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Fending Off Unverified Accusation with Narratives: The Role of Primary and Secondary Narratives in Organization's Response Effectiveness in an Ongoing Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This study integrates theories of metanarration and crisis narratives to identify optimal approaches to managing uncertain and high-pressure crisis situations. An online experiment used a U.S. adult sample to examine how (1) the primary narrative in a news story about the victim and (2) the secondary narrative with different crisis narratives used by the accused organization impacted the outcomes of the organization's public communication about the ongoing crisis situation. Results showed that the secondary narrative, emphasizing renewal, played a significant role in (1) lowering perceived organizational crisis responsibility, (2) lessening organizational reputation damage, and (3) boosting supportive intention toward the organization. In addition, findings revealed that perceived organizational crisis responsibility and perceived organizational reputation functioned as sequential mediators for the relationship between the secondary narrative (using renewal crisis narrative) and participants' intended support of the crisis-stricken organization. Findings advance crisis narrative theory and offer prescriptions for effective and ethical organizational responses in managing an ongoing crisis triggered by an unverified sexual harassment accusation against its members.

KEYWORDS: Crisis narratives, metanarration, response strategy, unverified accusation, ongoing crisis communication

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Introduction

As internet technologies continue to evolve, the visibility of social issues has been raised through the public's online discussion forums and social networking sites with a powerful effect on taking collective actions calling for societal solutions (Beaudoin et al., 2006). Online discussions have helped raise public awareness about social problems like sexual harassment, empowered people to speak up on social issues, and called organizations to refresh internal training and improve issue management approaches to stop issues like sexual harassment (Dobbin & Kalev, 2020). However, this also raised questions about what individuals and organizations should do if they believe they are falsely accused (Borysenko, 2020).

Research has been conducted to identify how often false accusations of sexual harassment are made and found that false accusations make up 2 to 10% of sexual harassment incidents reported within a 2-year period (e.g., National Sexual Violence Resource Center [NSVRC], 2012). This number is confounded when unsubstantiated accusations—where an investigation was unable to prove a sexual assault occurred—are included (Kay, 2018). Most of these false accusations might be caused by insufficient evidence and inconsistencies in victim statements (NSVRC, 2012). In 2019, about 150–750 people might lose their reputation and even end their careers, as a result of false accusations (Borysenko, 2020). It also brings the challenge to the accused organizations on how to effectively and ethically communicate the issues when there is limited and inconclusive information to address the reality and complexity of the issue associated with their members or employees. This can divide publics in terms of how they perceive the issue, which could consequently bring disagreement among publics over the appropriate public communication and issue resolutions for an organization. Such disagreement further challenges the organization to appropriately advocate, influence public opinion, and create a favorable organizational culture and work environment (Waltzer, 1988) when managing public communication involving social issues.

Although multiple studies have examined the negative effect of completely false information in public health crises (Nan et

al., 2021) and organizational crises (Jin et al., 2020), no research has been conducted to understand the effect of unverified accusations (verification pending on the completion of an investigation) on publics' perception and response to the organization and what might be the proper organizational crisis response strategies in an ongoing crisis. Furthermore, when publics form their judgment against an accused organization and its members, including attributing crisis responsibility to the organization before the allegation is officially verified through formal investigations, people's judgment can damage the accused organization's reputation and deprive the organization of its right to prove its innocence through due process and even stop publics from supporting the organization (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, it is critical for crisis managers and crisis communication scholars to understand whether and how organizations, under these unique circumstances that involve highly stressful moments of uncertainty, should organizations respond to publics' concerns about an unverified accusation based on facts and with integrity.

In recent years, scholars have called for the advancement of evidence-based recommendations for effective and ethical communication strategies in managing complex issues to better understand when and how organizations are involved in social issues such as sexual harassment (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Xiong et al., 2019). To contribute further to answering this call, our study specifically aims to understand how an organization, challenged by an unverified sexual harassment accusation against its members, can properly address public concerns regarding the allegation, clarify the responsibility attribution based on available information, and gain further support from its publics as the accusation investigation is ongoing and the crisis issue resolution remains uncertain at the time.

Integrating theories of crisis narratives (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016) and metanarration (Venette et al., 2003) and via an online experiment with a U.S. adult sample (N = 697), we examined how an organization, challenged by unverified sexual harassment accusations against its members, can effectively communicate about the highly uncertain and pressured crisis situation to its publics.

Specifically, our study investigated how participants' attribution of crisis responsibility, perceived organizational reputation, and behavioral intentions to support the accused organization might vary as a function of (1) the primary narrative about the victim as disclosed in a news story and (2) the secondary narrative (embedded with different crisis narrative types) utilized by the official spokesperson of the accused organization. The findings provide insights into advancing crisis narrative theory and offer evidence-based prescriptions for effective and ethical organizational responses in an ongoing crisis management process triggered by an unverified sexual harassment accusation.

Communication Challenge for Managing Ongoing Crisis

The key challenge to effective and ethical organizational crisis responses to issues triggered by a social issue (e.g., accusations of sexual harassment attributed to the member(s) of an organization) is two-folded: (1) the innate uncertainty of a crisis situation (Liu et al., 2016), and (2) the reality of how organizations manage unverified public accusations: both the investigation of an allegation and the verification of the original accusation take time. For the former issue (uncertainty in crisis), crisis management research suggests acknowledging the uncertainty and lack of information as best practices (Liu et al., 2016), which implies a level of organizational values and ethical actions. Given this best practice notion, it is paramount to explore, from the publics' perspective, how they view organizational responses and see if the publics prefer specific organizational response types and narratives regardless of the ethicality of the organizational responses. However, effectively and ethically managing unverified accusations runs into the problem of balancing timeliness with appropriate organizational responses.

DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) stated that unverified information, during an ambiguous situation, might contribute to either accurate or false information and consequently influence the publics' sense-making of the situation. Applying the definition of unverified information to the context of sexual harassment: when an organization is accused, the unverified information coming from other parties' accusations might also end up being false. If the publics'

concerns, triggered by the accusation, are not timely responded to by the accused organization (Coombs, 2014), the false information might harm the organizational reputation and interfere with the ongoing investigation, especially on social media, where rumors and misinformation about a crisis incident often go viral (Austin et al., 2021). In addition, ethics is also central to this timeliness concern—for an organization to act diligently and swiftly while remaining attuned to the accuser and publics' concerns.

Responding Strategy for Managing an Ongoing Crisis

According to Coombs situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), organizations can use different crisis response strategies, depending on the level of issues of crisis responsibility, to protect organizational reputation when crises occur (Coombs, 2007). However, a meta-analysis study reported inconsistent results about the effect of matching response strategies with crisis clusters and a weaker association between response strategies with attributed responsibility and organizational reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016). It raises a new question: What different content strategies (e.g., different narratives) can be effectively used in organizational responses to ongoing crises, especially when confronted with high issue uncertainty and pressing tension on traditional and social media? In light of this research need, we further integrated crisis narratives to identify viable content strategies organizations can use for responding to ongoing crisis challenges triggered by unverified social issue violation allegations.

The narrative has been suggested as a potential content strategy for communicating about a crisis situation so as to mitigate its negative effect on an organization (Clementson & Beatty, 2021), shape individual and societal understandings of crisis complexity, and cocreate the meaning of crisis (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Niederdeppe and colleagues (2011) pointed out the power of narrative in covering the complex causality of an issue and influencing the publics' perception of issue responsibility attribution. Thus, crisis narratives might have a unique value in aiding an organization's defensive stance-taking when confronted by unverified allegations about its crisis responsibility.

Crisis Narratives as Responding Content Strategies in an Ongoing Crisis

In the vein of crisis communication, Seeger and Sellnow (2016) proposed five types of crisis narratives that include *blame*, *victim*, *renewal*, *hero*, and *memorial* narratives; each plays its own role at different crisis stages with varied impacts. Empirically, Liu et al. (2020) found that different types of crisis narratives, especially blame, victim, and renewal narratives, influenced individuals' attitudes toward crisis situations and involved organizations, as well as a public's intention to take proactive actions in a public health crisis. Built upon Liu and colleagues' work (2020), our study identifies three types of crisis narratives (i.e., blame, victim, and renewal) to be further incorporated into organizational crisis response strategies used when managing ongoing crisis communication. Hero and memorial narratives are not included in this study as hero narratives are most often used in disasters, and memorial narratives are recommended for consideration after a crisis is over (see Seeger & Sellnow, 2016).

Blame narratives answer the question "who is to blame" (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016) and who should be responsible (Liu et al., 2020). An accusation of wrongdoing is central to blame narratives (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). To avoid or relieve responsibilities, organizations often shift blame to an individual, subgroup, or other organization (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). To distinguish blame narratives from other crisis narratives, blame narratives often begin with attacks in an effort to assign blame (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). As Seeger and Sellnow (2016) stated, "blame narratives are generally retrospective, looking back on what happened, and they are often highly contentious" (p. 81). However, this study argues that blame narratives can be used during crises when organizations deny crisis responsibility, which can engender the publics' feelings of anger or sadness. In addition, some blame narratives can include a call for punishment (Liu et al., 2020), but given the context of unverified sexual harassment accusations, this approach to strategic crisis management needs to be better understood.

Victim narratives personify the physical and emotional harm as well as set the innocence and vulnerability caused by crises, which engender the publics' feelings of compassion, empathy, or guilt

(Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). A victim is "a person or group harmed, damaged, or made to suffer from an act, circumstance, agency, or condition that is generally not of his or her own making and is of an illegitimate or unfair nature" (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016, p. 100). Victim narratives can serve as devices to influence or manipulate public opinions by portraying innocent and powerless individuals or an organization as a whole suffering from a crisis (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). An organization can be victimized by internal forces (e.g., unavoidable failures or employee sabotage) or external forces (e.g., guilt by association) (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Compelling victim narratives can generate support for donations or social changes (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). In the context of the unverified sexual harassment accusation, it is important to consider how an accused organization's response employing a victim narrative is perceived by publics, especially when the victim was/is a member of the organization.

Renewal narratives, rooted in the discourse of renewal theory (DRT) (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), highlight the organizational learning and ethical communication during a crisis. One of the foundational principles of renewal discourse is based on the assumption that "organizations can and do act intentionally to change their internal functions and their surroundings" (Sellnow et al., 2019, p. 123). As a type of forward-looking or prospective narrative, the renewal narrative tells the public about how the organizations would positively change after the crisis, which aims to rebuild strong relationships with publics after the crisis (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). The renewal narratives are stories of hope, possibility, and optimism due to forward-looking or prospective features (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Thus, renewal discourse includes four essential components, including leadership, lessons learned, a prospective vision, and ethical decision-making (Sellnow et al., 2019). These definitions also help distinguish renewal narratives and corrective communication/actions because corrective communication/actions focus on "how organizations present corrective messages to establish that the prior message about one or multiple aspects of the crisis was misinformation" (Jin et al., 2020, p. 3), while organizations use renewal narratives to provide forward-looking plans about positive changes to their stakeholders

in order to foster positive outcomes, such as rebuilding reputation and gaining support from the publics. Additionally, organizations should develop renewal responses that engage in authentic, honest, and transparent communication with publics during a crisis (Zhao et al., 2020) rather than blame others for the crisis that befell the organization (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). In managing an ongoing organizational crisis triggered by social issue violations (e.g., sexual harassment accusations against members of the organization) involving immediate changes, renewal narratives might help shape the publics' judgments about the crisis events and align them with the organization's plan for changes and response actions.

While Liu et al. (2020) studied these narrative choices in the public health crisis arena, the effects of the crisis narrative type have not been examined empirically in an organizational crisis context. Thus, this study examines how the various crisis narratives perform differently in influencing the publics' responses, cognitively and behaviorally, to an ongoing organizational crisis, triggered by an unverified sexual harassment accusation. Moreover, crisis narratives can shape the publics' perception of organizational reputation by framing public and societal understanding of crises (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Crisis narratives are also different from crisis response strategies from SCCT that emphasize mitigating organizations' crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2015; Liu et al., 2020). Thus, we posit that organizational response strategies embedded with different crisis narratives can help crisis communication scholars understand how different narrative-based response content strategies might impact the publics' crisis responsibility attribution and motivate them to take action (e.g., to support the accused organization during the investigation or not). So far, no prior study has applied Seeger and Sellnow's (2016) crisis narrative theory to examine what response content strategies organizations might use to effectively protect their reputation and communicate properly with their publics when encountering an unverified accusation of sexual harassment against their members.

Metanarration of an Ongoing Crisis

Narratives, such as storytelling, can help the publics understand the issues of crises and construct a reality (Clementson & Beatty,

2021) when organizations are in crises (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). To strengthen an organization-public relationship and build trust among the publics, organizations' spokespersons need to tell ethical (on-topic) narratives rather than unethical (off-topic spin) narratives (Clementson & Xie, 2020; Heath, 2000). However, inconsistent results were found regarding the effectiveness of on-topic narratives, off-topic spinning narratives, and nonnarrative (using statistical evidence) on the perception of crisis responsibility as well as perceived trustworthiness, identification, and positive attitude toward the spokespersons (e.g., Clementson, 2020; Clementson & Beatty, 2021; Clementson & Xie, 2020). Besides examining the effects of narratives and nonnarratives on crisis communication from spokespersons, these inconsistent findings indicate a critical need for further examination of crisis narratives, especially the effectiveness of competing narratives from media reports and organizations' spokespersons on the publics' perception of crisis responsibility, organizations' reputation, and behavioral intention during ongoing organizational crisis situations triggered by unverified accusations.

The narratives created and communicated in crisis might have multiple levels. As suggested by the metanarration of crisis model (Venette et al., 2003), primary narrative and secondary narrative might compete to function as communication and impact perceptions during a crisis. The metanarration of crisis model discovers "the process by which organizations involved in crisis seek to manage and influence public narratives surrounding the event" (Venette et al., 2003, p. 219). Organizations reconstruct a crisis event for their publics via organizational messages that are divided into primary and secondary narratives (Venette et al., 2003). The primary narrative refers to "the original crisis story as portrayed in the media'" (Venette et al., 2003, p. 220); the secondary narrative is what "organizations used as a response strategy when they reconstructed the initial story of what took place prior to and during a crisis" (Venette et al., 2003, p. 220). The primary narrative is produced by media reports during a crisis, while the secondary narrative is created by organizations to respond to the primary narrative in terms of the organizations' reflection on the primary narrative (Venette et al., 2003). These conceptual definitions further suggest

a sequential relationship between the primary narrative and the secondary narrative: the primary narrative, used in an initial news story about the reason(s) that caused a crisis can lead to the secondary narrative, used as a responding strategy with narratives by the crisis-stricken organization's spokesperson in order to address the primary narrative embedded in the initial news story.

By using the secondary narrative to "retell the story in a more favorable way" (Venette et al., 2003, p. 220), organizations can mitigate the reputational damage, resolve a crisis, and continuously build trust and good relationships with their publics (Venette et al., 2003). Thus, the primary narrative and the secondary narrative can compete against and conflict with each other to achieve certain effects. For instance, media reports identify failure(s) or flaw(s) on the end of organizations that cause certain crises, thus posing the primary narratives; to mitigate reputational damage and (re)gain publics' support, organizations then reconstruct the crisis stories via secondary narratives, countering the organizational failure(s) or flaw(s) the media reports make in the primary narrative. In line with the metanarration of crisis model, this study further investigated the role of news media as the source of primary narrative and the role of a crisis-stricken organization as the source of secondary narrative during an ongoing crisis triggered by an unverified sexual harassment accusation.

Primary and secondary crisis narratives on publics' organizational crisis responsibility attribution. When organizations are threatened by the unverified accusation of a sexual harassment incident, journalists often report victims with gender-based identified information as a primary narrative. Some research found an effect of gender on social issues about sexual harassment and #MeToo movement communication, such as an attitude toward social issues and an intention to support issues (e.g., Szekeres et al., 2020). News stories disclosing the gender of a victim not only play a role as a primary narrative but also impact how the publics attribute crisis responsibility against the accused organization. Therefore, it is critical to understand the role gender plays in crisis metanarration.

According to metanarration (Venette et al., 2003), a secondary narrative is formed in an organization's crisis responding efforts in

reconstructing the crisis stories. Empirically, Liu and colleagues (2020) found the publics exposed to the blame crisis narrative had higher crisis responsibility attribution toward the government compared to other types of crisis narratives. Clementson and Beatty (2021) found no significant difference in the attribution of crisis responsibility between nonnarrative and on-topic narratives. However, compared to on-topic narratives, the response strategy with a spinning narrative increased the publics' attribution of crisis responsibility (Clementson & Beatty, 2021). These findings indicate that the secondary narratives embedded different types of crisis narratives as spokesperson's crisis response strategies can differently impact the publics' crisis responsibility attribution against an organization accused of being responsible for a sexual harassment incident. To understand how primary and secondary narratives impact the publics' perception of crisis responsibility held against an accused organization, we ask:

> **RQ1:** How, if at all, do publics perceive the accused organization's crisis responsibility differ as a function of (a) the primary crisis narrative from news media embedded with victims' gender information and (b) the secondary narrative from the organization's spokesperson embedded with different crisis narrative types?

Primary and secondary crisis narratives on perceived organizational reputation. An organization's reputation is defined as "a set of attributes ascribed to a firm, inferred from the firm's past actions" (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988, p. 443). Although the perception of organizational reputation is closely related to the expectations of publics (Coombs, 2000), it could also be impacted by the organization's response to a crisis. Jin et al. (2020) found that an elaborated and narrative-based corrective responding strategy led to less reputational damage to a company attacked by misinformation regarding its crisis responsibility. However, in the context of managing an ongoing crisis with high issue uncertainty (e.g., an unverified sexual harassment accusation), whether and how the responding content strategy, embedded with different crisis narratives, might lead to different perceptions of organizational reputation remains unknown. Regarding the types of crisis narratives (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016), this study further argues that different

types of crisis narratives (i.e., blame, victim, and renewal narratives), when embedded in crisis responding strategy, can result in different effects on the publics' perception of organizational reputation. Moreover, according to the metanarration model (Venette et al., 2003), organizations respond to a crisis by reconstructing the stories as secondary narratives, which can compete with the primary narrative from news media reports (e.g., embedded with victims' gender) to impact publics' perception of a crisis-stricken organization's reputation. To understand how the primary and the secondary narratives influence the publics' perception of organizational reputation in the context of an ongoing crisis triggered by an unverified sexual harassment accusation, we ask:

> **RQ2:** How, if at all, do publics perceive the accused organization's reputation differ as a function of (a) the primary crisis narrative from news media embedded with victims' gender information and (b) the secondary narrative from the organization's spokesperson embedded with different crisis narrative types?

Primary and secondary crisis narratives on publics' supportive intention. Few studies have examined the effects of narratives on crisis communication effectiveness (e.g., Beldad et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020), especially when it comes to behavioral outcomes in organizational crises. Kang and colleagues (2020) found that advertising embedded narratives (i.e., founder's story) led to the highest level of word-of-mouth (WOM) intention compared to both the customer's story and nonstory formats. Liu and colleagues (2020) found no significant direct effect of crisis narratives, as embedded in news stories, on preventive action-taking in a health crisis. These limited results indicate that the strategic use of crisis narratives (e.g., blame, victim, and renewal narratives) for effective organizational crisis communication, especially in gaining public support in challenging times, needs to be further investigated. Furthermore, existing crisis narrative studies did not examine how crisis narratives from different sources compete to impact intended crisis communication outcomes.

Grounded in the metanarration model (Venette et al., 2003), this study further argues that the story of a crisis constructed by news media (as the primary narrative) and the stories of the

same crisis constructed by the crisis-stricken organization's official spokesperson (as the secondary narratives) can lead to varied supportive intentions toward the organization among publics when it faces an ongoing crisis triggered by an unverified sexual harassment accusation. To understand how primary and secondary narratives impact publics' intention to support the accused organization in an ongoing crisis of high issue uncertainty, we further ask:

> **RQ3:** How, if at all, do publics perceive the accused organization's intention to support the organization differ as a function of (a) the primary crisis narrative from news media embedded with victims' gender information and (b) the secondary narrative from the organization's spokesperson embedded with different crisis narrative types?

Mediating Role of Crisis Responsibility and Organizational Reputation

Based on the SCCT (Coombs, 2007), our study argues that organizational reputation is not only impacted by crisis responsibility attribution but also can further impact publics' decision-making about supporting the organization (or not) when an organizational crisis occurs. Thus, this study further posits that crisis responsibility and organizational reputation can function as sequential mediators for the relationship between crisis response strategies with crisis narratives and publics' intention to support crisis-stricken organizations, particularly when organizations encounter unverified accusations of sexual harassment. In addition, this study also argues that the official organizational spokesperson, as the secondary narrative, can impact crisis responsibility and organizational reputation, which can further impact publics' decision-making regarding their supportive behaviors toward the organization. Therefore, to understand how the relationship between the secondary narratives (from the spokesperson) with different crisis narratives and publics' supportive intention toward the organization is impacted by crisis responsibility and organizational reputation, we ask:

> **RQ4:** How, if at all, do crisis responsibility and organization reputation, as perceived by publics, mediate the effect of secondary narrative from the organization embedded with different crisis narrative types?

Method

To answer the above research questions of this study, a 2 (victim gender disclosed in the primary narrative: female vs. male) × 4 (the secondary narrative in official organizational response: blame vs. victim vs. renewal vs. control [no crisis narrative]) between-subjects online experiment was conducted with a representative sample of 697 U.S. adults. Participants were recruited by Qualtrics, a professional quantitative research platform. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at a large research university in the U.S. prior to data collection.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 697 U.S. adults participated in the online experiment in October of 2020. There were 379 females (54.4%), 315 males (45.2%), and 3 preferring to describe in their own terms (0.4%). Age-wise, 7.2% (n = 50) were 18–24, 24.1% (n = 168) were 25–34, 23.1% (n = 161) were 35–44, 10.9% (n = 76) were 45–54, and 34.7% (n = 242) were older than 55. The majority ethnicity was White (65.6%, n = 457), followed by Hispanic (12.3%, n = 86), Black (11.9%, n = 83), Asian (6.9%, n = 48), and more than two races (3.3%, n = 23). Regarding the education level, 8 (1.1%) had less than high school degree, 99 (14.2%) had high school graduate degree, 147 (21.1%) had some college but no degree, 68 (9.8%) had associate degree in 2-year college, 225 (32.3%) had bachelor's degree in 4-year college, 119 (17.1%) had master's degree, 15 (2.2%) had doctoral degree, and 16 (2.3%) had professional degree (JD, MD).

Since the stimuli were contextualized as an issue of sexual harassment [related issue discussions on social media (i.e., Facebook)], three screening questions about age and Facebook usage habits were asked to ensure the context relevance during the recruitment process. All the participants in this study (1) were over 18 years old, (2) had Facebook accounts, and (3) used Facebook for daily information seeking. After passing the screening questions, participants began by reading an introductory statement that asked them to imagine they were browsing updates from a news website and saw a headline about a sexual harassment

incident reported in a medical environment. This introduction statement was subsequently linked with a screenshot of an online news story about a suspected case of sexual harassment disclosed by a previous staff in a fictitious hospital, "North Hospital." The gender information of the former medical staff (i.e., the victim in this sexual harassment) at North Hospital was manipulated as female or male (as disclosed in the news story), and participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (female vs. male victim).

After reading the news, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in terms of North Hospital's official response to the unverified sexual harassment accusation: (1) blame narrative, (2) victim narrative, (3) renewal narrative, and (4) the control condition (no crisis narrative). In the response post, North Hospital refuted the happening of the case reported in the news story and claimed its stance in fighting against sexual harassment. Participants then moved to the post-exposure questionnaire assessing their perception of crisis responsibility, organizational reputation, and their likelihood of supporting the organization.

Stimuli Development

Primary Narrative: Victim Gender Manipulation in News Article

The news article was adapted from real news articles collected from online news outlets, NBC and Reuters, and was modeled as a Reuters news article in this study. The article was mainly about a suspected case of a sexual harassment case. The case was being investigated when the news was released, and North Hospital, the involved hospital, claimed that no record of the report was found. The article included direct quotes from the fictitious victim, who was a former medical staff at North Hospital. The victim was manipulated as either female or male. In the female condition, the news headline was "#MeToo in medicine: Women, harassed in hospitals await reckoning," and the news article describes the story of Dr. Christina Jenkins who disclosed her previous experiences of sexual harassment during her residency at North Hospital. Whereas in the male condition, the news headline was "#MeToo in medicine: Men, harassed in hospitals await reckoning," and the

news article describes the story of Dr. Mike Smith who disclosed his previous experiences of sexual harassment during his residency at North Hospital. In addition, the third-person pronouns used in the female condition were she and her, while the ones used in the male condition were he and his.

Secondary Narrative: Organization's Official Responding Narrative

The organization's response strategy was adapted from real stories collected from online forums and written with first-person pronouns. It was designed to be posted by the North Hospital's official Facebook account. Following Seeger and Sellnow's (2016) typology, the CEO of the hospital, as an official spokesperson, refuted the case as reported in the news story and declared the intolerance of sexual harassment at North Hospital by either blaming what happened in the medical industry (i.e., blame narrative), expressing sympathy toward victims (i.e., victim narrative), or talking about the proactive action done by North Hospital to prevent sexual harassment (i.e., renewal narrative). In the control condition, the CEO of the hospital announced the exciting news about the hospital's top ranking without using any crisis narrative strategies.

Independent Variables

A manipulation check was placed to determine whether the participants perceived the victim's gender as disclosed in the news story as well as the official spokesperson's response in the Facebook posts as manipulated in the respective stimuli, respectively.

Primary Narrative: Victim Gender Manipulation in News Article

Victim gender manipulation check was performed by asking participants whether the gender of the victim in the news story that they just read is male or female. The result from the two-way contingency table analysis shows there was a significant difference in the identification of victim gender in each condition, Pearson χ^2 (1, $N = 697$) = 316.17, $p \leq .001$, Cramér's V = .67. Therefore, the manipulation of the victim's gender from the news media was successful.

Secondary Narrative: Organization's Responding Narrative

Participants were asked to respond to a question asking what the CEO's response was in the North Hospital's Facebook post they just read, using the nominal scale: 1 = blamed the alleged perpetrator's inappropriate behavior, 2 = expressed sympathy toward the victim, 3 = took proactive action the hospital takes, and 4 = announced the exciting news about its top ranking. A chi-square result confirmed the successful manipulation of the narrative type used in the hospital's responses, Pearson χ^2 (1, N = 697) = 534.29, $p \leq .001$, Cramér's V = .51. Therefore, the manipulation of the crisis narrative type embedded in the organization's official responding narrative was successful.

Measures

Crisis Responsibility Attribution to Organization

Crisis responsibility was measured by a 9-item 7-point Likert-type scale, adapted from Brown and Ki (2013), focusing on preventability and locality. Participants were asked to rate their agreement, from "1 = Strongly disagree" to "7 = Strongly agree" with nine statements. Sample items include: "North Hospital had the capability to stop the situation from occurring," and "North Hospital has the resources to prevent the situation from occurring." An index was created for perceived crisis responsibility (α = .91, M = 4.97, SD = 1.28).

Organizational Reputation

A 7-item measure of perceived organizational reputation was adapted from Coombs and Holladay's (2002) measures. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the statement provided using a 4-item 7-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 7 = "Strongly agree." Sample items, including "North Hospital is basically dishonest," and "I do not trust North Hospital to tell the truth about the sexual harassment incident" were reverse coded. Thus, the higher number means a higher reputation. An index was created for perceived organizational reputation (α = .88, M = 3.71, SD = 1.30).

Intention to Support an Organization

Participants were asked to indicate the likelihood they would provide word-of-mouth support to an organization after reading North Hospital's response as presented in their CEO's message, on a 4-item 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "1 = extremely unlikely" to "7 = extremely likely." Sample items, adapted from Zeithaml and colleagues (1996), were "I would like to say positive things about North Hospital to other people," and "I would like to recommend North Hospital to someone who seeks my advice." An index was created for intention to support an organization (α = .96, M = 3.40, SD = 1.71).

Data Analyses

To examine the effects of primary narrative including victims' gender information as well as the secondary narrative with crisis narratives from the official organizational spokesperson on participants' perception of crisis responsibility, perceived organizational reputation, and their likelihood of supporting organization, a series of Univariate Analysis (ANOVA) were separately conducted between conditions. Moreover, to test the serial roles of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation on supportive intention, this study utilized PROCESS path-analysis macro developed by Hayes (2017) to test this serial mediation model using PROCESS model 6 for serial mediation.

Results

Effects of Primary and Secondary Narratives on Perceived Crisis Responsibility

RQ1 sought to investigate the effects of (a) the primary crisis narrative from news media embedded with victims' gender information and (b) the secondary narrative from the organization's spokesperson embedded with different crisis narrative types on perceived organizational crisis responsibility. The ANOVA results showed a significant main effect of the secondary narrative from North Hospital's official spokesperson with different crisis narrative types on lowering perceived crisis responsibility [$F(3, 681)$ = 2.82, p = .04, partial η^2 = .01]. However, there was no significant

main effect of primary narrative from news media embedded with the victim's gender information [$F(1, 681) = .14$, $p = .71$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$] on perceived crisis responsibility. Specifically, the results of pairwise comparisons illustrated that those participants who read the secondary narrative from the spokesperson response using renewal narrative ($M = 4.79$, $SE = 1.23$) had lower perceived responsibility attribution toward the hospital than participants exposed to the spokesperson responses using blame narrative ($M = 4.97$, $SE = 1.30$), victim narrative ($M = 4.94$, $SE = 1.20$) or nonnarrative control ($M = 5.18$, $SE = 1.37$).

Effects of Primary and Secondary Narratives on Perceived Organizational Reputation

RQ2 sought to test if (a) the primary crisis narrative from news media embedded with victims' gender information and (b) the secondary narrative from the organization's spokesperson embedded with different crisis narrative types would influence the hospital's reputation perceived by its publics. The ANOVA results showed a significant main effect of the secondary narrative with crisis narratives from spokesperson on individuals' evaluation of organization reputation [$F(3, 681) = 28.60$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$]. However, there was no significant main effect of the primary narrative with the victim's gender from the news media [$F(1, 681) = .003$, $p = .96$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$] on the evaluation of the accused hospital's reputation. Specifically, the results of pairwise comparisons illustrated that those participants who read the secondary narratives from the spokesperson using renewal narrative ($M = 4.04$, $SE = 1.25$), blame narrative ($M = 3.96$, $SE = 1.20$), and victim narrative ($M = 3.88$, $SE = 1.20$) perceived the accused hospital with higher reputation than those who read a nonnarrative control responding post ($M = 2.96$, $SE = 1.28$).

Effects of Primary and Secondary Narratives on Supportive Intention

RQ3 sought to examine the effects of (a) the primary crisis narrative from news media embedded with victims' gender information and (b) the secondary narrative from the organization's spokesperson

embedded with different crisis narrative types on intentions to support the organization. The ANOVA results showed a significant main effect of the secondary narrative with crisis narratives from spokesperson on individuals' intention to support the organization [$F(3, 681) = 15.23$ $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$], but there was not a significant main effect of primary narrative with victim's gender from news media [$F(1, 681) = 1.23$, $p = .27$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$]. Specifically, the results of pairwise comparisons illustrated that those participants who read the secondary narratives from the spokesperson using blame narrative ($M = 3.68$, $SE = 1.69$), renewal narrative ($M = 3.67$, $SE = 1.58$), and victim narrative ($M = 3.57$, $SE = 1.60$) would be more likely to provide the support to the accused hospital than those who read nonnarrative control responding post ($M = 2.65$, $SE = 1.77$).

Serial Mediation Model

RQ4 sought to discover how crisis responsibility and organization reputation mediated the effects of the secondary narrative from the organization embedded with different crisis narrative types on the supporting intention. Based on the significant findings of supporting intentions (RQ3), this study further investigated how the secondary narrative with crisis narrative types influences intentions to support the organization through perceived crisis responsibility and organization reputation (RQ4). The PROCESS model 6 was applied to operate a multiple regression analysis (Hayes, 2017). The results illustrated that perceived crisis responsibility and perceived organization reputation, as two sequential mediators, mediated the relationship between the secondary narrative using the renewal crisis narrative and the supporting intention. However, they did not mediate the relationship of the secondary narrative using blame and victim crisis narratives and the supporting intention.

A mediation model was projected to examine how the types of crisis narratives (dummy coded: 1 = renewal narrative, 0 = other types of narratives) influenced intentions to support the organization through two sequential mediators: perceived crisis

responsibility and organization reputation. The overall model showed a significant serial mediation [point estimate = –.24, SE = .11, 95% CI= (–.46, –.02)]. The model explained 8.3% of the variance in perceived crisis responsibility about sexual harassment. The secondary narrative using a renewal crisis narrative from a spokesperson, as a potential predictor, yielded a significant coefficient (b = –.24, $p \leq .05$). The model explained 21.83% of the variance in perceived organization reputation. The secondary narrative using renewal crisis narrative from spokesperson (b = .33, $p \leq .001$) and perceived crisis information credibility (b = –.45, $p \leq .001$) were significant predictors for perceived organization reputation. Finally, the model explained 35.01% of the variance in the intention to support the accused organization. There was no significant direct effect of the secondary narrative using the renewal crisis narrative from a spokesperson. However, perceived crisis responsibility (b = .21, $p \leq .001$) and organization reputation (b = .85, $p \leq .001$) were predictors for intentions to support the organization. In sum, the findings suggest that the relationship between the secondary narrative from a spokesperson using a renewal crisis narrative and intention to support the organization is fully mediated by perceived crisis responsibility, which in turn mediates perceived organizational reputation (see Figure 1).

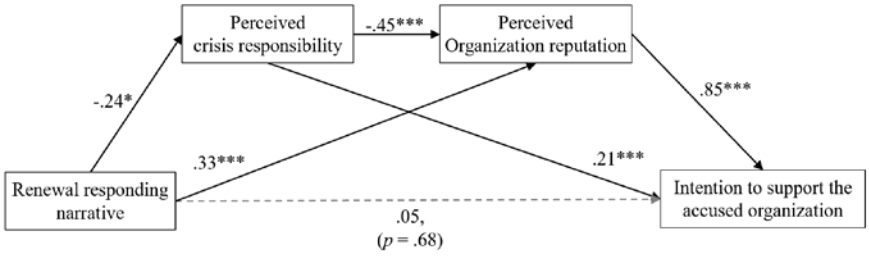

FIGURE 1 Sequential Mediators of Perceived Crisis Responsibility and Perceived Organization Reputation for Intention to Seek Crisis Information

Note: Standardized beta coefficients from regression model.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess how the primary narrative from the news media with the victim's gender and a secondary narrative from the organization's spokesperson with different crisis narrative types influenced ongoing crisis communication about unverified sexual harassment issues in the medical environment. First, this study revealed that participants reported lower perceived crisis responsibility and higher perceived organizational reputation when exposed to the secondary narrative using the renewal crisis narrative from the organization's official spokesperson. The renewal crisis narrative—one that emphasizes the organization's next steps—was preferred over narratives that emphasized blame, attribution, and sympathy. Ulmer and Sellnow's (2002) work on the discourse of renewal, and the resulting renewal narratives, emphasized the importance of ethical and proactive communication, which participants considered preferable. Further, the organization's reputation was best seen through this narrative, and this has substantial practical implications. Organizations, when using a spokesperson, should communicate about an ongoing crisis social issue—like sexual harassment—with verbiage that captures what the organization is going to do next, such as updating its management process to better prevent these issues.

Second, the secondary narrative using blame and renewal crisis narratives played a similar role in boosting participants' supporting intentions toward the organization. Third, the results from the serial mediation model revealed that participants perceived organizational crisis responsibility and perceived organizational reputation functioned as sequential mediators, which helped explain the relationship between the secondary narrative using renewal crisis narrative and intention to support the organization.

The Role of Primary and Secondary Narratives in Ongoing Crisis Communication

Findings revealed that the secondary narrative from the organization (via its official spokesperson) played a significant role in building positive communication with the publics when compared to the primary narrative from the news media reporting the

unverified accusation of sexual harassment against the organization. These findings are in line with the metanarration of the crisis model (Venette et al., 2003), in which primary narrative from news media and secondary narrative from organizations not only compete with each other but also shape the publics' perception of the crisis altogether. Specifically, from an organizational crisis management standpoint, our findings provide empirical evidence that organizations reconstructing the crisis story tend to have a stronger positive impact than the primary narrative from news media on the publics' perception of organizational crisis responsibility and organizational reputation as well as the publics' intention to support the accused organizations in challenging and uncertain times. Practically, organizations in an unverified and ongoing crisis should communicate with their publics because their communication may work to better impact publics than the primary—news media—narrative. These findings also imply a potential impact of publics' perceived credibility and their trust in news media can have on their perception of organizations' crisis responsibility and reputation along with their behavioral intentions to support organizations during an ongoing crisis triggered by unverified accusations. These findings further indicate the importance of timely responses to the crisis from the organizational management and its official channels. Reconstructing the story about the crisis also means that organizational leaders not only reaffirm the organization's response to the unverified accusation based on available information, but also deliver transparent information with a strong organizational stance against sexual harassment, which can help reduce the spread of rumors and misinformation, lower publics' sense of situational uncertainty, and (re)gain publics' support toward the accused organizations in challenging times.

The Role of Crisis Narrative Types in Ongoing Crisis Communication

Our findings revealed that, overall, in an ongoing crisis communication situation that involves unverified sexual harassment, publics who read the secondary narrative with renewal crisis narratives from the organization's official spokesperson attributed the

least crisis responsibility to the organization about the unverified accusation of sexual harassment when compared to the other narrative types (e.g., blame and victim crisis narrative) and the nonnarrative condition. These findings are in line with the recommendations from the SCCT, advocating that organizations can use crisis response strategies to address the issues of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007; Ma & Zhan, 2016) and mitigate organizations' crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2015). The findings further indicate that, based on the participants' preference for the renewal narrative, there is a consistent, ethical choice. That is, this study furthers our understanding of best practice strategies previously seen in other studies (e.g., Liu et al., 2020), which sheds light on the importance of using renewal narratives to facilitate organization-public engagement in authentic, honest, and transparent communication in ongoing crises (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Zhao et al., 2020). This approach simultaneously addresses issues of crisis responsibility, which demonstrates how questions of responsibility can be ethically covered through the strategic use of the renewal crisis narrative.

These findings also correspond to the previous study about the effect of narrative on the outcome of crisis responsibility (Clementson & Beatty, 2021). More importantly, our findings further provide a better solution that crisis managers can use renewal crisis narrative when organizations encounter a crisis about the unverified accusation of sexual harassment and need to timely respond to that crisis situation. Given that the renewal narrative is based around organizational communication that proactively looks forward is preferred by participants, our research demonstrates that a focus on the organization's future—not the accusers and not acting like a victim—is preferable to the public. Again, this provides indications of ethics and moral preferences by society in the context of an organizational crisis triggered by sexual harassment allegations. Using a response strategy with a renewal crisis narrative can reduce the damages of organizations and also maintain or rebuild trust and positive relationships with the public during ongoing crises.

When looking at the perception of organizational reputation and intention to support the organizations, our findings showed

that the secondary narratives with renewal crisis narrative from an organizational spokesperson increased the likelihood of a higher public perception of the organization's reputation along with an increased intention to support the organization. These findings correspond to the previous study about the effects of types of crisis narratives on the outcome of behavioral intention (Liu et al., 2020). Additionally, regarding Lyon and Cameron's study (2004), our findings imply that response strategies with the renewal crisis narrative from organization leaders can increase the publics' perception of good organization reputation, which can further increase the publics' likability of the organizations. According to the findings, we suggest that crisis-stricken organizations should proactively and transparently tell their publics about forward-looking plans instead of accusing the responsibility of wrongdoing or personifying harms when organizations encounter the unverified accusation of sexual harassment. These concerns and recommendations are consistent with questions of responsibility and victimization for sexual harassment accusations and evaluations (Bongiorno et al., 2020).

Theoretical Implications

The results of the present study reinstate the active role of crisis narratives in constructing the meaning of an organizational crisis, even when the crisis is associated with a complex social issue. Our study has confirmed that narratives can be effectively and ethically embedded in the SCCT-suggested responding strategies to better communicate the responsibility attribution when an organization faces an unverified accusation. For example, our findings support the argument that organizations should use the renewal narratives to provide forward-looking plans for positive changes to their stakeholders in order to enhance positive outcomes during unverified accusations and ongoing crisis events, such as sexual harassment in the medical profession. Using blame narratives to deny or avoid crisis responsibility or using victim narratives to manipulate public opinions can backfire and damage the organizations' reputations and their relationships with stakeholders during unverified accusations and ongoing crises. In addition, the findings not

only provide evidence for the argument of "crisis narratives as the emotional expression" (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016, p. 19) but also indicate the effectiveness of crisis narratives on the publics' emotional reactions that further impact their perceptions and attitudes toward organizations as well as supporting behavior. Positive emotions, such as hope, can be evoked by renewal narratives focusing on forward-looking features and can benefit organizations to continuously build positive relationships with their stakeholders when organizations respond to unverified accusations and manage ongoing crises. On the other hand, blame narratives shifting responsibility and victim narratives setting the innocence and vulnerability caused by crises can evoke negative emotions (e.g., guilt, anger, and sympathy) that may result in negative outcomes when communicating about unverified accusations and ongoing crisis events.

Meanwhile, scholars have pointed out the potential of metanarration (multiple levels of narratives) in shaping individuals' understanding of crisis (Venette et al., 2003), though this had not been examined empirically. Evidence from our study helps map how the primary narrative created by the news media and the secondary narrative created by a crisis-stricken organization compete to influence publics' perceived crisis responsibility, organizational reputation, and behavioral intentions during an ongoing crisis triggered by an unverified accusation. Practically, our findings demonstrate how the secondary narrative might be effectively and ethically used in (re-) constructing official organizational responses in order to counter the primary narrative from the news media regarding unverified accusations in ongoing crises.

Finally, our study also advances SCCT in three key ways. First, our mediation model not only provides support for the quintessential linkage predicted by the theory but also extends the SCCT to examine the outcome of behavioral intention. According to our mediation model, crisis managers not only need to find a better strategy (e.g., using renewal storytelling) to increase their publics' perception of a good organizational reputation, but also need to pay attention to the association between perception of good organization reputation and intention to take actions (e.g., support organizations). Second, our mediation model and main findings

affirm SCCT with a crisis narrative type from Seeger and Sellnow (2016) that was previously untested in SCCT research. Our findings contribute to SCCT with crisis narratives as a practical content response approach to effective crisis communication and ethical crisis storytelling, particularly when organizations encounter unverified accusations during an ongoing crisis. Additionally, although the SCCT has been applied to a wide spectrum of crisis topics, our study contributes uniquely to advancing the SCCT by examining a controversial and challenging crisis topic: the crisis issues of sexual harassment and accusations in the medical profession, which integrates crisis management, social issue communication, and healthcare communication.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations that should be addressed by future research. First, the current study only studied the CEO/spokesperson's response narratives and three types of crisis narratives (i.e., renewal, blame, and victim crisis narratives) in crisis communication. Among the crisis narratives identified by Seeger and Sellnow (2016), other types of crisis narratives (e.g., hero and memorial crisis narratives) should be examined in crisis communication by future studies. Second, this study was conducted at a single point in time. The presentation of initial crisis news and the organization's official response happens in a short time span. To enhance ecological validity, future studies need to consider using longitudinal studies to compare the pre- and -post effects of each point of communication and multiple exposures to responding information. Third, this study was conducted in the U.S., so future studies should apply the current framework, integrating the metanarration and crisis narrative, to other countries and different cultures for further assessment. Fourth, this study only focused on the topic of an unverified accusation of sexual harassment in the medical environment, so future studies need to continuously explore this topic in different types of organizations and professional fields. Fifth, this study focused on the effects of primary and secondary narratives on an organization's ongoing crisis communication. Future studies need to further identify the potential impact of the degrees of the publics' perceived credibility of or

trust in news media on their perception of crisis-stricken organizations and the outcomes of organizational crisis communication.

In conclusion, this study examined how a primary narrative in news media and a secondary narrative in the form of an organizational official response strategy with different crisis narratives impact the publics' perception of organizational crisis responsibility, organizational reputation, and their intention to support organizations in challenging situations. This study also investigated how perceptions of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation mediate the relationship between the secondary narrative embedded with different crisis narrative types and intention to support a crisis-stricken organization. This study not only integrates the metanarration model (Venette et al., 2003) and crisis narratives (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016) but also extends the SCCT to further examine how key components of crisis communication (e.g., perception of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation) impact publics' behavioral intention resulted from crisis communication about an unverified accusation of sexual harassment. Together, our study provides implications for crisis managers and organizational leaders on how to strategize more effective and ethical crisis response messages when confronted with an organizational crisis with high issue uncertainty and challenged by contending information from various sources and competing narratives.

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