesis 1**: A humorous (vs. rational) crisis response type will lead to lower (vs. higher) perceived severity of a crisis, resulting in a higher (vs. lower) level of organization reputation.

While crisis communication in the online context has been largely unexplored, based on the nature of the online medium as a platform for consumers to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, including humorous exchanges (Gupta & Harris, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; as cited in Huete-Alcocer, 2017; Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018), we expect that the medium through which the crisis communication is delivered will have the following impact:

**Hypothesis 2**: The type of message delivery will moderate the mediating effect of perceived severity and response type on organizational reputation, such that,

- **H₂A**: In the online condition, a humorous (vs. rational) response leads to lower (vs. higher) perceived severity and in higher (vs. lower) organizational reputation

- **H₂B**: In the offline condition, a humorous (vs. rational) response leads to higher (vs. lower) perceived severity and lower (vs. higher) organizational reputation

**CHAPTER 3: Pre-test Methodology**

A pre-test was needed before conducting the main study. The objective of conducting a pre-test was to (1) identify which stimulus to use in the main study, and (2) whether the stimulus was considered humorous to the participants. The pre-test design was similar to the design of Xiao, Cauberghe, and Hudders’ (2017) pre-test which they used to determine which humorous stimulus to use in their main study.

### 3.1 Participants

A total of 38 participants were recruited to participate in the pre-test. These participants were collected via convenience sampling, primarily undergraduate and graduate students.
3.2 Stimuli

A mock newspaper article was written by the researcher. It contained information about a fictitious transportation company that regularly experienced service delays. The article was the same for all participants. Participants were given ten different humorous messages that were responses made by the imaginary company. They were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert Scale from 1 (Not Funny at all) to 5 (Very Funny) how humorous they found each message response; created by the researcher. Humour was manipulated by creating ten fictitious social media posts by the imaginary company. The posts included “funny” language to amplify the hilarity of the content. The vignette and the list of responses that were used in the pre-test can be found in Appendix 1.

3.3 Procedure

In order to conduct research with human participants, the present study, including the pre-test, received ethics approval from the University of Guelph’s Research Ethics Board (REB#19-03-004). Upon signing up to participate in the pre-test but before they began the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form which they had to read fully and agree to before partaking in any part of the pre-test. Once electronically signed, participants were able to begin the online pre-test survey. Once they finished, they were thanked for their participation and were provided with a debriefing form (both informed consent and debriefing forms are found in Appendix 9).

3.4 Pre-test Analysis & Results

The results for the pretest are as follows: the means were calculated for each crisis response type (CRT); however, they were not significantly different from each other (refer to Table 2 below). The sum of scores for each crisis response was calculated instead. The total
scores for each response was calculated by collecting the sum of scores; the crisis response that had the highest frequency of both “4 – Somewhat Funny” and “5 – Very Funny” scores were the one chosen to be used in the main study. The crisis response that was chosen is highlighted in the list found in Appendix 1.

Table 2. Mean scores for pre-test stimuli.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CRT1</th>
<th>CRT2</th>
<th>CRT3</th>
<th>CRT4</th>
<th>CRT5</th>
<th>CRT6</th>
<th>CRT7</th>
<th>CRT8</th>
<th>CRT9</th>
<th>CRT10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each crisis response, the total scores for “4 – Somewhat Funny” plus “5 – Very Funny” were added. Response 4 had the highest mean, which ultimately led to that crisis response being chosen as the stimulus for the main study. Frequency scores for each of the ten responses can be found in Appendix 1, where the highest mean can be found for response 4.

CHAPTER 4: Main Study Methodology

The main study design was similar to Xiao, Cauberghe, and Hudders’ (2017) main study, which they based on Martin et al. (2003) – this study was designed to determine which crisis response type and message delivery type had an effect on an organization’s reputation.

4.1 Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing platform where individuals are awarded a certain amount of US dollars in exchange for their participation in various tasks. For the main study, participants were awarded $1.00 USD for completing the experiment. The total number of participants was calculated using G*Power software, which indicated that at least 180 participants should be recruited. This calculation was based on an alpha of p < 0.05, an effect size of 0.25 (medium effect), and a 0.80 power—this is considered the standard power in social science research (Cohen, 1992). There were no
restrictions in terms of gender or other demographics other than participants had to be at least 18 years old or older in age to participate. The survey was administrated on Qualtrics.com.

4.2 Stimuli

A mock newspaper article was written by the researcher. It included information about a fictitious transportation company that experienced service delays. The article was the same article that was used in the pretest, and it was used in all experimental conditions: humour and rational conditions, and offline and online conditions. Humour was manipulated by using the crisis response that was determined to be the most humorous by the pre-test—the content of this response was used in both the online and offline condition. The crisis response in the rational conditions simply stated the issue and claimed that it will be resolved as soon as possible. The online condition was manipulated by indicating to the participants that the company’s crisis response was made via a social media post. No explicit social media platform was used in order to avoid bias, as the authors are not aware of any previous research that supports whether some platforms are preferred over the other. In the offline condition, message delivery method was manipulated by instructing the participants to imagine themselves standing on the platform of the train station, listening to announcements being made over the PA (public address) system. Both crisis responses (humorous and rational) contained an apology from the company. In the humorous condition, the social media post included “funny” language, essentially slang, to amplify the hilarity of the content. Refer to Appendix 2 for examples of stimuli and the news vignette.

4.3 Procedure

To conduct research with human participants, the present study received ethics approval from the University of Guelph’s Research Ethics Board (REB#19-03-004). Upon signing up to
participate in the study, participants were presented with an informed consent form which they had to read fully and agree to before partaking in any part of the experiment. Once the consent form was electronically signed, participants were able to begin the online experiment. When they completed the study, they were thanked for their participation and were provided with a debriefing form (both informed consent and debriefing forms are found in Appendix 1).

4.4 Design

The main study was a scenario-based online experiment; a 2 (crisis response type: humorous vs. rational) x 2 (message delivery type: online or offline) between-subjects design. The 2 x 2 design tested whether a humorous response strategy will influence overall organizational reputation. The independent variable was the response type, the dependent variable was the measure of organizational reputation, the mediator was the perceived severity level of the crisis, while the moderator was the message delivery type.

A questionnaire was created to measure participants’ attitudes and opinions towards the humorous and rational crisis response messages; questionnaire items were adapted from Nabi et al. (2007) humorous scale. The questionnaire was comprised of 16 items; responses were collected on a 7-point Likert Scale (See Appendix 3 for scales). Table 3 includes all scales that were used in the present study, along with the number of items and the anchor.

The survey also included items adapted from a perceived severity scale; it consists of 3 items measured on a 7-point Likert Scale, which assess the degree to which participants felt the company was dishonest, untrustworthy, and insincere (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

A third measure, the organizational reputation scale, comprised of 14-items measuring participants’ attitudes about the organization’s reputation. It was also administrated using a 7-point Likert scale and developed by Ponzi, Fombrun, and Gardberg (2011).
As mentioned, each item from all three scales are measured on a 7-point Likert scale, whether it may be the semantic differential scale or a statement. Each item is rated as either 1 being the worst option, and 7 being the best option.

Table 3. List of scales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Anchor (7-point Likert Scales)</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational reputation Scale</td>
<td>14 items</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Ponzi, Fombruin, &amp; Gardberg (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity scale</td>
<td>3 items</td>
<td>Semantic Differential Scale from 1 to 7</td>
<td>Arpan &amp; Pompper (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humorous scale</td>
<td>16 items</td>
<td>Semantic Differential Scale from 1 to 7</td>
<td>Nabi et al. (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 5: Main Study Analysis & Results

5.1 Objective

The two key objectives of the main study were: (1) to determine whether a humorous response has an influence on the organization’s reputation during low severity crisis situations, and (2) to determine whether the response from the organization in times of crisis was more effective if it was conveyed online versus offline.

5.2 Participants

A total of 234 participants were collected to participate in this study using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Each participant was paid $1.00 USD upon receiving their MTurk completion code at the end of the survey. However, 183 of the participants data were used as 46 participants did not pass the manipulation checks given and 5 participants had missing data. The 51 participants’ data were excluded from analyses. Their data were permanently deleted. In the remaining sample, 53.7% of participants were male, 37.3% were female, and 9% preferred not to respond. A total of 56% of participants were aged between 25 to 34 years old, most completed some college or university degree (38.3%), and most were of Caucasian race (61%). All
demographic results can be found in Appendix 11. Participants were randomly assigned one out of four experimental conditions through the “randomizer” feature on Qualtrics. The number of participants assigned to each condition is indicated in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Main study experimental conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Message Delivery</th>
<th>Online</th>
<th>Offline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td></td>
<td>Condition 1</td>
<td>Condition 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 44</td>
<td>N = 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td></td>
<td>Condition 2</td>
<td>Condition 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 42</td>
<td>N = 53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3 Reliability scores

Results were analyzed using SPSS software version 24. In order to ensure that the questionnaires were measuring the latent variables, such as humour, a reliability analysis was conducted for each item. A reliability analysis was also performed to ensure that both the reputation questionnaire and semantic differential scale were measuring the constructs and latent variables. A summary of those analyses is found in Table 5 below. According to Nunnaly and Bernstein (1994), a Cronbach’s alpha score of .70 or more is considered acceptable and reflects a good internal consistency reliability for a scale. Cronbach’s alpha for each set of questionnaires is high (α > .90), which indicates that there is high internal consistency. None of the items from any of the scales were reserved coded.

Table 5. Scale reliability scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha Based on Standardized Items</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humour Scale</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation Scale</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity Scale</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4 Correlations analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to analyse the relationship among the constructs. A strong, positive correlation was found between the Humour Index scale and the Reputation Index scale ($r = .915$). There was another strong, positive relationship found between Humour Index scale and Severity Index Scale ($r = .899$). The correlation table can be found below.

Table 6. Correlations table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Humour</th>
<th>Reputation</th>
<th>Severity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.915**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.915**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.899**</td>
<td>.924**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

When the correlation analysis was conducted it was noted that the humorous scale and the severity scale, and the reputation scale were all highly positively correlated. Given the list of items for each scale, there are a few overlapping items between the humorous and reputation scale that could have potentially measured the same construct. For example, both scales asked participants whether they trusted Transportation Ltd. These similar items could have caused these scales to correlate so highly. In addition to this, as it has been mentioned before, because the items in the perceived severity scale were not reverse coded, the correlations were positive,
rather than negative, even though higher scores on perceived severity items indicated lower perceived severity.

5.5 Manipulation check

Three manipulation checks were performed at the beginning of the survey, immediately after participants read the vignette and were given one of the four conditions. Questions can be found in Appendix 4; the first question asked participants what service the company in the vignette provided. This was to ensure that all participants did not only read the vignette but understood the content as well. As mentioned, 46 participants did not answer correctly and were eliminated from the study; therefore, the final total number of participants was 183.

The second manipulation check was to confirm whether the response made by the company highlighted in the vignette was logical. Participants had to answer on a 7-point Likert Scale from “1 – Extremely illogical” to “7 – Extremely logical”. The means for each condition is listed in table 6.

Table 7. Mean scores for second manipulation check.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Mean ((\bar{x}))</th>
<th>Standard Deviation (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online + Humour</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online + Rational</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline + Humour</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline + Rational</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third manipulation check was to confirm if those who received the humorous response condition found the response indeed funny. It was expected that those who had both humorous conditions would rate the crisis response type as humorous and those who had the two rational conditions would rate the crisis response type less funny. In table 6, according to the means, participants agreed that both rational conditions were more logical than the two humour
conditions. In table 7, according to the means, participants agreed that both humorous conditions were funnier than the two rational conditions. Given the differences in means, the manipulation checks were confirmed. Further explanations are discussion in chapter 6: discussion.

Table 8. Mean scores for third manipulation check.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humour Manipulation Check</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Mean ((\bar{x}))</th>
<th>Standard Deviation (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online + Humour</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online + Rational</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offline + Humour</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offline + Rational</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6 Moderated Mediation Analysis

The first hypothesis predicted that the effect of the type of response by the organization on the organization’s reputation would be mediated by the perceived severity of the crisis, such that, participants exposed to a humorous (rational) response would perceive the severity of the crisis lesser (greater) and the organization’s reputation will increase (decrease). As well, the second hypothesis states that the type of message being delivered will have a moderating effect on the relationship between response type, and perceived severity, and organizational reputation, such that, in the online condition, a humorous (rational) response will lead to lower (higher) perceived severity and result in higher (lower) organizational reputation; whereas in the offline condition, a humorous (rational) response will lead to higher (lower) perceived severity and thus lower (higher) organizational reputation.

To test both hypotheses, model 7 (moderated mediation) and model 4 (mediation) from the Andrew Hayes PROCESS tool, was executed in SPSS; see Appendix 6 for syntax code (Hayes, 2013). Model 7, shown in Figure 3 below, is described as a moderated mediation model, which represents the conceptual model described in chapter 3; where Y is the dependent variable.
(organizational reputation), \(X\) is the independent variable (response type), \(M\) is the mediator (perceived severity) and \(W\) is the moderator (message delivery).

Before conducting the analysis, we verified the assumptions of the model were satisfied. The assumptions were considered: (1) the relationship between \(X\) and \(Y\) is linear in nature, or approximately so; (2) the errors in estimation of outcome variable \(Y\) are normally distributed; (3) there is homoscedasticity; (4) the errors in estimation are statistically independent. Similar to ANOVA assumptions, given that participants were randomly assigned to a condition, the fourth assumption was satisfied. Residual analyses were conducted to test the first and second assumptions. There were no outliers found; this was discovered by constructing boxplots (refer to Appendix 5 for graphs). A Shapiro-Wilk’s test of normality was performed to check the assumption of normal distribution of the dependent variable, and according to this test, if the p-value is less than the significance level \((\alpha = .05)\) then it is considered an abnormal distribution. Despite the normality assumption being violated, the analyses were completed because ANOVA tests are considered robust to deviations in normality, especially when the group sizes are relatively equal, and the degrees of freedom are greater than 20 (Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). In this study, the degrees of freedom are 182 and the group sizes were 44, 42, 49, and 53. Given this and according to Maxwell and Delaney (2004), it was reasonable to continue the analysis by assuming that the F-values produced would be reliable results despite the violation. A Levene’s test for Equality of Error Variances was used to check the assumption of equal variance of the dependent variables in each cell. The results found were not significant \((p > .05)\), confirming that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated. Although the third assumption was difficult to preform, an attempt at homoscedasticity was conducted and found in Appendix 12.
Perceived severity, the mediator, was collected by asking participants a 3-item scale developed by Arpan & Pompper (2003) regarding the way they perceived the severity level of the fictitious crisis in the vignette. Their responses were averaged to develop a perceived severity index. A summary of the descriptive results is found in the two tables below.

**Table 9. Mean perceived severity scores for Response Type condition.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 10. Mean perceived severity scores for Message Delivery condition.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message Delivery</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that participants’ perceived severity did not seem to change given the condition as the total means do not significantly differ; ultimately leading to no statistical differences. To test the proposed mediation, the bootstrapping method was applied—with 5000 iterations, per the default in SPSS. This method tests the null hypothesis that the indirect path from the interaction term (response type*message delivery) to the dependent variable (organizational reputation) via the mediator does not significantly differ from zero. During the bootstrapping procedure, if zero is not found within the confidence intervals then it
can be concluded that the indirect effect is significantly different from zero at the p < .05 level (Garcia et al., 2010). Results for the moderated mediation analysis are summarized in Tables 12, 13, and 14. It is important to note that the items were not reverse coded, meaning when the mean or score is a large number, it is more positive. When participants score closer to 7 on the scale, they are agreeing and supporting a positive statement (e.g., the response was honest). Statements were all positive, including the semantic differential scale, the positive construct was rated closer to 7 and the negative one was rated closer to 1. For example, “1 = dishonest” and “7 = honest”. This means that a higher Perceived Severity Index score is actually indicative of a lower perceived severity. For the Humour Index and the Reputation Index, higher scores indicate greater humour scores and higher reputation scores.

Table 11. PROCESS model 7 results for moderated mediation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intercept</th>
<th>Standard Error (SE)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV = Severity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.5178</td>
<td>1.2101</td>
<td>3.7335</td>
<td>0.0003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Type</td>
<td>-0.6599</td>
<td>0.7475</td>
<td>-0.8829</td>
<td>0.3785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Delivery</td>
<td>-1.2888</td>
<td>0.7619</td>
<td>-1.6915</td>
<td>0.0925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Type*Message Delivery</td>
<td>0.7087</td>
<td>0.4700</td>
<td>1.5080</td>
<td>0.1333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV = Reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.1598</td>
<td>0.1606</td>
<td>0.9952</td>
<td>0.3210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Type</td>
<td>-0.1640</td>
<td>0.0894</td>
<td>-1.8346</td>
<td>0.0682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Severity</td>
<td>0.9470</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>34.1189</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The moderated mediation hypothesis predicts that message delivery will moderate the indirect relationship between response type and organizational reputation, mediated by perceived severity. As indicated in Table 13, the index for message delivery was not significant as zero lies between the lower limit and upper limit confidence intervals. Notably, although it is shown in Table 14 that in the offline message delivery there is a significant effect on perceived severity and organizational reputation compared to the online message delivery, this is not indicative of a
moderated mediation effect as the index for the moderated mediation is not significant. This is indicative of message delivery influencing perceived severity alone, rather than in combination with response type. Therefore, hypothesis two is not supported.

Table 12. Index for moderated mediation (difference between conditional indirect effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message Delivery</th>
<th>Index</th>
<th>BootSE</th>
<th>BootLLCI</th>
<th>BootULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.6711</td>
<td>0.4415</td>
<td>-0.1854</td>
<td>1.5430</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13. Conditional effects of X on Y.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indirect effect of Response Type on Perceived Severity and Organizational Reputation</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>BootSE</th>
<th>BootLLCI</th>
<th>BootULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>0.0462</td>
<td>0.3540</td>
<td>-0.6460</td>
<td>0.7168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline</td>
<td>0.7173</td>
<td>0.2735</td>
<td>0.1667</td>
<td>1.2474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.7.1 Mediation analysis. Hypothesis one predicts that perceived severity will mediate the relationship between response type and organizational reputation. As presented in Table 15, the mediation effect is significant, however it is a partial mediation given that the direct effect is also significant. These results show that compared to a humorous response, a rational response decreases perceived severity, because the relationship is positive, and a higher Perceived Severity Index is indicative of lower perceived severity. Furthermore, the effect from perceived severity on reputation is positive, meaning that the higher the Perceived Severity Index (indicative of low severity), the higher organizational reputation is in the rational condition. These results indicate that the higher the perceived severity score, the more participants perceive the crisis as low severity, which ultimately leads to high reputation. Given this, hypothesis one was not supported as it was predicted that a rational crisis response type would have the opposite effect on perceived severity and organizational reputation.
Table 14. Mediation analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>LLCI</th>
<th>ULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV = Reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.3422</td>
<td>0.0968</td>
<td>-3.5368</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
<td>-0.5331</td>
<td>-0.1513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humour</td>
<td>0.4965</td>
<td>0.0633</td>
<td>7.8413</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
<td>0.3716</td>
<td>0.6215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity</td>
<td>0.5366</td>
<td>0.0574</td>
<td>9.3458</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
<td>0.4233</td>
<td>0.6499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Direct effect of X on Y:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>LLCI</th>
<th>ULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.4965</td>
<td>0.0633</td>
<td>7.8413</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
<td>0.3716</td>
<td>0.6215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indirect effect of X on Y:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>BootLLCI</th>
<th>BootULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Severity</td>
<td>0.5320</td>
<td>0.0637</td>
<td>0.4074</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, there was a direct main effect between a company’s response to crisis and its organizational reputation. As indicated in Table 12 above, this direct effect between response type and an organization’s reputation is marginally significant at p = .0682. In Table 13, the direct relationship between response type and organizational reputation has an effect number of -0.1640; what this indicates is a negative relationship, suggesting that the independent variable and dependent variable are moving in opposite directions. Meaning, when a humorous crisis response was made, organizational reputation increased, and when a rational crisis response was made, organizational reputation decreased.

CHAPTER 6: Discussion

In the following section, the results will be discussed more elaborately for the moderated mediation analysis.

6.1 Mediation Analysis

This study explored whether the perceived severity of a crisis would act as a mediator between response type and organizational reputation. Coinciding with what was previously
mentioned, the direct effect of response type and organizational reputation was marginally significant; as well as the indirect effect of response type through perceived severity was significant. Furthermore, the relationship between perceived severity and organizational reputation was significant. These findings together provide evidence for the relationship between response type and organizational reputation possibly existing through perceived severity.

Following Xiao and colleagues (2017), perceived severity was found to be significantly related to organizational reputation, suggesting that perceived severity is indeed important in determining organizational reputation. The Perceived Severity Index was positively related to the Reputation Index—meaning that when perceived severity decreases, organizational reputation increases. This was unexpected, as we hypothesized that the rational response would increase perceived severity. It is possible that the rational response, which lower perceived severity, was the more appropriate response, and therefore resulted in increased organizational reputation. Additional variables, such as appropriateness of response, may be required to understand the nature of the relationship.

In terms of the partial mediation, it is also possible that additional alternate pathways mediate the relationship between response type and organizational reputation, such as perceived appropriateness, perceived sincerity, perceived likeability, or brand familiarity, but it is inconclusive that response type can directly have influence on the organization’s reputation.

Figure 4. Conceptual model with significant relationships.
The unexpected mediating relationship between response type, perceived severity, and organizational reputation could also be due to the response type manipulation being insufficient. Previous research has found that humour can be difficult to convey (Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018) and different individuals do not all have the same sense of humour. The concept of humour is a difficult one to operationalize and apply. Given the wide range of humour styles that have been described (Weiberger & Gulas, 1992), it is difficult to predict whether humorous content will be thought of as such by every participant. Notably, the pre-test to confirm that the humorous responses were indeed humorous was completed on a different sample population than the main study, which could have contributed to the lack of significant findings. Humour can be difficult to convey due to the fact that not everyone has similar senses of humour. An interesting thing to note is that MTurk recruits’ participants from different countries, cultures, and who speak different languages. Some participants may not have interpreted the humour as well as others due to language barriers or lack of sense of humour due to cultural differences. It is also possible that the humorous manipulation may have also elicited negative emotions, such as frustration, annoyance, or irritation towards the fictitious company. The humorous response types may have been interpreted as lack of concern by the organization, for example, it may have been viewed as the organization not taking the situation seriously. This could have easily elicited negative sentiments towards not only the conditions, but also towards the company themselves. Most attribution research deals with how individuals go about forming causal inferences (Folkes, 1988). Previous research has shown that there are three types of antecedents for causal inferences: motivations, information, and prior beliefs (Kelley & Michela, 1980; as cited in Folkes, 1988). As no data was collected on participants’ motivations or prior beliefs, it is difficult to conclude what attributions of responsibility they made regarding the crisis in the
scenario. As mentioned, it is possible that the rational response was more appropriate in the
given crisis situation, and perceived as the organizational taking responsibility, whereas the
humorous response was perceived as inappropriate or dismissive—but we cannot conclude this
without additional data.

6.2 Moderated Mediation Analysis

As previously mentioned, because the moderated mediation analysis was not significant,
it is difficult to draw a conclusion from the significant effect of offline message delivery on the
mediation relationship. When conducting a moderated mediation analysis, it is important to note
that although it was hypothesized that the moderator would have a combined effect with the
independent variable on the mediator, it is also possible that the moderator can influence the
mediator on its own. Figure 5 demonstrates an example of how message delivery could affect
perceived severity, but without the help of the independent variable of response type (represented
as the dashed arrow).

Although the moderated mediation analyses did not have any significant results, it is
possible that the effects of message delivery, especially an online or offline context, has not been
explored well enough. Preliminary research has suggested that organizations do not know how to
interact well with the consumers, especially in the online world (Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016).
These researchers are concerned as there has been very little guidance on how to assist
organizational crisis managers when trying to select an appropriate crisis response strategy.
Traditional theories, such as the SCCT (Coombs, 2007) and other crisis management literature,
does not effectively represent the online context. While social media has provided organizations
the freedom and ability to communicate directly with its stakeholders (Ngai, Tao, & Moon,
2015), it still leaves the organizations vulnerable in times of crisis due to the lack of information
on what crisis response strategy to apply effectively (Park, Cha, Kim, & Jeong, 2012). Bear in mind, a limited number of studies have been able to examine the effective use of social media as a communication tool during actual times of crisis compared to in experimental settings (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Given that the indirect effect of response type on organizational reputation through perceived severity was not significant, variables other than perceived severity could mediate the relationship between response type and organizational reputation in the online conditions. It is important to mention that assumptions for interpretation and statistical inferences were made when conducting these analyses. Nevertheless, it is possible that the lack of significance in the results may have been since the assumptions were not met completely.

*Figure 5. Moderation between response type and perceived severity.*

6.4 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Attribution theory explains the way stakeholders assign responsibility in a crisis situation. The present study examined crisis response type, message delivery, and perceived severity as key variables that can influence organizational reputation, but given the results, it is likely that additional variables had an impact on participants’ perceptions of the brand as well. As the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007) outlines, the attributions made by consumers in response to crises are influenced by crisis type, veracity of evidence, damage, and performance history. It is possible that in trying to limit the confounding elements in the
present study (e.g., using a fictitious organization to avoid preconceived brand sentiments), the elements that contribute to consumers’ attributions in a crisis situation were not sufficiently observable, and therefore the attributions made were not as expected. The present study aimed to examine if the damage of a crisis (i.e., perceived severity), and in turn organizational reputation, could be influenced by response type and message delivery, but perhaps additional characteristics of the crisis are necessary in order to produce an appropriate consumer response. In other words, perhaps consumers did not make the expected attributional evaluations because not enough elements of the crisis were present.

CHAPTER 7: Contributions

7.1 Theoretical contributions

Although there has been research conducted in the past on the effects of humour in advertisement, it is still arguable that humour is difficult to depict as sense of humour varies greatly between individuals (Warren & McGraw, 2016). Incorporating humour into the crisis management literature is a relatively new concept, as only a few researchers have explored this field of the study (e.g., Xiao, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). However, these researchers have only explored the possibility of using humour in situations when crises are rumoured. The present study was using this same concept but in times when the crisis is not rumoured but confirmed. Although the present study did not find major significant results, this research contributed to this body of literature to a degree, by extending the application of humour in times of crisis.

Furthermore, little research has explored how incorporating message delivery into crisis management literature can be beneficial. By establishing the role of message delivery as a
moderator of the relationship between response type and perceived severity, ultimately leading to organizational reputation, an attempt at a deeper understanding of the conditions under which humour can be more or less effective was done. Although previous research has looked at the effects at what an organization should say—what emotions to convey, essentially focusing more on message framing (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014)—no research to the author’s knowledge has explored the realm of what delivery method would be the most effective. The present study sought to explore this idea, hoping to introduce social media literature to the crisis management literature; with benefit that is discussed in the managerial contributions section below.

### 7.2 Managerial contributions

From a managerial perspective, the present study can be beneficial in the public relations and communications industries. Although the level of severity is low, these types of crises require proper response strategies to minimize damage to the organization, which can be beneficial to public relations practitioner and marketers.

Incorporating humour as a potential response strategy begins to outline opportunities for when this tactic can be effective. Today, Millennials and Generation Z individuals are demanding that information and content online be not only more accessible, but also relatable, credible, relevant, and trustworthy (Arndt, 1967; Katz & Lazarsfield, 1955; Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Cheung et al., 2009; Grimes, 2012). The goal of the present study is to offer public relations and marketing agencies the option and opportunity to use more relatable content to better target and reach their audiences. Millennials and Generation Z individuals tend to have more positive responses to humorous content online—this is seen rather often with viral humorous content online, internet memes, etc. (Ledbetter, 2018). A recent example was when KFC in the United Kingdom faced a crisis after distribution issues lead to delays in chicken
deliveries to stores. KFC decided to respond to the low severity crisis by using a humorous response. The advertisement KFC UK used to respond to the crisis can be found in Appendix 8. KFC’s humorous apology advertisement received widespread positive responses from consumers (Oster, 2018).

Public relations practitioners need to act fast in times of crisis, and the use of social media as a tool to reach consumers is vital as it can reach many different people very quickly. This study was hoping to show that the use of social media (the online condition) could possibly have an impact on how an organization’s response to a crisis is received. The power of social media is growing, and research continuously demonstrates that more information is becoming easily available online than ever before.

CHAPTER 8: Limitations & Future Research

8.1 Limitations

The present study was marked by several limiting factors that should be considered in future research. Firstly, the pre-test of the study was conducted by convenience sampling; although already mentioned in previous chapters, there are many pros and cons to doing this. While it is easier and faster to collect participants, there is always the possibility that the results are biased due to the sample not being representative of the general population. However, there are downfalls in using Amazon Mechanical Turk as well. This tool recruits’ participants from different countries, ethnicities, ages, genders, etc.

A second limitation is related to the experimental design of the main study. Offline message delivery was two of the four conditions, which required participants to imagine themselves standing on a platform, awaiting the train to arrive. The condition is created to
illustrate the scene as realistic as possible. However, when compared to the online condition, it simply just read as the company stated the following social media post. The stimuli were created to be perceived as realistic as the offline condition, which may have explained the possibility of the online condition not having significant results. Perhaps if the online condition had the same scenario laid out to the participants as the offline condition, but the only difference being that instead of hearing the company’s response over the PA (public address system), participants received the company’s response through their mobile devices, perhaps this could have led to different results.

A third limitation is the possibility that there may have been several other factors that could have mediated the relationship between response type and the organization’s reputation, other than perceived severity. Perceived severity, although measured by a reputable scale, can be different for everybody. It is possible that the fictitious crisis may have offended some participants more so than others. If this were true, it is also possible that they felt the given responses were not appropriate or sincere. Although the fictitious organization and crisis were initially created to avoid any preconceived biases towards any known brands, the reality is that consumers often have strong attachments—when their beloved brands are faced with a crisis, emotionally attached consumers will become defensive, react passionately, and find any excuse to dismiss the information in order to protect their own self-concept. Consumers can be biased when it comes to processing the information, counter arguing the negative information, and resisting to change their attitude toward the crisis (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Park et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2010). It is possible that the participants did not feel any attachment towards the fictitious brand because there was no brand loyalty and no brand familiarity for them to feel a certain emotion towards the situation.
A fourth limitation is that in crisis management literature, it is often that researchers will use fictitious crises, because real crises are not frequent. However, the best and most authentic way to capture consumers reactions is in actual times of crisis. Consumers may think that they will react a certain way when the crisis given is hypothetical, but it is very possible that they may react a completely different way once the crisis becomes a reality. It is difficult for crisis management researchers to capture the genuine response of a consumer when the crisis itself is not actually true; making this research challenging.

8.2 Future Research

There are many opportunities for this research to be conducted differently in the future. First and foremost, continuing to examine humour and its effects as a crisis response type. It is a novel concept, and its introduction to crisis management has the potential to be explored and developed. The use of humour has been a positive expression in humans (Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018), why could it not have the same effects to organizations? It is a way for organization to communicate information with their consumers more organically and authentically. It would also be interesting to explore the effectiveness of different humour types. As previously mentioned, there are a number of different types of humour. For instance, it would interesting to explore what effects, if any, self-deprecating humour can have in response to a crisis?

It is also suggested to explore other potential mediating factors other than perceived severity. There are several scales that can test perceived appropriateness, likeability, and sincerity. It would be interesting to test whether consumers feel a certain way towards the brand following the use of humour and use tools other than semantic differential scales to capture attitudes.
Future research could also explore message delivery in its entirety in terms of crisis management. Although there has been research how what to say in times of crisis, it is crucial to explore and determine how to delivery the message. Message delivery can be incredibly impactful, and if done correctly, it can make dramatic differences on how consumers react to a crisis, and ultimately make differences, whether it may be positive or negative, to the targeted organization.

Another avenue to explore in the future is to look at the effects on organizational reputation versus brand reputation. Reputation holds a lot of value (Honey, 2013), whether it may be brand specific or organization specific. Brand reputation is described as the goodwill consumers ascribe to a brand based on their previous encounters with said brand and typically involving their products and services (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995; as cited in Dahlén, Granlund, & Grenros, 2009). It would be interesting to see that since fictitious brand was providing a service like transportation, rather than just highlighting a company, it would have had significant results if the dependent variable was brand reputation. The vignette was created to have an unbiased company presented to avoid biases, but perhaps it would have been beneficial to have a specific company name to better understand the effects of organizational reputation.

Finally, another suggestion for future research could be including more than one humorous response, or tailoring responses to consumer groups based on shared characteristics, such as age. Future research could include two or three different humorous responses to ensure that the effect of humour is in fact significant. It would be also interesting to see whether this concept would have any significance in different product categories or with crises of different severity levels.
CHAPTER 9: Conclusion

Humour has been shown to have positive effects; whether it is to improve mental health or overall physical health, leadership skills, memory skills, one’s education, or simply employees’ moods in the workplace, it has been shown that there can be benefits when humour is applied appropriately (Warren, Barsky, & McGraw, 2018; Schmidt, 1994; Szabo, 2003). Had the present study shown significant results, the improved organizational reputation resulting from the use of humour as a crisis response to low severity crises would have been added to the list of benefits. Crises occur often, and it is agreed that in times of crisis, stress levels increase. Public relations practitioners and marketers work tirelessly, and the goal of this research is to provide them with a new tool that can aid them in managing low severity crises. To grow and develop this body of literature gives academics and practitioners the ability to explore the effect of social media and the power it could have in times of crisis.
References


Hargie, O., Stapleton, K., & Tourish,D.(2010). Interpretations of CEO public apologies for the


Nabi, R. L. (2016). Laughing in the face of fear (of disease detection): Using humor to promote
doi:10.1080/10410236.2014.1000479


Appendices

Appendix 1: Stimuli for Pre-test

Vignette:

Please read the following:

Canadian Transportation company leave Friday morning commuters stranded!
Article written by Allison Hunter – Globe and Mail – Posted October 13th, 2018 @ 2:35PM

“Earlier this morning in a large, urban city commuters were left stranded, yet again, and without any mode of transportation to their workplaces in the city's downtown core and other destinations in the area. Commuters hoping to arrive downtown this morning were left out in the crisp autumn morning cold as all Transportation Limited (TLtd.) trains from 6:00AM to 9:00AM were nowhere to be found. Commuters were offered no explanation and when asked for a comment, TLtd. was unavailable. One commuter, Ben Doyle, had this to say about the missing trains:

"Not surprised, we have been let down by TLtd. before. Their trains are consistently and almost predictably unreliable!"

Doyle went on to further comment that only twice this month the trains have been on time, and that this is the third time that they had not shown up at all. It is worth noting that TLtd. has repeatedly done nothing to address or resolve the situation; leading commuters to consider alternative forms of transportation."

Stimuli:

Q: On a scale from 1 (not funny at all) to 5 (very funny), how humorous do you find the following social media posts?

R1: “To our commuters, what else is new? We know this is a major inconvenience, but we hope you have rescheduled your brunch resos! We will provide an update ASAP! We totally apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00 PM

R2: “To our commuters, sorry to rain on your parade, but that guy you were going to meet, yeah that one who kept rescheduling, well he wasn’t going to show up anyway. We will provide an update sooner than him texting you back. We apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00 PM

R3: “To our commuters, let’s be honest, you were running late anyway to pick up your double shot, vanilla latte, extra whip. We will provide an update soon, but until then, drink your coffee peacefully. We apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00 PM
R4: “To our commuters, did you actually want to go to that spin class your co-worker invited you to? No? Well then, you’re welcome. You’ll see them in the office on Monday. We totally apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00 PM
(The stimulus chosen for the main study)

R5: “To our commuters, yeah, we might be late, but what’s worse? Us being late or you having to take the subway? I think we both know the answer to that one. We will provide an update ASAP! We totally apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00PM

R6: “To our commuters, since we’re experiencing some delays, you may as well just “work from home” #todayiscancelled. We will provide an update ASAP! We totally apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00 PM

R7: “To our commuters, it’s not your fault that we’re late. Email your boss and ask for a paid day off! #yourewelcome. We will provide an update as soon as we can! We apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00PM

R8: “To our commuters, think about it: it’s better to arrive late, then arrive ugly. Just sayin’. We will provide an update ASAP, and we’ll be sure to look gorgeous while we're at it! We totally apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00PM

R9: “To our commuters, obviously we’re running a tad bit late, but you can thank us later because now you don’t have time to have water cooler conversations with Susan. We will provide an update ASAP! We apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. October 13th, 2018 4:00PM

R10: “To our commuters, we hate being late, but at this point, we’re just so good at it. We will provide an update as soon as possible! We apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. January 12th, 2018 4:00PM

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Appendix 2: Vignette & Stimuli for Main Study

Vignette:

Please read the following:

Canadian Transportation company leave Friday morning commuters stranded!
Article written by Allison Hunter – Globe and Mail – Posted October 13th, 2018 @ 2:35PM

“Earlier this morning in a large, urban city commuters were left stranded, yet again, and without any mode of transportation to their workplaces in the city's downtown core and other destinations in the area. Commuters hoping to arrive downtown this morning were left out in the crisp autumn morning cold as all Transportation Limited (TLtd.) trains from 6:00AM to 9:00AM were nowhere to be found. Commuters were offered no explanation and when asked for a comment, TLtd. was unavailable. One commuter, Ben Doyle, had this to say about the missing trains:

"Not surprised, we have been let down by TLtd. before. Their trains are consistently and almost predictably unreliable!"

Doyle went on to further comment that only twice this month the trains have been on time, and that this is the third time that they had not shown up at all. It is worth noting that TLtd. has repeatedly done nothing to address or resolve the situation; leading commuters to consider alternative forms of transportation.”

Later that afternoon Transportation Limited have finally commented on the unsatisfactory service, addressing the issue. Please consider the following:

Stimuli:

Humour/Online Condition:

Transportation Limited responded to the situation through an online social media post. This is how they responded:

"To our commuters, did you actually want to go to that spin class your co-worker invited you too? No? Well, then you're welcome. You'll see them in the office on Monday. We totally apologize for the inconvenience. We will have an update for you ASAP!" from @TLtd. on October 13th, 2018 4:00PM

Rational/Online Condition:

Transportation Limited responded to the situation through an online social media post. This is how they responded:
“To our commuters: while this is a difficult and frustrating situation, we are experiencing unexpected delays. We will provide an update as soon as we receive further information. We apologize for the inconvenience.” from @TLtd. at October 13th, 2019 4:00PM

Humour/Offline Condition:

Imagine yourself standing on the platform of a train station, in the middle of October in a large, urban city. It's breezy outside, but the sun is shining. You are waiting for your train to arrive, when all of a sudden, a TLtd. personnel makes an announcement over the train station's PA (public address) system. This is what was said:

"To our commuters: did you actually want to go to that spin class your co-worker invited you too? No? Well, then you're welcome. You'll see them in the office on Monday. We totally apologize for the inconvenience. We will have an update for you ASAP!" 

Rational/Offline Condition:

Imagine yourself standing on the platform of a train station, in the middle of October in a large, urban city. It's breezy outside, but the sun is shining. You are waiting for your train to arrive, when all of a sudden, a TLtd. personnel makes an announcement over the train station's PA (public address) system. This is what was said:

"To our commuters: while this is a difficult and frustrating situation, we are experiencing unexpected delays. We will provide an update as soon as we receive further information. We apologize for the inconvenience."
Appendix 3: Scales used in the main study

All scales were on a 7-point Likert Scale and Semantic Differential Scales were from 1 to 7:

**Humour:**
1. I found Transportation Ltd.'s response funny
2. Transportation Ltd. appears to be successful
3. I believe Transportation Ltd. has a sense of humour
4. Transportation Ltd. is a creditable company
5. I trust Transportation Ltd.
6. I feel confident in Transportation Ltd. skills
7. Bad/Good
8. Foolish/Wise
9. Unintelligent/Intelligent
10. Negative/Positive
11. Unacceptable/Acceptable
12. Wrong/Right
13. Not Funny/Funny
14. Not amusing/Very amusing
15. Not entertaining/Very entertaining
16. Not humorous/Humorous

**Severity:**
1. Untrustworthy/Trustworthy
2. Dishonest/Honest
3. Transportation Ltd. is competent and effective at providing transportation services

**Reputation:**
1. The promises made by Transportation Ltd. seem reliable
2. Transportation Ltd. is a company I have a good feeling about
3. Transportation Ltd. is a company I trust
4. Transportation Ltd. is a company that I admire
5. Transportation Ltd. is a company that I respect
6. Transportation Ltd. has a good reputation
7. I would say something positive about Transportation Ltd.
8. Transportation Ltd. seem very capable of performing their job
9. If I had the opportunity, I would use Transportation Ltd. services
10. I would recommend the services of Transportation Ltd. to others
11. I would recommend Transportation Ltd. as a good place to work/recommend applying for a job there
12. I have an open mind towards Transportation Ltd.'s activities and initiatives
13. I would invest in Transportation Ltd.
14. I feel confident about Transportation Ltd. Services
Appendix 4: Manipulation Checks used in the main study

1. What service does the company highlighted in the article provide?

2. How logical do you think Transportation Ltd.’s response was?

3. I found Transportation Ltd.’s response funny
Appendix 5: Graphs indicating normality for ANOVA assumptions

Boxplots:
Appendix 6: Reference for Hayes PROCESS Model 4 and Model 7 Syntax

**Model 4:**

!ENDDEFINE.
PROCESS
  y=ReputationINDEX
  /x=HumourINDEX
  /m=SeverityINDEX
  /decimals=F10.4
  /boot=5000
  /conf=95
  /model=4.

**Model 7:**

UNIANOVA ReputationINDEX BY ResponseType MessageDelivery
  /METHOD=SSTYPE(3)
  /INTERCEPT=INCLUDE
  /PLOT=PROFILE(ResponseType*MessageDelivery MessageDelivery*ResponseType)
  /EMMEANS=TABLES(ResponseType*MessageDelivery) COMPARE(ResponseType) ADJ(BONFERRONI)
  /EMMEANS=TABLES(ResponseType*MessageDelivery) COMPARE(MessageDelivery) ADJ(BONFERRONI)
  /PRINT ETASQ DESCRIPTIVE HOMOGENEITY
  /CRITERIA=ALPHA(.05)
  /DESIGN=ResponseType MessageDelivery ResponseType*MessageDelivery.
Appendix 7: KFC UK Advertisement with consumers reactions via Twitter

WE'RE SORRY

A chicken restaurant without any chicken. It's not ideal. Huge apologies to our customers, especially those who travelled out of their way to find we were closed. And endless thanks to our KFC team members and our franchise partners for working tirelessly to improve the situation. It’s been a hell of a week, but we’re making progress, and every day more and more fresh chicken is being delivered to our restaurants. Thank you for bearing with us.

Visit kfc.co.uk/crossed-the-road for details about your local restaurant.
Rachel McGrath
@RachelMcGrath · 19 Feb 2018

The KFC chicken crisis directly affected me yesterday when I was forced to endure the wait at Brixton McDonalds instead of getting a zinger meal. Please respect my privacy at this emotional time.

Francesca Perryman
@JourofFrancesca · 23 Feb 2018

Whoever is in charge of @KFC_UK's marketing and press - bravo 👏🏻 This ad and the Q&A posters are great, very clever! 😳

Nola Marianna Ojomo
@NolaMarianna · 23 Feb 2018

It's been a tough week for us KFC lovers. This apology advert is so good 😂😊

TONI TONE
@t0nit0ne · 23 Feb 2018

For background, KFC's all over the the UK had to shut because they ran out of chicken (supplier issues). Check out this brilliant apology ad. I think rewording the KFC to "FCK" (f*ck) is genius.

Andy Goulding
@AndyGoulding · 19 Feb 2018

I'm only just hearing about the #KFC crisis! They're running out of chicken! Suddenly I want to panic buy KFC!
Appendix 8: Pre-test informed consent and debriefing forms

Informed Consent Form:

“Responding to Low Severity Crises with Humour: The Effects on Organizational reputation”
REB File #19-03-004

Welcome! You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by:

The principal investigator, Dr. Tanya Mark (Associate Professor, Marketing & Consumer Studies), and student investigator, Miriam Habib (Graduate Student, Marketing & Consumer Studies). The results of these studies will be used towards an academic paper.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Tanya Mark at 519-824-4120 ext. 53687, tanya.mark@uoguelph.ca or Miriam Habib, at mhabib03@uoguelph.ca. The results of the study can be obtained by contacting the Dr. Mark or Miriam Habib.

This is an online study and participation can take place at any location and at any time based on your convenience.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of this research is to understand whether humour is an effective response strategy during a low severity crisis. Your participation in the study involves reading vignette cases and answering multiple choice questions.

The survey will take approximately 2 to 5 minutes to complete.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

There are no foreseeable risks, discomforts or inconveniences that can result from participating in this study, other than boredom, fatigue and/or restlessness. If you experience any of these feelings during this study, you may take periodic breaks, and when you are ready to continue, you may return to the study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY:

Your participation may help you gain insight into the research process. Furthermore, your participation will help advance knowledge in the field of marketing and consumer studies.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of the participants. No direct identifying information will be collected. All data will be stored on locked password protected computers.
and will be held for a period of up to five years after the completion of the experiment, then securely destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:

You have the right to decide whether you want to participate in this study or not. You may also remove your data from the study prior to submitting your survey responses, without penalty. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS:

This project has been reviewed by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants (REB#19-03-004).

You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

If you have questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study (REB#19-03-004), please contact: Director, Research Ethics; University of Guelph; reb@uoguelph.ca; (519) 824-4120 (ext. 56606)

I have read the information provided for the study and I agree to participate in this study.
- I consent and agree to participate in this study
- I do not consent and disagree to participate in this study

Debriefing Form:

Thank you for participating in our study! Your participation has been greatly appreciated and very helpful.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research, please feel free to contact Miriam Habib, MSc Student, Marketing and Consumer Studies at mhabib03@uoguelph.ca. You can also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Tanya Mark at tanya.mark@uoguelph.ca.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality. All information will be stored on password protected computers which will remain locked when not in use. All electronic data will be deleted after 5 years. Please note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed while data is in transit over the internet.

WITHDRAWAL

Regardless of you completing the study, you are still able to withdraw your data from the study at any time. You will be assigned an ID number upon completion of the survey that is
automatically generated by Qualtrics.com, the website that administrate the survey, which will be associated with your data. If you chose to withdraw, your data will be deleted and destroyed.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This project has been reviewed by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants. If you have any questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study, please contact: Director, Research Ethics; University of Guelph; reb@uoguelph.ca; 519-824-4120 ext. 56606.

You do not waive any legal rights by agreeing to take part in this study.

If you would like to learn more details on this study, or find out the results of the study, please feel free to contact Miriam Habib or Dr. Mark at the emails provided above.

Thank you again for your participation!
Appendix 9: Main Study test informed consent and debriefing forms

Informed Consent Form:

INFORMED CONSENT

“Responding to Low Severity Crises with Humour: The Effects on Organizational reputation”
REB File #19-03-004

Welcome! You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by:

The principal investigator, Dr. Tanya Mark (Associate Professor, Marketing & Consumer Studies), and student investigator, Miriam Habib (Graduate Student, Marketing & Consumer Studies). The results of this study will be used towards an academic paper.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Tanya Mark at tanya.mark@uoguelph.ca or Miriam Habib at mhabib03@uoguelph.ca.

The results of the study can be obtained by contacting the Dr. Mark or Miriam Habib. This is an online study and participation can take place at any location and at any time based on your convenience.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of this research is to understand whether a specific method can be used as an effective response strategy during a low severity crisis. Your participation in the study involves reading a vignette and answering multiple choice questions.

PROCEDURE:

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to perform the following tasks:
1. Read a fictional vignette
2. Read a response message
3. Answer a series of multiple-choice questions related to the messages. The questions will ask you to identify whether the messages are humorous and your attitudes towards them
4. Answer a series of demographic questions

The survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

There are no foreseeable risks, discomforts or inconveniences that can result from participating in this study, other than boredom, fatigue and/or restlessness. If you experience any of these feelings during this study, you may take periodic breaks, and when you are ready to continue, you may return to the study.
PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive $1.00 USD for participating in this study, this will be distributed by MTurk.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY:

Your participation may help you gain insight into the research process. Furthermore, your participation will help advance knowledge in the field of marketing and consumer studies.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of the participants. No direct identifying information will be collected. All data will be stored on locked password protected computers and will be held for a period of up to five years after the completion of the experiment, then securely destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:

You have the right to decide whether you want to participate in this study or not. You may also remove your data from the study prior to submitting your survey responses, without penalty. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS:

This project has been reviewed by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants (REB#19-03-004). You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

If you have questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study (REB#19-03-004), please contact: Director, Research Ethics; University of Guelph; reb@uoguelph.ca; (519) 824-4120 (ext. 56606)

I have read the information provided for the study and I agree to participate in this study.

- I consent and agree to participate in this study
- I do not consent and disagree to participate in this study

Debriefing Form:

Thank you for participating in our study! Your participation has been greatly appreciated and very helpful.
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research, please feel free to contact Miriam Habib at mhabib03@uoguelph.ca or principal investigator, Dr. Tanya Mark at tanya.mark@uoguelph.ca.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality. All information will be stored on password protected computers which will remain locked when not in use. All electronic data will be deleted after 5 years. Please note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed while data is in transit over the internet.

WITHDRAWAL

Regardless of you completing the study, you are still able to withdraw your data from the study at any time. You will be assigned an ID number upon completion of the survey that is automatically generated by Qualtrics.com, the website that administrate the survey, which will be associated with your data. If you chose to withdraw, your data will be deleted and destroyed.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This project (REB#19-03-004) has been reviewed by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants. If you have any questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study, please contact: Director, Research Ethics; University of Guelph; reb@uoguelph.ca; 519-824-4120 ext. 56606.

You do not waive any legal rights by agreeing to take part in this study.

If you would like to learn more details on this study, or find out the results of the study, please feel free to contact Miriam Habib or Dr. Mark at the emails provided above.

Thank you again for your participation!
Appendix 10: Demographics results from the main study

### Age

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### Gender

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### Education

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<td>4.3</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>73.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab (Saudi Arabian, Palestinian, Iraqi, etc.)</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>4.9</td>
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Appendix 11: OLS regression assumptions
### Residuals Statistics

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a. Dependent Variable: ReputationINDEX

### Coefficients

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<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
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<td>.072</td>
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<tr>
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a. Dependent Variable: ReputationINDEX

### ANOVA

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a. Dependent Variable: ReputationINDEX

b. Predictors: (Constant), MessageDelivery, ResponseType

### Model Summary

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a. Predictors: (Constant), MessageDelivery, ResponseType

b. Dependent Variable: ReputationINDEX