

Responding to Online Hoaxes: The Role of Contextual Priming, Crisis Narrative Type and Communication Strategy*

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This study investigates the interaction between contextual priming, crisis narrative type and crisis communication strategy in the context of a geopolitical conflict. Specifically, it examines how an international company, when its country of origin is being caught in geopolitical tension and being portrayed positively vs. negatively by the media, should respond to misinformation paracrisis on social media using different crisis narrative types and crisis communication strategies. An online experiment (N = 506) found that a narrative response might be more effective; people's judgment of the crisis response is partially influenced by the contextual priming of how the company's country of origin is portrayed. This study enriched communication literature by examining strategic crisis narratives in the context of geopolitical conflicts, and exploring the roles of different response types, response strategies and contextual priming into crisis situations. This study yields important implications on how international organizations should respond to threats amid geopolitical uncertainties. Media scanning may be critical when geopolitical tensions are present. International organizations may benefit from adopting informative, accommodative responses rather than informative, defensive responses when handling misinformation-driven paracrisis. Alternatively, a narrative response might work better than an informative response.

Keywords: contextual priming, crisis communication, narrative message, social media hoax, international organizations

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Introduction

Hoaxes are fabricated acts (Merriam-Webster, 2018) that present detrimental threats to organizations. Those “deceptive alerts designed to undermine the public’s confidence in an organization, product, service or person” (Veil *et al.*, 2012, p. 328) have been increasingly common in the social media space, widely adopted by groups or individuals to gain engagement and attention (Park and Rim, 2019; Veil *et al.*, 2015). Social media hoaxes can be understood as a form of paracrisis—publicly visible reputational threats that emerge rapidly online and do not necessarily involve confirmed organizational wrongdoing (Coombs, 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In this study, paracrisis is treated as a contextual condition rather than a distinct crisis category, characterized by low responsibility attribution, high uncertainty, and rapid amplification through networked media. As a result, viral hoaxes can still cause substantial reputational harm (Veil *et al.*, 2012), as publics may not immediately recognize the lack of veracity in unsubstantiated claims. Without timely and strategically appropriate responses, organizations may experience financial loss and erosion of brand reputation, legitimacy, and trust (Veil *et al.*, 2012). Strategically responding to social media hoaxes therefore remains a critical challenge for organizations, particularly international ones.

Hoaxes and organizational crisis response messages do not appear in a vacuum (Yi, 1993). They are embedded in complex media environments in which prior contextual information can activate cognitive schemas that shape how subsequent messages are interpreted (Yi, 1990, 1993). This contextual priming effect has been well documented in advertising and persuasion research (e.g., Shen & Chen, 2007; Yi, 1990) and in studies of social issue interpretation (e.g., Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Dixon, 2007). Such priming effects may be especially consequential for international organizations, whose crisis responses may be evaluated through the lens of geopolitical tensions and country-of-origin perceptions.

Recent geopolitical conflicts illustrate how international companies can become symbolic targets. For example, Chinese consumers boycotted American brands during the U.S.–China tariff war (Feng & Xiao, 2025), and Moroccans boycotted IKEA following Sweden’s foreign policy decisions (Taylor, 2015). These reactions suggest that media portrayals of geopolitical relations may prime audiences to evaluate organizations differently before any crisis response is even encountered. Despite these developments, no research has systematically examined how geopolitical contextual priming shapes audience evaluations of organizational responses to misinformation-driven paracrises.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how crisis response format (narrative vs. informative) and crisis communication strategy (accommodative vs. defensive) interact with geopolitical contextual priming to influence audience evaluations of organizational responses to social media hoaxes. Using an experimental design, the study manipulated media portrayals of China as a geopolitical friend versus threat and examined how U.S. participants evaluated a Chinese company’s response to a social media hoax. By focusing on paracrisis as a contextual condition shaped by media and geopolitical environments, this

research offers a focused, theory-driven extension of crisis communication research rather than a broad theoretical expansion.

Literature Review

Hoaxes and misinformation paracrisis on social media

The rise of social media has posed numerous challenges for crisis communication. One particular challenge is the ease and speed with which inaccurate information about companies and organizations can spread (Oukropec, 2024). A social media hoax is a type of paracrisis (Oukropec, 2024; Chen & Holladay, 2018) because social media exposes potential reputational risks to the entire online public, creating the need for these risks to be managed publicly rather than solely among stakeholders (Oukropec, 2024). Chen and Holladay (2018) categorized six types of paracrisis, including challenge, faux pas, guilt by association, misinformation, social media misuse, and social media account hacking. A social media hoax is a form of misinformation paracrisis characterized by the “circulation of messages about the organization that lack veracity” (Chen & Holladay, 2018, p. 109).

Rather than conceptualizing paracrisis as a distinct theoretical category, this study treats misinformation paracrises as a contextual condition characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and low initial responsibility attribution. These features distinguish hoaxes from conventional crises and make them particularly sensitive to external contextual cues, including media framing and geopolitical narratives.

Prior research on paracrisis responses has yielded mixed findings. Research on responses to paracrises on social media generally recommends a more defensive approach (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). However, closer examinations of paracrisis responses have revealed inconsistent results. Humor and mockery may be effective in some cases (Kim et al., 2016); however, Honisch and Manchon (2019) found the opposite effect and instead recommended a reform strategy. Overall, Coombs (2017) suggested that responses to paracrises may take the form of variations of traditional crisis response strategies, which were later specified as refusal, refutation, repression, recognition, reform, and revision (Coombs & Holladay, 2015).

While the lack of consensus regarding effective response strategies in paracrises warrants further investigation, it is also important to examine the contexts in which hoaxes and misinformation paracrises occur. Most existing studies on paracrises or online hoaxes examine these phenomena in relatively isolated environments, testing audience reactions to response strategies without accounting for broader media or international contexts. Yet, in an era of globalization, crises and misinformation travel both physically and symbolically across national boundaries, making crisis communication increasingly complex for organizations (Schwarz, Seeger, & Auer, 2016). International organizations may be particularly disadvantaged when local media facilitate othering or favor certain national or ethnic groups (Nohrstedt, 2011). In crisis communication, geopolitical tensions play an

important role in shaping crises themselves as well as public perceptions and judgments. For example, Claessen (2022) argued that mutual frustrations among European countries contributed to the portrayal of “geopolitical othering” of Ukraine in Russian narratives during the Ukraine crisis. Similarly, Taher, El Kolaly, and Tarek (2025) employed the micro-influencer impact model to examine crisis communication during geopolitical conflicts and found that perceived authenticity, expertise, narrative personalization, and digital literacy play significant roles in shaping public opinion and crisis responses.

Despite growing scholarly interest in crises occurring within geopolitical conflicts, existing research has not examined how geopolitical framing interacts with response strategies and response formats in misinformation paracrises. This gap motivates the present study’s focus on contextual priming and response effectiveness.

Contextual priming and U.S.- China relations

Messages “don’t appear in a vacuum” (Yi, 1993, p. 1), and audience interpretations of messages are shaped by the broader media environment in which those messages are embedded. Accordingly, people’s perceptions of a social media hoax or paracrisis can be influenced not only by message content, but also by contextual information encountered prior to or alongside the crisis message. Examining the effectiveness of crisis communication across different information environments is therefore critical.

Contextual priming refers to the influence of surrounding media content that activates cognitive schemas used to interpret a focal message (Shen & Chen, 2007). Most people read messages in an environment filled with various other information, such as page background, price, information for another product, etc. (Mandel and Johnson, 2002). Contextual priming has received much attention in advertising and persuasion research as product information can be ambiguous and interpreted in many ways: an ad that describes a piece of luggage as being light can be interpreted as the luggage being easy to carry around or being less durable (Yi, 1990).

Contextual priming is effective because people interpret information using recent, active knowledge structures for schemas (Higgins and King 1981; Wyer and Srull 1981) activated by the last stimuli or message. They are adopted to interpret current information because of its accessibility, even though the schema might not be directly related to the new information (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Two different effects, assimilation effect and contrast effect, might occur (Sherif and Hovland 1961). Assimilation effect describes people’s tendency to adopt the primed context and judge the subsequent message accordingly (Sherif and Hovland 1961; Shen and Chen, 2007). However, people can also bias away from the context and reject the primes when people are highly involved in the topic and engaged in elaborated thinking on the message (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1993; Shen and Chen, 2007).

Priming certain attributes of products can activate consumers’ interpretation in a subsequent ad, and consequently, enhance people’s judgment of the brand (Yi, 1990). Schmitt (1994) found that although participants said they were not aware of the visual

priming, they were still affected by it unconsciously. Contextual information on websites also influences people's evaluation of a subsequent ad and their purchase intention (Jeong and King, 2010). This trend remains consistent across different studies examining magazine ads, TV commercials, online display or banner ads (Jeong and King, 2010), job and recruitment ads (Walker *et al.*, 2011), and ads in blogs (Segev *et al.*, 2015). Contextual priming can also influence attitudes and behaviors such as president approval (Althaus and Kim, 2006) and stereotyped judgment on crime situations (Abraham and Appiah, 2006; Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Azocar, 2007). These findings suggest that contextual priming shapes evaluative judgments even when audiences are not consciously aware of its influence (Schmitt, 1994).

In the context of international crisis communication, contextual priming related to a company's country of origin may be especially consequential. When organizations operate across national boundaries, audiences may rely on geopolitical cues and media portrayals of a country as heuristics for evaluating organizational credibility and intent (Borden, 2016). For instance, when Chinese people boycotted American brands as a response to the tariff war between the U.S. and China (Feng and Xiao, 2025) and when Moroccans boycotted IKEA to respond to Sweden's foreign policy (Taylor, 2015), these companies being caught in geopolitical conflicts, partly due to contextual priming effects induced by political or economic tensions between countries (Taylor, 2015). These reactions illustrate how geopolitical narratives can prime audiences to evaluate organizations through a national lens, independent of organizational behavior.

Such contextual priming may be particularly influential in misinformation paracrises, where uncertainty is high and organizations are already in a disadvantaged position. In these situations, contextual cues may shape acceptance of the crisis response, defined as the perceived degree to which audiences accept an organizational response (Yang *et al.*, 2010), as well as organizational reputation (Kim, 2001) and corporate trust (Shen, 2017).

Although only a limited number of studies have examined geopolitical contextual priming in crisis communication, existing research suggests that news framing can significantly affect how crises and organizational responses are perceived (Mason, 2019). However, few studies have examined how geopolitical contextual priming interacts with specific crisis response strategies and response formats in misinformation-driven paracrises, particularly for international organizations.

This study, in particular, utilizes the geopolitical relationship between the United States and China as the media context. The two countries have "one of the world's most important and complex bilateral relationships" (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Since 1949, their relationship has experienced fluctuations, with periods of tension and cooperation in areas such as trade, military affairs, and national security (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024). Data from the Pew Research Center indicate that in 2024, 42% of participants viewed China as an enemy, approximately 50% viewed China as a competitor, and only 6% viewed China as a friend (Huang, Silver, & Clancy, 2024). In 2025, 77% of U.S. respondents reported unfavorable views of China, and 42% believed that China posed the greatest threat to the United States (Huang, Silver, & Clancy, 2025).

However, it is important to note that the U.S.–China relationship has not always been negative. Between 2009 and 2011, Americans generally held positive views of China, and

in 2017, public opinion in the United States was nearly evenly divided (Silver, 2022). In contrast, data from 2021 revealed a sharp 28% decline in positive attitudes toward China (Pew Research Center, 2021). These negative perceptions were attributed to bilateral economic relations, the COVID-19 outbreak, and human rights issues (Pew Research Center, 2021). Despite ongoing tensions and fluctuations, the United States and China remain critical partners. As the world's two largest economies, China is one of the largest markets for U.S. exports, while the United States is China's top export market (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). The status of the relationship between the two countries, along with their close economic interdependence, provides a valuable opportunity to examine how fluctuations reflected in the media environment may influence public perceptions of a Chinese company during a misinformation-driven paracrisis. Any misinformation-driven paracrisis or social media hoax has the potential to cause significant damage to companies operating in both countries.

It is important to distinguish between country-of-origin effects and contextual priming of a country. Country of origin is typically treated as a static organizational attribute, whereas contextual priming captures dynamic media portrayals of a country as positive or negative, which may fluctuate with international relations and geopolitical uncertainty. By focusing on contextual priming rather than static country-of-origin effects, this study examines how shifting geopolitical narratives shape audience evaluations of organizational crisis responses. H1 is posited below.

H1: After exposure to a positive (H1a) vs. negative (H1b) story about China, participants who read a company's response to a misinformation paracrisis from China will report (1) greater acceptance of the response (2) higher company reputation and (3) higher trust toward the company.

Crisis narrative type: Narratives vs. informative response

Narratives are chains of causally connected events unfolding across time and space (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010) that include plots and sequences designed to immerse audiences in a coherent story (Green, 2006; Shen et al., 2014). Compared with informative messages, which present discrete facts and arguments, narrative messages organize information into meaningful structures that facilitate sensemaking under uncertainty. Prior research shows that narrative persuasion can shape attitudes toward social, health, and political issues more effectively than informative messages (Shen et al., 2014). Through the strategic use of narrative, Gabbay & Leenders (2003) found that recruiters could influence the recruit's decision to trust the company. The narrative construction of events could also increase the narrative's credibility (van Krieken and Sanders, 2016). Narrative effectiveness is often explained through cognitive and affective mechanisms, such as transportation and identification. Narrative messages tend to transport readers into the story world, reduce self-awareness, and foster emotional and cognitive engagement with characters and events (Green, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Shen et al., 2014). In contrast, informative responses rely more

heavily on analytic processing and factual scrutiny, which may heighten skepticism when audiences face ambiguity or uncertainty.

Crisis communication has long been described as inherently narrative in nature. As Yang et al. (2010) argued, crisis communication “is essentially narratives” (p. 475), and Heath (1997) described it as the enactment of a narrative of control under conditions of high uncertainty. Accordingly, narrative responses may be particularly effective during crises by providing causal explanations and restoring a sense of order, thereby reducing resistance to organizational messages (Yang et al., 2010). Prior studies have shown that narrative crisis responses can increase perceived interactivity, positive organizational attitudes, and message acceptance (Yang et al., 2010).

Despite these advantages, the effectiveness of narrative responses in misinformation-driven paracrises remains underexplored. Social media hoaxes often lack clear sources for verification and are designed to be emotionally engaging and easily shareable (Itti & Baldi, 2009; Vosoughi et al., 2018). In such contexts, audiences may engage in “post-fact” reasoning and rely less on factual correction alone (Berthon & Pitt, 2018). Informative responses that focus solely on refutation or denial may therefore be insufficient or even counterproductive, particularly when perceived as unfair or overly aggressive (Johar et al., 2010; Mills & Robson, 2019).

These features suggest that narrative responses may offer a distinct advantage in social media hoaxes by contextualizing events, explaining organizational actions, and guiding audience sensemaking, rather than merely correcting facts. However, boundary conditions remain unclear, particularly regarding whether narrative responses are more effective than informative responses when audiences are exposed to negative contextual cues, such as unfavorable geopolitical framing.

Building on prior findings that narrative messaging positively influences response acceptance (Yang et al., 2010), organizational trust (Gabbay & Leenders, 2003), and attitudes toward organizations (Yang et al., 2010), this study examines whether narrative responses are more effective than informative responses in the context of social media hoaxes.

H2: When compared with an informative response, a narrative response can generate higher levels of (1) acceptance of the response (2) company reputation and (3) trust toward the company.

Crisis communication strategies

In paracrisis situations, Coombs and Holladay (2015) identified six response strategies—refusal, refutation, repression, recognition/reception, reform, and revision—which can be positioned along a continuum from defensive to accommodative responses (Coombs, 2019). Defensive strategies primarily seek to deny the existence of a crisis, minimize organizational responsibility, or refute allegations, whereas accommodative strategies acknowledge concerns and emphasize corrective actions, apologies, or compensation. Based on the

situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), stakeholders would attribute high, low, or medium crisis responsivities to organizations when facing different crises. If the assumed crisis responsivities are high, communicators might adopt accommodative strategies to achieve satisfactory outcomes; if the attributed responsibilities are low, they adopt defensive strategies (Coombs, 2007). However, SCCT was largely developed in the context of conventional crises and assumes relatively stable attributions of responsibility, an assumption that may not hold in social media–driven paracrises.

Prior research has extensively examined the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies across multiple outcome variables, including response acceptance, organizational attitudes, supportive word-of-mouth intentions, corporate reputation, and trust (Cheng, 2018; Jin, 2010; Yang et al., 2010). For example, Yang et al. (2010) demonstrated that accommodative strategies, such as corrective actions, enhance response acceptance, particularly when audiences are actively engaged in crisis communication. Ngai and Jin (2016) further showed that hybrid strategies combining accommodative and defensive elements may prevent escalation in social-mediated crises, while Ma (2020) found that compensation strategies can reduce consumer reactance.

Corporate reputation is a key indicator of crisis communication effectiveness (Claeys et al., 2010). Empirical studies consistently show that accommodative strategies, especially apologies are more effective in reputation restoration than purely defensive responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Claeys et al., 2010). Similarly, trust is a central dimension of organization–public relationships and a critical outcome in crisis contexts (Kang & Park, 2017; Shen, 2017; Yang et al., 2015). Research suggests that accommodative strategies can foster trust when stakeholders attribute low responsibility to the organization (e.g., natural disasters), but may fail to restore trust when responsibility is perceived as high and public skepticism dominates (Coombs, 2019; Yang, 2016).

Importantly, social media hoaxes differ from traditional crises in that responsibility is often ambiguous, evidence is contested, and misinformation spreads rapidly through emotionally charged networks. In such paracrisis contexts, stakeholder attributions may be shaped less by objective responsibility and more by contextual cues and media framing, raising questions about whether standard SCCT prescriptions apply. As a result, it remains unclear whether accommodative or defensive strategies are more effective when organizations respond to social media hoaxes, particularly under varying geopolitical and contextual priming conditions.

Building on this gap, the present study examines how defensive and accommodative response strategies operate within misinformation-driven paracrises, and how their effectiveness depends on response format (narrative vs. informative) and contextual priming. Based on prior research and the unique features of social media hoaxes, we advance the following hypotheses:

H3: When compared with a defensive crisis communication strategy, an accommodative crisis response can generate higher levels of 1) acceptance of the response, 2) company reputation, and 3) trust toward the company.

This article also investigates how crisis narrative type and crisis communication strategy together influence crisis communication outcomes. Past research has identified a narrative

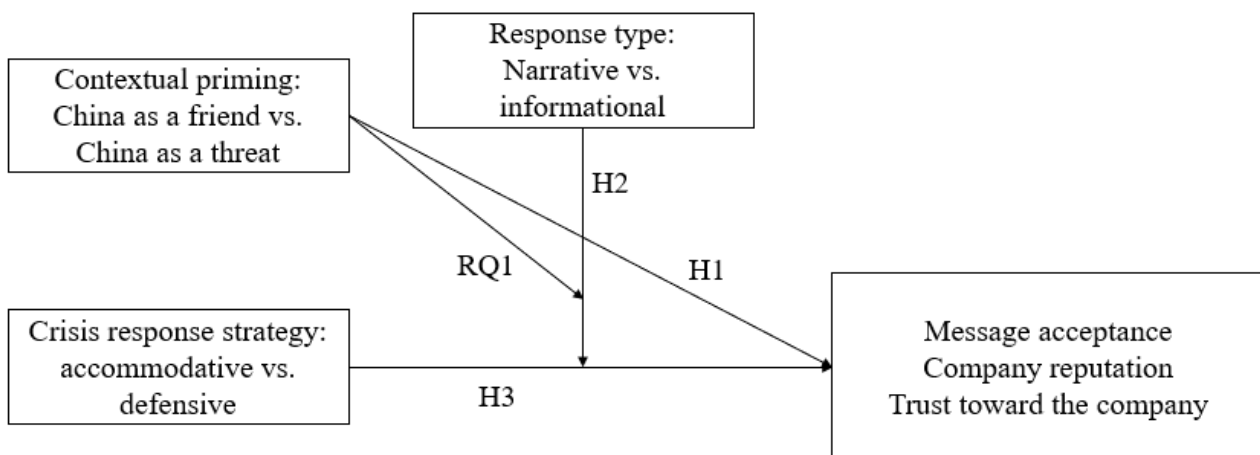
response to be more effective in crisis communication (Yang *et al.* 2010; Gabbay and Leenders, 2003) and an accommodative response to be more effective than a defensive response (Coombs, 2015). This study hypothesizes the following interactional effect:

H4: A narrative, accommodative response will generate higher levels of 1) acceptance of the response, 2) company reputation, and 3) trust toward the company than other types of responses.

The interactions between the three proposed independent variables are also examined. As indicated above, messages do not appear in a vacuum (Yi, 1993). Investigating how the complex media environment (geopolitical uncertainties between two countries, in this study) might affect the effectiveness of crisis response is important as it enhances our understanding of crisis responses effectiveness. Exposure to a previous message could affect how they judge the subsequent information, and such impact remains under-investigated in responses to social media hoax. Moreover, the examination would explain how and to what extent the reports on geopolitical conflicts affect responses to social media hoaxes is still unknown. Scholars have argued that the priming effect and news frames could affect the effectiveness of crisis response (Yang *et al.*, 2010; Mason, 2019), but these studies did not examine strategic crisis responses from an international and geopolitical perspective. Figure 1 displays the hypotheses in this article.

RQ1: How does contextual priming (China as a friend vs. China as a threat) moderate the relationship between response type and crisis communication strategy?

Figure 1- Hypothesized model



Method

A 2 (contextual priming: China as a friend vs. as a threat) x 2(response type: narrative vs. informative) x 2 (crisis communication strategy: accommodative vs. defensive) between-group experiment was conducted online. This specific context was chosen because of the recent geopolitical conflict between the U.S. and China, and that the tensions were well-documented by the media (Gandel, 2016).

The experiment was launched on Qualtrics.

Sample

Participants were recruited via Lucid, an online vendor. $N = 506$ participants from the United States joined the online experiment. Participants had a mean average age of 45.81 ($SD = 17.03$), ranging from 18-year-old to 81-year-old. 244 of them were males (48.2%) and 261 of them were females (51.6%). Most of the participants were white (73.5%), followed by Black/African American (non-Hispanic) (10.9%), and Latino/Hispanic (6.1%). 29 of the participants were Asian/Pacific Islander (5.7%), 6 were Native American (1.2%), and 2.6% of them reported their race as "other." Most of them received bachelor's degrees (25.1%), 23.7% of them received high school degrees, 23.1% received some college education. In our sample, 11.7% received associate degrees, 10.7% received master's degrees, 4% received less than a high school diploma and 1.8% of them received doctorate degrees. 25.1% of the participants reported income between \$20,000-40,000, 21.5% of them reported income under \$20,000, and 16.6% reported income between \$40,000-\$60,000. About 13.8% said \$100,000 and higher, 12.1% of them reported \$60,000 - \$80,000, 7.5% reported \$80,000-\$100,000, and 3.4% did not report their income.

Procedure

Researchers conducted a pre-test using participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk to check the experiment flow. For formal data collection, participants were recruited by an online vendor, Lucid. Participants clicked the link to participate in the study. Upon consent, they answered questions relating to the control variables and then were randomly exposed to an article depicting either China as a friend or China as a threat. After answering the manipulation check questions, participants read information about a Chinese food company and an incident at a U.S. location – Two employees posted a video accusing the company of violating food safety measures. This scenario was chosen as an adaptation of a real social media crisis that happened to Domino's Pizza when two employees posted videos of their food contaminating behaviors in the kitchen. The two employees were eventually arrested and charged with food tampering. Then, participants were randomly assigned to read a response from the company, which argued that the online video was a hoax, and the video

was created as a prank by the two employees. Participants then proceed with the questionnaire and were debriefed at the end of the questionnaire. Upon completion, participants received compensation from the vendor.

Stimulus

Contextual priming was manipulated through an online article created based on current coverage regarding China and U.S. relations and online news articles describing how China facilitated/threatened the U.S. economy. Specifically, one story described China as a friend, discussing how China's investment in the U.S. stimulated the local economy. In the "China as a threat" context, the article discussed how China's investment in the U.S. took away local jobs and endangered the local economy. All other parts of the story remained similar, and the two versions are in similar length.

Response types (narrative vs. informative) were manipulated via two versions of a Facebook post. The manipulation was adopted from Shen *et al.*'s study (2014) and followed their message manipulation format. The design of the Facebook post mimics the design of a real Facebook post. In both conditions, the response was from the company's CEO's Facebook account. In the narrative condition, the response was formatted as a story using narrative elements: the initiation of the event (CEO received the hoax information), exposition (CEO realized actions needed to be taken), complication (CEO realized the complexity of the hoax and started an investigation), and event culmination (CEO concluded the investigation and offered a resolution) (Shen *et al.*, 2014). The informative condition was crafted using a typical news story format, starting with the summarization of the event, followed by a series of actions taken by the CEO and the company. Then the CEO quoted the investigators and stated the company's resolution and its stand on the social media hoax. The information and CEO's presence in both conditions were similar.

Two strategies were created at the end of the story to manipulate crisis communication strategy in the company's response. In the accommodative condition, the response emphasized that the company was sorry about what happened and similar events would never happen again in the future. In the defensive condition, the company defended itself and stressed it was a victim as well, and the two employees who made the video were to blame and should be held responsible. Figure 2 and figure 3 showcase two of the stimuli used.

Figure 2 - Response stimuli example (narrative, accommodative response)



Figure 3 - Priming stimuli example (China as a threat)

Despite its economic growth, China poses threat to the U.S.

Within about 15 years, China's economy will surpass America's and become the largest in the world. As of this moment, a consensus has formed that China poses a significant threat to the U.S. economy. Ever since 2001, when the U.S. agreed to allow China into the World Trade Organization, U.S. workers have been nervous.

Small towns across America have suffered just as workers have. After a factory closes, unemployed residents move away for new work, shops close, and mayors lacking tax revenue cut services. The result is the towns becoming hallowed out shells with decaying prospects. The loss was not concentrated in just one state or region, like Michigan or the Midwest. Every congressional district in every state bled jobs.

A new study shows the growth in the U.S. trade deficit with China between 2001 and 2017 cost 3.4 million American workers their jobs. Among the 3.4 million who lost jobs since 2001 is Cathy Coreman from Pennsylvania. She was struck down twice, Cathy said, "The 1st time it happened was in 2012 when the mirror manufacturing company I worked for closed its factory and transferred its business to China. The second time my employer laid me off as it prepared to permanently close its glass factory and move half of the work to China. That is the way U.S. factory workers live now: nervous. Any day could be their last on the job. Any day, their work could be shipped to China. Finding new work that pays a living wage is difficult in many places.

China has threatened the American economy by using low-wage labor, providing government subsidies, free or cut-rate raw materials, and discounted utility bills. China keeps people employed by subsidizing overproduction of materials like steel and aluminum, then dumps the excess at below-production-cost prices on the international market. These market-distorting practices kill industries in market economies such as in the U.S. China is a threat, not a friend.

Measurements

All items were measured on 1-7 point scales.

Acceptance of response messages was measured by adapting five items from Blumstein *et al.* (1974). Participants were asked to rate the response message. A sample item was “Not acceptable” to “acceptable”. Cronbach $\alpha = .96$, $M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.64$.

Corporate reputation was measured by adopting 7 items from Tao and Wilson (2016) to measure the perceived reputation of the company. Participants were asked to rate their levels of agreement on statements. A sample statement read “This company delivers high-quality products and services”. Cronbach $\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.22$.

Trust toward the company was measured by using five items from Cheng, Shen, and Jiang (2020). Participants were asked to rate their levels of agreement on statements. A sample statement is “I believe that the company treats stakeholders like me fairly and justly”. Cronbach $\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.31$.

Demographic variables including age, gender, race, education, and income were also measured. Control variables including social media use and frequency of reading online hoaxes were also measured.

Three manipulation check questions were used. The first manipulation check question was to examine whether the contextual priming (China as a friend vs. as a threat) was successful by asking participants’ levels of agreement on the item “the article I just read described China as a friend of the U.S.”. The second manipulation check question examined the manipulation of response type by asking the participants to rate their levels of agreement on 5 items, with an example reads like “I think this response tells a story about this incident rather than purely listing information”. The third manipulation was to check the manipulation of crisis communication strategy by asking levels of agreement on 4 items such as “the response apologized for the online hoax” and “the response took responsibility for this online hoax on its own”.

A 2 (contextual priming: China as a friend vs. as a threat) x 2(response type: narrative vs. informative) x 2 (crisis communication strategy: accommodative vs. defensive) between-group experiment was conducted online.

Results

Manipulation check

Independent t-tests were performed to check the manipulations. Manipulation of contextual information was successful $t(504) = 2.13$, $p < .05$. Those exposed to the news depicting China as a friend reported that China was described as a friend rather than a threat (friend: $M = 4.19$, $SD = 2.28$ vs. threat: $M = 3.76$, $SD = 2.28$). Response type (narrative vs. informative) was also manipulated successfully, $t(504) = 5.82$, $p < .00$. Those exposed to narrative information reported a significantly higher level of story narration ($M = 5.16$, SD

= .85) than those exposed to an informative message ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.02$). Those exposed to an accommodative response reported that the message was more accommodative ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.26$) than those exposed to a defensive message ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.27$).

Hypotheses testing

To test H1, H2, H3 and H4 and answer the research questions, a MANOVA test was employed, controlling for time spent on social media and frequency of reading online hoaxes. The more time people spend on social media and the more frequently people read about an online hoax, the more likely they were familiar with the phenomenon of online hoaxes. Therefore, they might be more likely to judge a hoax more critically and to evaluate the affected company differently. Correlations between the dependent variables were all significant and acceptable, with the lowest correlation being $r = .52$ and the highest being $r = .85$. In the MANOVA test, we first examined how the independent variables affected the dependent variables as a group. Upon identifying the significant results, the main effects of the independent variables were then investigated. For significant two-way interactions, we employed pairwise post-hoc tests. For the significant three-way interaction, researchers split the data by the different conditions of the moderating variable (contextual priming) and then probed the two-way interactions under each condition.

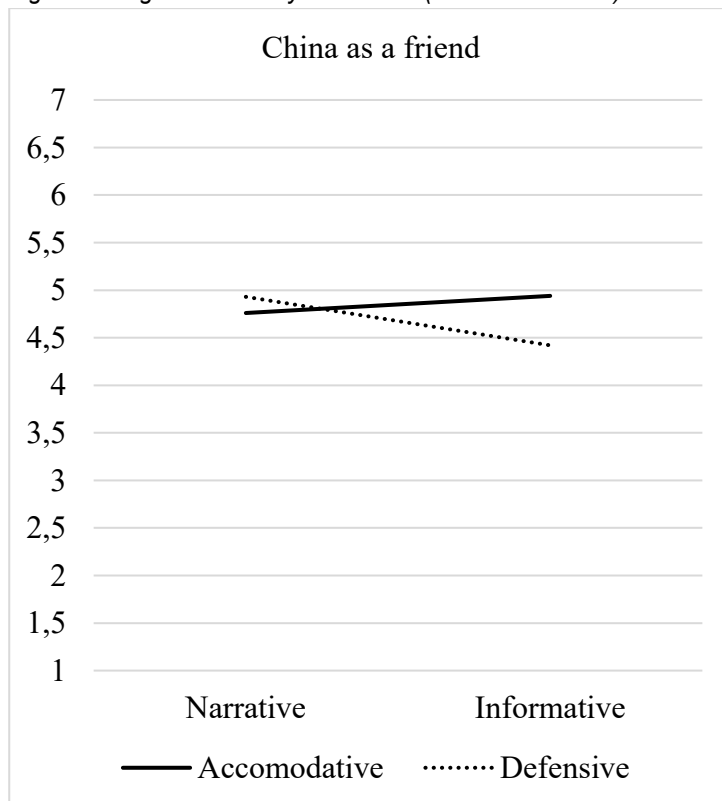
Results showed that response type (narrative vs. informative) had a significant main impact, Wilks' $\Lambda = .98$, $F(3, 494) = 3.36$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. No significant difference was found on contextual priming (Wilks' $\Lambda = .10$, $F(3, 494) = 0.17$, $p > .1$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$) and on crisis communication strategy (Wilks' $\Lambda = .10$, $F(3, 494) = 0.57$, $p > .1$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$). H1(a), H1(b) and H3 were not supported.

To further investigate H2 (response type, narrative vs. informative), univariate analysis for response type showed that response type was significant on all three dependent variables. A narrative response was more acceptable ($M = 5.38$, $SD = .10$) than an informative response ($M = 5.00$, $SD = .10$), $F(1, 496) = 6.84$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Those who read a narrative response also reported the company to have better reputation ($M = 4.88$, $SD = .074$) than those who read an informative response ($M = 4.67$, $SD = .08$), $F(1, 496) = 3.79$, $p = .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. A narrative response brought higher level of trust towards the company ($M = 4.77$, $SD = .08$) than an informative response ($M = 4.46$, $SD = .08$), $F(1, 496) = 7.56$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Therefore, H2 was partially supported.

A significant two-way interaction was found between response type and crisis communication strategy, Wilks' $\Lambda = .98$, $F(3, 494) = 10.98$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, and the difference was found on message acceptance, $F(1, 496) = 7.56$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Pairwise post hoc comparison showed that an informative and accommodative response was significantly more acceptable ($M = 5.34$, $SD = .15$) than an informative, defensive response ($M = 4.63$, $SD = .14$). There was no significant difference among narrative responses or on other dependent variables. Therefore, H4 was not supported.

RQ1 probes how contextual priming moderates the relationship between crisis response strategy and response type. A significant three-way interaction was found, Wilks' $\Lambda = .99$, $F(3, 494) = 4.19$, $p < .1$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. The significant impact was found on company reputation, $F(1, 496) = 6.32$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. After separating the file by how China was portrayed, the ANOVA test showed that a significant difference was found only when China was portrayed as a friend (Figure 4). When people were primed with news portraying China as a friend, a significant two-way interaction was found for response type and crisis communication strategy on company reputation. $F(1, 252) = 2.81$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Pairwise post hoc test revealed that an informative, accommodative response led to significantly higher perceived company reputation ($M = 4.94$, $SD = .15$) than an informative, defensive response ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .14$). After reading an article about China being a friend of U.S. economy, an informative, accommodative response was more effective than an informative, defensive response. No significant differences were found on other independent variables.

Figure 4 - Significant 3-way interaction (China as a friend) and its effect on company reputation.



Discussion

This study examined people's perceptions of the corporate messages on a misinformation paracrisis on social media under different contextual priming effects featuring different geopolitical relations. Results of this study highlights the strategic complexity corporations

need to navigate while responding to hoax on social media amid geopolitical uncertainties. Rather than positioning any single response strategy as universally effective, the findings demonstrate that crisis response effectiveness is contingent upon response format, strategy, and the broader geopolitical media context in which the response is embedded. Results suggest that a narrative response might be more effective than an informative response in generating higher message acceptability perceived company reputation. In addition, an informative, accommodative response was more acceptable than an informative, defensive response. Importantly, these effects were not uniform across conditions. Results from the three-way interaction indicate that people processed crisis response messages differently depending on the surrounding media environment. Only when participants were primed with a geopolitical context portraying China as a friend of the U.S. did an informative, accommodative response outperform an informative, defensive response in terms of company reputation.

This study enriched the crisis communication literature by examining the impact of narrative response format on message acceptability, corporate trust, and reputation. As previous research indicated, narrative messages could be more persuasive (van Krieken and Sanders, 2016; Gabbay and Leenders, 2003; Yang *et al.*, 2010) and could help reduce counter-arguing and increase message effectiveness (Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010). Our findings extend this work by demonstrating that narrative advantages persist even in paracrises characterized by low organizational responsibility and high informational ambiguity, such as social media hoaxes. Results of this study supported the argument that a narrative response in a paracrisis is more effective than an informative message in increasing the perceived message acceptability and company reputation. When responding to a paracrisis, using strategies such as explaining the chain of events that lead to the paracrisis might help the company to gain better message evaluation and restore its reputation. Perhaps a narrative response gives the audiences a more immersive context to understand the situation (Green, 2006; Shen *et al.*, 2014); in addition to explaining the paracrisis, a narrative response might also provide entertainment values (Shen *et al.*, 2014) and hence, is more persuasive. Results also reflected Heath's (1997) argument of crisis communication being the enactment of narrative control during uncertain times. Moreover, results extended previous research on the effect of strategic narratives during uncertain times (i.e., Yang *et al.*, 2010) and indicated that narrative storytelling countering a paracrisis could be effective in terms of its influence on both message acceptance and reputation. Narrative responses may provide audiences with a coherent interpretive framework under uncertainty, particularly when misinformation disrupts causal clarity.

The significant two-way interaction suggest that an informative, accommodative message is more effective in increasing message acceptance than an informative, defensive message. When messages are presented in a non-narrative format, participants prefer to see the organization taking a softer and more accommodative stand when refuting hoaxes on social media. Such response was perceived to be more acceptable. A firmer, defensive stand might make the participants perceive the message to be less acceptable. This result is in line with previous research that a more accommodative stand might be more effective for corporations to restore their reputation (Claey *et al.*, 2010; Coombs and Holladay, 2008).

This result suggests that when a narrative response is not available or feasible, and when the company has to respond using an informative format, taking a softer stand and being apologetic might make the response more acceptable than taking a firm, unapologetic stand. However, rather than presenting this as a novel main effect, we interpret it as context-dependent evidence that even low-responsibility misinformation paracrises may activate expectations for accommodation when audiences lack confidence in factual verification.

The most theoretically revealing finding is the significant three-way interaction on company reputation. When predicting reputation, only after exposure to a geopolitical prime portraying China as a friend of the U.S. did participants perceive an informative, accommodative response as more effective than an informative, defensive response. This suggests that geopolitical contextual priming conditions the applicability of crisis response strategies, rather than merely amplifying their effects. When China was portrayed as a friend, participants appeared more receptive to accommodative signals; when China was portrayed as a threat, response strategies had limited influence on evaluations.

This pattern invites consideration of the long-standing and often negative U.S.–China relationship as an interpretive backdrop. Even when primed with a positive portrayal, participants may still hold chronically accessible geopolitical schemas that lead them to expect accommodative behavior from Chinese companies regardless of crisis responsibility or misinformation status. Rather than undermining the findings, this interpretation underscores the importance of distinguishing between *country-of-origin as a static attribute* and *geopolitical contextual priming as a dynamic media condition*. While entrenched geopolitical attitudes may set baseline expectations, the results show that short-term contextual cues can still meaningfully shape how crisis responses are evaluated.

Notably, when China was portrayed as a threat, no response strategy emerged as clearly effective. This suggests that in hostile geopolitical media environments, organizational crisis communication efforts may face structural constraints, limiting the persuasive power of both accommodative and defensive strategies. This finding advances crisis communication theory by showing that response strategies may only function as intended within relatively favorable geopolitical contexts, emphasizing the need for strategic narratives that help organizations navigate compounded reputational risks under geopolitical tension.

The impact of contextual priming deepens our understanding of paracrisis communication. Although Coombs and Holladay conceptualized paracrises as publicly visible but responsibility-ambiguous threats, empirical research has rarely examined how broader media and geopolitical contexts shape paracrisis evaluations. While prior reviews have highlighted the role of political and cultural environments (Cheng et al., 2020), this study provides causal evidence that geopolitical contextual priming interacts with response format and strategy to influence crisis outcomes. Although no main effect of contextual priming was observed, the interaction effects demonstrate that its influence is conditional and nonlinear.

Finally, this study did not find a significant main effect of crisis communication strategy alone, diverging from some prior research (Claeys et al., 2010; Coombs, 2019; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). This suggests that in misinformation paracrises, response strategy may be overshadowed by message format and contextual interpretation. Social media

hoaxes may therefore constitute a distinct crisis type in which traditional strategy prescriptions are insufficient, warranting further theoretical and empirical attention.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to corporate and crisis communication theories. It examined how companies should respond to social media hoaxes most effectively and extended prior research on hoaxes, paracrisis, and social media crisis communication in a digital age. It also enriched crisis communication literature by integrating different response types with contextual priming and examining their impact on response message acceptance, corporate trust, and organizational reputation.

Although contextual priming did not show a significant main effect, the observed 3-way interaction provides nuanced insights into how cognitive processing and activated schemas influence audience reactions in complex crisis environments. These findings advance theoretical understanding of paracrisis communication, particularly under conditions of cross-cultural and global organizational contexts (Coombs, 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In addition, the results highlight how crisis communication outcomes may be shaped by geopolitical tensions and international contexts, offering guidance for future research on country-specific framing effects in crisis scenarios.

Practical Implications

The results indicate that audiences prefer narrative-based responses from companies when addressing social media paracrisis. Companies' responses should include storytelling that outlines the development of the paracrisis and the sequence of organizational actions taken to manage it. When a narrative response is not feasible, an informative, accommodative response is generally more acceptable than an informative, defensive response, even in low-responsibility situations, as it fosters greater trust and message acceptance.

This study also demonstrates that audience judgments are influenced by contextual cues, including geopolitical and country-of-origin factors. Organizations, particularly international ones, should conduct careful media screening and consider the geopolitical framing of their country of origin before issuing responses, as negative portrayals can undermine the effectiveness of informative responses. Narrative responses may be more resilient across varying contexts, supporting higher trust and perceived credibility. Companies should clearly explain the chain of events leading to their response actions and craft messages that immerse audiences in the rationale and context of the crisis response, while remaining attentive to the limitations posed by the study's focus on country framing and the specific experimental context.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study has a few limitations. This research used only one country and one scenario to reflect the media environment and geopolitical conflicts, and the results might not be generalizable to other scenarios and other international companies. It only focused on one type of social media. Other media sources could be manipulated and examined as well. Second, hoaxes are only one type of social-mediated crisis; other types, such as online misconduct and information mismanagement, can be investigated in future studies. Future studies should investigate different types of contextual priming and other social media crisis on various social media platforms.

Conclusion

This study investigated how contextual information, crisis response type, and crisis communication strategies together influence how companies should best respond to paracrises such as social media hoaxes. The experiment showed that a narrative response might be more effective, and informative, accommodative response is more effective than an informative, defensive response. The study found that participants did adopt an active, accessible cognitive scheme primed by contextual information when judging a subsequent crisis response message; however, the results are complicated by other messaging factors.

Biographical notes

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