

**“Say It Like You Mean It”: An Exploration of how Members of the Public Perceive  
Audiovisual Crisis Responses**

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**Abstract**

Through focus group discussions in which members of the public discuss audiovisual crisis responses, this study explored which aspects of crisis communication that received much prior attention actually matter in shaping public perceptions and in what ways. The findings align with evidence-based guidelines in the sense that apologies, emotions, and nonverbal behaviors are important in shaping public perceptions. However, simply applying recommended strategies may not be enough to repair reputations. Crisis communication strategies must be put to practice in such a way that shows empathy for victims, while the speaker appears both competent and sincere.

## **“Say It Like You Mean it”: An Exploration of how Members of the Public Perceive Audiovisual Crisis Responses**

In the last three decades, experimental studies expanded the predictive ability of crisis communication theory. Research has shed light on the causal effects of distinct aspects of crisis communication such as content, channels, tone, and nonverbal behaviors on post-crisis reputation (e.g., Claeys et al., 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2009; De Waele et al., 2018; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). In reality, however, each of these separate dimensions is joined together in an actual crisis response. After years of research on the distinct effects of separate strategies we should take a step back and look at the bigger picture. How are actual crisis responses perceived by the public?

Through focus group research in which members of the public discuss real-life audiovisual crisis responses, this study explores how crisis communication shapes public perceptions of individuals and organizations in crisis and for what reasons. As such, the findings will add a qualitative and deeper understanding to the existing body of knowledge on crisis communication. When all of those elements that received significant research attention in the past come together in an actual response, what elements get noticed by the public and why?

### **Literature Review**

#### **What Elements Shape the Public Perception of a Crisis Response?**

The key agenda of empirical crisis communication research is to understand how stakeholders perceive crises and how crisis communication affects those perceptions (Coombs, 2012). This stream of research identified several situational (e.g., crisis type, pre-crisis reputation) and message factors (e.g., content, emotionality) that impact public perceptions. Each of these distinctive points of focus within the literature is briefly discussed to outline what is predicted regarding their effects.

### ***Situational Factors***

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007), the most dominant paradigm in empirical crisis response research (Avery et al., 2010), puts forward situational factors that determine the reputational threat of a crisis by shaping perceptions of organizational responsibility.

First and foremost, the reputational threat is determined by the crisis type. SCCT classifies crisis types into three clusters based on the responsibility attributions they produce (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Victim crises come with weak attributions of crisis responsibility; accidental crises generate moderate responsibility attributions; and preventable crisis produce strong responsibility perceptions. The more responsible an organization is considered, the more its reputation suffers (Claeys et al., 2010; Racine et al., 2018).

Importantly, a history of similar crises or an unfavorable reputation prior to a crisis can intensify attributions of responsibility and the corresponding reputational threat (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015; Coombs, 2004; Eaddy & Jin, 2018; Kim, 2017). A favorable pre-crisis reputation, however, can create a halo effect that protects an organization against reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Finally, perceptions of crisis severity may also add to the reputational damage caused by a crisis (Claeys et al., 2010; Zhou & Ki, 2018).

### ***The Content of Crisis Communication***

Regarding the organizational response, most attention has been devoted to the content of crisis communication (Avery et al., 2010). Priority should always be given to informing the public through instructing and adjusting information (Coombs, 2007). Instructing information informs stakeholders about the actions they should take to protect themselves from the physical threat resulting from a crisis. Adjusting information helps stakeholders cope psychologically with a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Sturges, 1994). To be reassured,

stakeholders need to know what happened and what corrective actions are being taken to solve the problem and to prevent similar ones in the future. In addition, adjusting information includes expressions of empathy toward victims (Coombs, 2007; Koehn, 2013). Experimental studies have showed that expressing empathy is not only the ethical thing to do but that it also helps protect the organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2008, 2009; Kim & Sung, 2014).

Once adjusting and instructing information are provided, the organization can turn its focus to reputation restoring response strategies (Sturges, 1994). SCCT (Coombs, 2007) presents three clusters of response strategies that vary in their responsibility acceptance for the crisis. Deny strategies reject all responsibility for the crisis; diminish strategies minimize the organization's crisis responsibility; and rebuild strategies allow the organization to take full responsibility through compensation and/or apologies. Organizations should increasingly accept responsibility as their responsibility for the crisis intensifies (Coombs, 2007; Racin et al., 2018).

The results from some experimental studies have shown that denial can restore reputational damage when the strategy is accepted by the public and succeeds in removing responsibility perceptions (Claeys et al., 2010; Fuoli et al., 2017). However, the organization should anticipate negative reactions to a denial if the public rejects the organization's account or if the company eventually does appear to bear responsibility (Coombs et al., 2016). As such, most studies indicate that corporate apologies outperform less accommodating strategies in protecting reputational assets, especially when organizational actions caused the crisis (Decker, 2012; Kim et al., 2009; Lee, 2004; Lyon & Cameron, 2004).

### ***Emotional Crisis Communication***

In an emerging stream of research, scholars also consider the emotionality of the crisis response. Results from these studies have revealed that reputation repair is facilitated when a

written crisis response includes emotional appeals (Kim & Cameron, 2011) and more specifically verbal expressions of sadness (Claeys et al., 2013), shame, or regret (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Reputational damage cannot only be minimized through a verbal expression of emotions but through nonverbal cues of affect as well. For instance, sad facial expressions accompanying an apology help strengthen positive organizational perceptions (Stephens et al., 2019; ten Brinke & Adams, 2015). However, showing too much emotion hurts credibility perceptions (Stephens et al., 2019) and cues of inappropriate emotions (i.e., smiling) can backfire (ten Brinke & Adams, 2015). Even though these insights are promising and people indeed rely on nonverbal cues to assess a speaker's emotional state (Jacob et al., 2013), most research has been limited to verbal expressions of emotions. It thus remains unclear to what degree the public takes into account these different expressions of emotions when determining their stance toward people or companies in crisis.

### ***Nonverbal Aspects of Crisis Communication***

In addition to communicating emotions, nonverbal cues can also result in perceptions of how powerful a speaker is and whether or not the message is deceitful. More specifically, speakers should avoid visual (i.e., gaze aversion, posture shifts, adaptors) and vocal (i.e. speech disturbances, raised voice pitch) cues of deception (De Waele et al., 2018). In addition, they should communicate with vocal (i.e. lowered voice pitch) and visual (i.e. making eye contact, expressive body movements) cues of power amid an ongoing crisis to come across as competent (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). During the post-crisis stage, however, powerful cues should be avoided to increase perceptions of sincerity.

Despite these findings, the impact of nonverbal cues has long been neglected by crisis communication research, which mainly relies on written stimuli to test the effects of crisis responses (De Waele & Claeys, 2017). While non-verbal aspects have always been important due to the omnipresence of audiovisual crisis communication (e.g. interviews, press

conferences, news reports), the need to fully understand non-verbal behaviors has become more urgent given that organizations and individuals now increasingly produce and upload audiovisual crisis messages themselves via social media like YouTube or their own websites (De Waele et al., 2018; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). In addition, we should also consider that while findings regarding the distinct effects of certain nonverbal cues (e.g., voice pitch) are consistent throughout different studies in different fields, their impact is hard to predict when combined with other nonverbal cues (De Waele et al., 2018). Nonverbal cues can interact in unpredictable manners and we have yet to learn which types of cues dominate over others in the public's assessment of a crisis response.

Taken together, crisis communication research has produced fairly consistent conclusions regarding the effects of crises and crisis responses on public perceptions. The findings have led to specific evidence-based guidelines regarding, among others, the content, tone, and nonverbal cues related to crisis responses. While experimental research only allows us to take into account a limited set of factors (Reeves et al., 2016), however, these dimensions of crisis communication do not appear in a vacuum in real life. In addition, most causal effects have been examined in a fictitious setting. Therefore, this study aims to understand how these distinct effects combine and translate to 'the real world.' As such, this study presents an exploration of how actual crisis responses are perceived by members of the public, which aspects of the response are taken into consideration when they form opinions of individuals and organizations in crisis, in what ways, and how that evaluation takes shape in discussions with others. Hence, the first research question is:

RQ1: How do members of the public perceive and evaluate audiovisual crisis responses?

### **Mechanisms Underlying the Impact of Crisis Communication**

While much research has been focused on examining the impact of certain aspects of a crisis response, few researchers have tried to understand why those elements shape public perceptions the way they do (Grappi & Romani, 2015). SCCT and subsequent research stress the importance of responsibility attributions in determining reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). While we know how situational factors determine reputational damage through responsibility attributions, however, we know very little about how crisis communication in turn succeeds at repairing that harm.

A mediator that has received some research attention is the perceived sincerity of the speaker. For instance, emotional spokespersons may better succeed at minimizing reputational damage because they seem more sincere (Claeys et al., 2013; ten Brinke & Adams, 2015). Furthermore, powerless nonverbal behaviors reduce reputational damage in the post-crisis stage because they come across as more sincere. However, in the midst of a crisis, people respond more favorably to powerful nonverbal behaviors because these increase perceptions of competence (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). The public therefore judges a crisis response based on sincerity as well as competence.

Another element to consider may be the degree to which a crisis response induces empathy among the public. Recent studies indicate that empathy from the public toward an organization in crisis facilitates reputation repair (Crijns, et al., 2017; Schoofs et al., 2019). For instance, crises affect reputations not only through responsibility attributions but also through empathy. Victim crises result in less reputational damage than preventable crises because people will be more empathic (Schoofs et al., 2019). Furthermore, apologies might be effective as a crisis response strategy because they increase public empathy for an individual or organization in distress.

Besides examining which elements of crisis communication shape the public's opinion, we also aimed to study why those elements shape perceptions the way they do.

Hence, the second research question is:

RQ2: How and why do relevant aspects of audiovisual crisis responses influence public perceptions?

### **Method**

To gain an in-depth understanding of the processes through which members of the public interpret audiovisual crisis responses, qualitative research is appropriate as it can provide detailed answers to 'why' and 'how' questions (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). We opted to conduct focus group interviews, as this is a useful method to obtain in-depth information on the formation of personal and group opinions while providing a broad range of information at the same time (Fern, 2001).

### **Participants**

Three focus groups consisting of seven to eight participants were conducted to answer the research questions. Group participants were heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, and educational attainment. While homogeneous groups tend to feel more comfortable in sharing their opinions, we opted for heterogeneity of participants to stimulate different perspectives and the depth of understanding that comes from listening to participants defend their opinions (Fern, 2001). The choice for heterogeneous groups also lies in the aim to question the general public and in recognition of the fact that the topic of discussion is not all too sensitive, lowering the threshold for participants to share their views.

Participants in the first focus group were recruited by the researchers and responded to a call for participation posted on social media. Participants of the other two groups were recruited by a specialized Belgian market research bureau. To form heterogeneous groups, participants were selected based on their age, gender, and educational attainment, which were

queried using a short recruitment questionnaire. The questionnaire also asked participants to rate their knowledge of the English language, as the Dutch-speaking Belgian participants would have to watch a number of English spoken crisis messages. Only participants who indicated they had a good understanding of the English language were selected to participate. A total of 22 men ( $n = 12$ ) and women ( $n = 10$ ) with an average age of 37 years (range: 18 – 68 years) participated in the study. Two participants were students, four participants had a high school diploma, six participants had a bachelor's degree, and 10 participants had a master's degree.

All participants signed an informed consent form, which explained the research procedures and assured confidentiality. Participants received a voucher of 50 euros for their participation.

### **Procedure**

The focus group discussions were guided by an external moderator who is familiar with qualitative research methods; this person was not included in the setup of the study. We did this to avoid the introduction of bias in the discussions that moderation by the researchers might bring (Fern, 2001). One of the researchers was, however, present to take notes. After the participants were welcomed and informed on the research procedures, they watched and discussed seven audiovisual crisis responses of organizations and public figures (see Table 1). The researchers carefully selected these audiovisual crisis messages to make sure that they varied on a number of factors (e.g., type of speaker, crisis response strategy, emotionality of the message, crisis type, message format, etc.) that were of interest in informing answers to the research questions. Political speakers were not included, as discussions on political crisis communication are likely to be influenced by participants' partisanship (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). The order in which the videos were shown was randomized for each group. The moderator introduced each video with a short description of the crisis.

Each video was followed by a discussion among the participants, which was highly

response-driven as participants were encouraged to freely discuss their thoughts on the crisis messages and to respond to each other's opinions. More specifically, participants received the general instruction to discuss which elements of the video came to their attention, and why these elements gave them a positive, negative, or neutral impression. Participants were encouraged to take notes while watching each video so that they would remember everything that had come to their mind. The role of the moderator mainly consisted of encouraging deeper discussions by posing follow-up questions, and by making sure that the discussions stayed on topic. This approach allowed the research team to assess which aspects of audiovisual crisis communication came naturally to the attention of participants and in what ways<sup>1</sup>. The focus group interviews lasted on average about 2.5 hours (range: 2h 23min – 2h 48min), including a coffee break. The discussions were recorded on video so that the transcription (verbatim) could also describe the nonverbal behaviors of the participants as well as group dynamics in addition to the verbal responses.

[Table 1 near here]

### **Data Analysis**

The transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, elements that appeared to be relevant to the research questions were identified and coded (e.g., playing the victim, attack the accuser). In the next step, these codes were categorized into major themes (e.g., content of crisis communication) and subthemes (e.g., acceptance of responsibility). Next, the transcripts were reread to refine the themes and the coding of data extracts. After finalizing the coding phase, the data within the themes were analyzed. Finally, some quotes were selected to demonstrate the prevalence of the themes.

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<sup>1</sup>A pilot focus group with seven junior researchers from the university as participants was organized. This pilot study allowed us to test the procedure, to evaluate the selection of the videos, and to train the moderator. While the pilot focus group revealed findings in line with the ones from the actual study, these data were not included because participants were all specialized in communication and therefore not representative.

## **Findings**

Several themes that emerged repeatedly throughout the focus group discussions have been identified and will be presented in the following sections. More specifically, we will elaborate on the situational and message factors that received considerable attention throughout the focus groups and how they are perceived (RQ1). These discussions will also reveal why these aspects of crisis communication seemed important in shaping public opinions (RQ2).

### **Situational Factors**

Almost all crisis responses stirred extensive discussions regarding the extent to which the organization or public figure was considered responsible for the events. Participants judged the speaker more critically and questioned the sincerity of the response when they felt that the organization or public figure acted intentionally. In such cases, participants often were not sure whether speakers were genuinely sorry and sincerely accepted responsibility, or whether they merely “said things because they had no other choice but to do so” (Respondent 21, FG3).

When responsibility perceptions were high, most participants appeared unable to empathize with the speaker’s situation, making it harder for them to forgive the events. However, discussions regarding attributions of responsibility triggered some participants to deliberately take the speaker’s perspective. When participants managed to understand the speaker’s motives, they appeared to attribute less responsibility to the speaker, to judge the response as more sincere, and to forgive more easily. If, however, participants failed to agree with the speaker’s motives, the opposite was true.

Furthermore, the pre-crisis reputation of each individual or organization also came up in the conversations. Some participants indicated that they were familiar with, and held positive attitudes toward, a speaker. If this was the case, participants suggested that they felt more inclined to empathize with the speaker and were more likely to trust him or her.

Conversely, participants indicated that they had a harder time empathizing with a speaker that they did not know at all or that they had trouble identifying with, as this rendered participants less involved with the events.

### **The Content of Crisis Communication**

#### ***Adjusting Information***

Participants often spontaneously mentioned one element of adjusting information, namely the importance of an empathetic response. In situations in which an individual or an organization caused damage to other persons, most participants heavily criticized the speaker when they felt that he or she did not show genuine empathy toward victims. Generally speaking, participants felt that a crisis response lacked empathy when little attention was paid to the victims and their suffering because the response was built around and focused too much on the public figure or organization, or as respondent 13 (FG2) put it: “It was about them, it was not about the victims”.

Several more specific ‘cues’ were mentioned from which participants concluded that the speaker failed to show empathy. First, a lack of empathy was associated with speakers that seemed to praise themselves by elaborating too extensively on the actions they had taken to resolve the crisis and/or by highlighting their favorable pre-crisis reputation. Respondent 1 (FG1), for instance, responded to a video by saying, “He was like: ‘We *really* tried our best. We did this and we did that, and safety is our top priority, but then, oops, some people died’”. Second, a lack of sympathy was derived from responses that aimed to minimize or shift blame. Third, ‘playing the victim’ was especially associated with a lack of concern and considered disrespectful toward the actual victims:

R1: The way he communicates is just disrespectful toward the victims

R2: Indeed, he’s very much trying to minimize everything.

R7: And the way he is like: “I’m the biggest victim here, please stand up for me, please have sympathy for me”. That bothered me.

[Focus group 1]

In addition to expressing empathy, most participants considered communicating corrective action as an indispensable aspect of crisis communication, especially in the context of organizational crises. They felt that the organization needed to explain clearly and specifically what steps were being taken to resolve the crisis and to avoid similar problems in the future. Participants attached importance to this kind of information because it signaled to them that the organization was professional and in control of the situation, and that the organization was taking responsibility in solving the problem and helping potential victims.

### *Apology*

An interesting paradox emerged when participants commented on public apologies. On the one hand, they expected that organizations or individuals in crisis apologized for their misdeeds. On the other hand, because participants realized that organizations or individuals in crisis want to meet this expectation, most participants were skeptical about the apology’s sincerity. Hence, apologies were heavily scrutinized and an apology surely had to meet high standards when the speaker was considered to have acted intentionally. When participants doubted the sincerity of the apology, it was merely viewed as an ‘obliged number’: “He has no other option than to apologize” (Respondent 18, FG3).

Participants also indicated that “one or two sentences are not enough to apologize” (respondent 1, FG1); apologies shouldn’t get lost within the message. Explaining why the events occurred, as well as communicating corrective action contributed to the sincerity of apologies. Some participants, including respondent 3 (FG1), noted that the speaker “just wants to get it over with” if this information did not accompany the apology:

I felt that there was little content, he did not say much. How did it happen? What are you going to do about it? What actions will you take so that this won't happen again? What about the victims? What about...? Because, he only says 'sorry', that's all he says. For me, I think that's just too easy.

Furthermore, participants heavily questioned the sincerity of an apology if they felt that the speaker showed little empathy toward victims throughout. Importantly, the apology was not perceived as genuine if the speaker tried to minimize blame in other stages of the crisis message. This latter insight leads us to another, extensively discussed aspect of crisis responses, namely accepting responsibility.

### ***Accepting Responsibility***

Whether or not the speaker accepted responsibility for the events was often the first topic of debate among participants. Participants perceived speakers as more credible, sincere, and honest throughout the entire communication when they "straightforwardly" accepted full responsibility "without beating around the bush":

She admits everything and she also knows that it might be over for her, and she just says it like that. I mean, I think that is very brave. (Respondent 6, FG1)

It seemed sincere to me because she starts with: "I am responsible and I made a mistake." (Respondent 13, FG2)

When participants considered the person or organization to blame for the crisis, they were especially sensitive to statements that create the impression that responsibility was being minimized. First, taking on the role of the victim was not at all appreciated and especially not when damage was caused to others. Second, participants did not appreciate crisis responses that tried to create the impression that "it could have happened to everyone" by pointing out that other organizations or public figures had been confronted with similar

crises in the past. Nor did participants appreciate speakers who minimized responsibility by hinting that “everyone makes mistakes.” As such, it appears that all too explicit attempts to induce sympathy should be avoided.

Overall, participants seemed increasingly inclined to scrutinize the speaker’s responsibility for the events when they perceived that the speaker did not fully accept responsibility. Such instances initiated fiery discussions with regard to the extent to which the act was considered intentional. Several participants also noted that they found making up excuses was worse than the actual crisis itself, as stated by respondent 21 (FG3): “That he is making up a story about it, is worse to me than the fact that he did it”.

### ***Emotional Crisis Communication***

The emotionality of the message, or the lack thereof, was often discussed spontaneously and in the early stages of the discussions. A few participants noticed and appreciated the use of emotionally charged words, as expressed by respondent 7 (FG1): “She used the word ‘tragedy’. I mean, she uses heavier words, she does not minimize it. She realizes the impact of all this”. However, most participants relied on speakers’ nonverbal behaviors to assess their emotions. Vibrations in the speaker’s voice, heavy breathing, the speaker’s mimicry, gaze in the eyes, and a restrained body posture were considered signals of the speaker’s emotional state. The majority of the participants agreed that such emotional expressions added to the sincerity of the message and the speaker, as they signaled that the speaker truly cared about what had happened

Several participants mentioned feeling compassionate toward speakers who they felt expressed sadness or shame because the speaker seemed to be genuinely distressed by the events by showing these emotions. This was, however, especially the case for public figures, because, as described by respondent 2 (FG1): “They are more personally affected by the events than CEOs are”.

In the case of an organizational crisis, then, expressions of sadness mainly gave rise to

the perception that the CEO was empathetic toward victims. Participants indicated that, by showing emotions, the CEO illustrated himself or herself as being involved in the events and affected by the suffering of victims. Conversely, in cases of severe crises that caused harm to stakeholders, participants criticized CEOs who did not show emotion. Participants then argued that the CEO did not seem to care for the victims and considered the crisis message as less sincere and empathetic throughout.

While emotional crisis communication received a lot of approval, an abundant display of emotions appeared undesirable. Emotions were perceived most genuine and seemed to arouse the highest levels of empathy toward the speaker when participants felt that the speaker ineffectively tried to hold back his or her emotions:

She doesn't look at her text anymore, she pours it all out. She speaks in a very sincere way (other participants nod in agreement). She is not reading some text, and you feel that, yes, she has to restrain herself. She has to take deep breaths, she looks away, she doesn't look at her text. So you can see that she is having a hard time there.

(Respondent 13, FG2)

More extreme emotional displays (i.e. crying) compromised the credibility of the speaker and were sometimes even ridiculed, especially when the events weren't perceived as highly severe and when the speaker was held responsible. Importantly, extreme emotions also led to the perception that the speaker was not professional or competent. The balance between expressing emotions and appearing professional appeared especially important to participants in the context of organizational crises. On the one hand, participants wanted to see that the organization was empathetic toward those affected by the events. On the other hand, as the organization was responsible for solving the problem, participants also wanted to see competence:

R3: I think that when it is about a company in crisis, it is very important that you communicate in a controlled way, so that you create the impression that you are aware of the problem and that you are working on it. Whereas when you have a sports-related scandal, it is easier to pull the emotional card, because sports plays with peoples' emotions. While, the products that a company produces... You need to trust their products.

R5: Yes. However, here you are being confronted with deaths, while sports is actually just sports.

R3: Yes, but that is exactly the reason why you have to show that you are strong... To keep peoples' trust.

R1: Yes, they must come up with a solution. There is a problem, they are responsible, and they have to fix it. While with the athletes we have watched so far, if they confess, we're already satisfied.

[Focus group 1]

### ***Nonverbal Cues***

Participants not only relied on speakers' nonverbal behaviors to estimate their emotions, participants also relied heavily on speakers' nonverbal behaviors to assess the sincerity and authenticity of their responses. Hence, the speakers' nonverbal behaviors often provided the first topic of discussion among participants. One of the first aspects participants were likely to comment on was whether the speaker communicated spontaneously or whether he or she was reading a text (whether or not from a teleprompter). Participants agreed that the message appeared too scripted when speakers read a prepared text, which made them question the sincerity of the message.

Similarly, while participants appreciated a serene and calm manner of speaking, the message was considered less sincere when it was delivered in a manner that was too stoic and

monotonous, as this gave participants the impression that the speaker did not really care.

Additionally, avoiding eye contact also signaled insincerity.

Notably, a speaker's nonverbal behavior was sometimes disconnected from the actual message content. Participants sometimes doubted the sincerity of the message content (e.g., when the speaker avoided responsibility) but sympathized with the speaker nevertheless when they felt that he or she signaled to be genuinely affected by the events through nonverbal behaviors (mostly emotional displays):

When you look at her body language, you can see that she is really affected by it, and then I'm inclined to believe her. But when you listen carefully to what she is saying, like, that she did not know, then it contradicts a bit. Then, you're less inclined to believe her. (Respondent 22, FG3)

Okay, the message might not be good, but I do have the feeling that this man...But that has something to do with the look in his eyes, but I feel like this man is genuinely affected by what happened. (Respondent 16, FG3)

### **Discussion**

Focus group research explored how members of the public evaluate audiovisual crisis responses and what their main considerations in forming opinions of individuals and organizations in crisis are. Overall, the findings show that even though established research findings and evidence-based guidelines in the context of crisis communication do translate to practice, they do not translate that easily. While the public indeed appreciates apologies, acknowledgements of responsibility, adjusting information, and emotional expressions (cf. RQ1), the danger lies in merely implementing these communicative practices without the right focus in mind. To reach forgiveness from the public, recommended strategies must be put to practice in such a way that empathic concern is expressed for victims, while the sender of the message appears both competent and sincere at the same time (cf. RQ2).

First and foremost, the degree to which a crisis response stimulates reputation repair appears to be associated with perceptions of sincerity. Communicative practices are scrutinized in light of the extent to which they undermine or enhance the sincerity of the speaker and the message. Communication efforts miss their goal or even backfire when they are perceived as insincere. For instance, while apologies are considered important by the public, an apology is not considered sincere and subsequently does not result in forgiveness if the overall response lacks an acknowledgment of guilt and does not show true concern for victims (cf. Bentley, 2018; Lee & Chung, 2012). In addition, while subtle displays of emotion enhance the sincerity of the speaker (cf. Claeys et al., 2013; ten Brinke & Adams, 2015), showing extreme emotions comes across as insincere and backfires (cf. Stephens et al., 2019).

Notably, the reason why nonverbal cues seem to play an important role in shaping opinions is that the public relies on them to assess the sincerity of the speaker. Certain nonverbal behaviors (e.g., avoiding eye contact, reading off a text, appearing too stoic) hurt the sincerity of the response, while others (e.g., emotional displays, Stephens et al., 2019; powerless cues, Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014) strengthen it by signaling that the speaker truly cares. Hence, while prior research already touched upon the importance of sincerity (Claeys et al., 2013; ten Brinke & Adams, 2015; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018), our results stress that sincerity is absolutely vital for reputation repair.

Second, the public needs to feel that the speaker genuinely empathizes with those affected by the crisis in order to be able to forgive. Communication practices that result in positive perceptions from the public, such as providing adjusting information, revealing emotions, and acknowledging responsibility, do so because they communicate concern for victims, acknowledge their suffering, and illustrate that the speaker truly wants to make things right. Crisis responses should center around affected stakeholders and illustrate that their well-being is the number one priority. Hence, while a clear explanation of the corrective actions

taken provides reassurance and demonstrates that the organization takes responsibility in solving the problem, organizations should not seek praise for how well they manage a crisis. Responses that seem to serve as a defense of the speaker, let alone attempts to seek sympathy, lack empathy and receive backlash. While findings from prior research stress that crisis responses should include an expression of empathy (Coombs, 2007, 2008, 2009; Koehn, 2013), our findings stress that showing empathy should not just be a separate element within a crisis response. Rather, every single aspect of the response should illustrate that the interest of victims is put first.

Third, while deliberate attempts to evoke sympathy from the public are destined to backfire, people seem to empathize with a speaker more easily when the crisis is not intentional or when a speaker's emotional displays signal that the speaker is truly affected by the events. While empathy from the public does not seem as vital for reputation repair as the belief that the speaker is sincere and empathetic, people do seem to be more forgiving when they empathize with the speaker. This is in accordance with evidence from recent studies that explored the role of the public's empathy in reputation repair (Crijns et al., 2017; Schoofs et al., 2019).

Finally, while people rather explicitly assess crisis responses based on the extent to which they are considered sincere and empathetic, they tend to regard it as a given that organizations are at the same time on top of things. Therefore, while it is crucial to come across as sincere and to communicate with empathy, this should not come at the expense of illustrating that the organization is capable of managing the crisis firmly. For instance, while showing controlled emotion helps the public feel that the spokesperson is sincere and empathetic, spokespersons should be careful not to over-emote, as this signals a lack of competence and thus hinders reputation repair. However, researchers devoted only limited attention to the role of perceptions of competence in the process of reputation repair (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014).

Taken together, while the public does seem to appreciate audiovisual crisis communication messages that align with guidelines from literature and theory, organizations or public figures that implement recommended strategies in a merely strategic manner might see their responses backfire. In essence, strategies in crisis communication only work in limiting reputational damage when they exude trust that the crisis will get solved and are aimed at reducing harm to victims rather than reducing harm to the organization or the individual in trouble. It is clear that crisis communication should come forth from a genuine concern for those affected by the events and an eagerness to make things right. As such, our findings clearly advocate the view that “ethical and effective should not be mutually exclusive terms” (Hobbs, 1995, p. 343).

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Our reflections on the findings suggest some relevant directions for further research. Limitations associated with the study offer potential suggestions for future studies as well.

First, the findings reveal which aspects of audiovisual crisis communication messages are explicitly considered by participants when forming opinions. However, our method does not allow to assess the extent to which these factors actually affect public opinions and what the relative importance of these factors in relation to each other is (Ellis, 1994). In addition, participants’ meaning-making processes can also be influenced by factors that were not mentioned out loud. Hence, experimental research remains indispensable to estimate the effects of crisis communication and its underlying mechanisms (Coombs, 2012).

Second, our study only included members of the Belgian public. However, one’s cultural context is likely to influence how communicative practices are interpreted. For instance, the effectiveness of crisis response strategies has been shown to vary according to the cultural background of the public (Lee, 2004; Xifra, 2012). In addition, the use of nonverbal

communication differs across cultures (Burgoon et al., 2016) and cultural norms define how emotions are expressed and interpreted (De Gelder & Huijs In 'T Veld, 2015).

Third, discussions on which communication efforts are deemed important and desirable were triggered by the audiovisual crisis responses that were presented to the participants. However, while carefully selected, it is likely that the selected crisis responses failed to cover all communicative practices that can play a role in influencing stakeholder perceptions and some might thus have missed our attention.

Finally, while some basic information on the crises addressed was provided, participants were not well aware of the situational factors that characterize each of the crises. Hence, this study does not provide extensive insights into how situational factors influence the way people judge the appropriateness of communicative efforts. In addition, most crises evolve over time in the media and evoke multiple responses from the individuals or organizations involved. While it is the accumulation of these responses that determines post-crisis reputation, this study only explored how one specific response was interpreted by the audience.

### **Conclusions**

This focus group study adds to the crisis communication literature by examining how the effects of crisis communication that have been well-established by experimental research translate to “the real world”. The results show which aspects of audiovisual crisis communication are being noticed by the public, in what manner, and how they shape reputation repair. The findings are largely consistent with evidence-based guidelines put forward by prior experimental studies in the sense that apologies, accepting responsibility, emotions and non-verbal behaviors are important in shaping opinions of public figures and organizations in crisis. However, the effectiveness of these communication practices seems to depend upon several factors and their overall success is determined by the extent to which they come across as sincere, empathetic and express competence on behalf of the organization.

As such, the findings add a more nuanced understanding to the existing knowledge in crisis communication as established by prior experimental research and offer guidance for putting crisis communication theory into practice. Evidence-based guidelines in crisis communication should not be implemented in a merely strategic manner but with a clear ethical focus in mind. When organizations want to minimize or restore reputational damage, their focus should be on concern for the victims rather than for themselves.

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**Table 1**

*Description of the audiovisual crisis responses discussed by participants in each focus group*

<b>Crisis context</b>	<b>Type of speaker</b>	<b>Gender of the speaker</b>	<b>Focus of the response</b>	<b>Type of video</b>
Belgian television presenter accused of sexual harassment	Television presenter	Male	Self-disclosed accusations and minimized the crisis as well as his responsibility.	He made a video of himself in what seemed to be his own living room and posted the video online
Australian army confronted with sexual harassment among employees	Lieutenant General – Chief of Army	Male	Explains how upset he is about the events and that he will address the misbehavior within his organization firmly.	Corporate video of the Lieutenant General in front of a neutral background
High profile Russian tennis player fails doping test	Tennis player	Female	Self-disclosed failing the drug test. Explains that she did not know that the substance was banned but takes responsibility for failing the test and apologizes.	Press conference
Well-known Belgian cyclist caught using cocaine for the second time	Cyclist	Male	Minimizes his responsibility as he claims not to remember taking the drug due to a blackout from drinking alcohol.	Interview with a reporter in a more informal setting
Products of a Canadian food-processing company cause a listeria outbreak, resulting in 22 deaths	General Executive Officer	Male	Explains the corrective actions taken, says that he is saddened by the events, apologizes.	Corporate video of the CEO in front of a neutral background
American car manufacturer initiates recalls due to product failure that has been linked to 124 deaths	General Executive Officer	Female	Provides an update on the recall, explains the corrective actions that are being taken, apologizes.	Corporate video of the CEO in front of a neutral background
National Australian cricket team caught tampering with cricket balls during an official game	Cricket player – Team captain	Male	In an emotional response, he takes responsibility and apologizes.	Press conference with Q&A