

Making Peace or Holding a Grudge? The Role of Publics' Forgiveness in Crisis Communication

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This study examines whether organizations can restore reputations and financial performance damaged by crises by seeking forgiveness from publics. This study also investigates the mechanism of forgiveness seeking by testing the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies in different situations. An experiment involving an information security crisis ($N = 800$) found that substantive accommodative strategies (i.e., compensation and corrective action) are more effective at winning forgiveness than symbolic accommodative strategies (i.e., apology and showing regards). The effects of accommodative strategies on forgiveness vary in different conditions of severity and precrisis satisfaction.

Keywords: crisis communication, crisis communication strategies (CCSs), forgiveness, China, information security

As a moral virtue, forgiveness enables people to empathize with others and therefore resolves conflicts and restores valued relationships. However, the concept of forgiveness has attracted limited attention in crisis management scholarship. This study aims to investigate the role of forgiveness in crisis communication by examining whether organizations can restore reputations and financial performance damaged by crises by seeking forgiveness from publics including stockholders, customers, media, and members of the general public. This study explores how the effectiveness of crisis communication varies depending on the cause and consequences of a crisis as well as the precrisis relationships between organizations and publics.

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"Crisis" refers to public perceptions of a violation of strongly held expectations (Coombs, 2010). Crises threaten an organization's reputation and its publics' physical and financial well-being. To recover from reputational and financial damage inflicted during crises and to repair relationships with their publics, organizations use symbolic and substantive resources to comfort people and alleviate suffering (Coombs, 1995; Jorgensen, 1996). Symbolic strategies include informing, acknowledging, or assuring publics by apologizing or showing regards. Substantive strategies include acting to protect publics or making payments to offset loss. These acts of mortification are based on apologetic rhetoric, and forgiveness is one anticipated response. Psychologists define forgiveness as a transformational process from resentment (e.g., cognitions, emotions, motivations, behavioral intentions) to positive experiences (Baskin & Enright, 2004). When an organization responds appropriately after a crisis, people's negative emotions and cognitions toward the organization are alleviated or replaced by positive ones. Crisis managers are pursuing an outcome akin to psychologists' definition of forgiveness.

The contributions of the study are threefold. First, this study defines forgiveness and explains its applicability in the context of crisis communication by establishing the Forgiveness in Crisis Communication Scale (FCCS). Several business management studies have presented the significance of forgiveness in rebuilding relationships between organizations and publics (Zourrig, Chebat, & Toffoli, 2009), but they often operationalize forgiveness as a dependent variable related to crisis communication (e.g., Carroll, 2009; Moon & Rhee, 2012; Vanhamme & Grobbs, 2008). Thus, this study constructs a scale to measure forgiveness during crises.

Additionally, this study proposes an indirect path from crisis communication strategies (CCSs) to organizational reputation and financial performance via forgiveness. Previously, researchers have conceptualized forgiveness as an indicator of the effectiveness of crisis communication (Carroll, 2009; Moon & Rhee, 2012), but few have examined how forgiveness influences other public responses. This study seeks to find links among public forgiveness and positive perceptions and behavioral intentions.

Finally, this study explores the mechanism of how crisis communication wins publics' forgiveness for organizations. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and organization public relations theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Huang, 2001) are used to identify three contextual factors of crisis communication: locus of cause, severity of the consequences, and precrisis relationships between organizations and the publics. The findings revisit basic assumptions of classic crisis communication theories from a public-centric perspective.

This study was conducted in China, a culture characterized by collectivism (Hofstede, 1984; Zhu, Anagondahalli, & Zhang, 2017) in which the line between the public and the private is blurred and people are more ready to apply interpersonal social norms and interactive principles at the collective level. It is contextually sensible to observe the role of forgiveness, an extensively investigated construct at the interpersonal level in crisis communication.

Literature Review

The Forgiveness-Mediated Model of Crisis Communication

This study pinpoints the role of forgiveness in crisis communication as supplementary to SCCT. The three fundamental tenets of SCCT are (1) attributed responsibility influences organizational reputation (Coombs, 1995, 2016); (2) CCSs should match the amount of attributed responsibility to protect reputation (Coombs, 2016); and (3) intensifiers such as crisis attributions, organizational performance, and severity of the crisis moderate the effectiveness of CCSs (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010). Studies using SCCT are often criticized as organization-centric because of the concentration on organizational reputation (Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Therefore, this study introduces forgiveness as an outcome of crisis communication from the public perspective. As a psychological transformation in transgressions, forgiveness may affect organizational reputation and financial performance. Thus, a forgiveness-mediated model of crisis communication is proposed (see Figure 1).

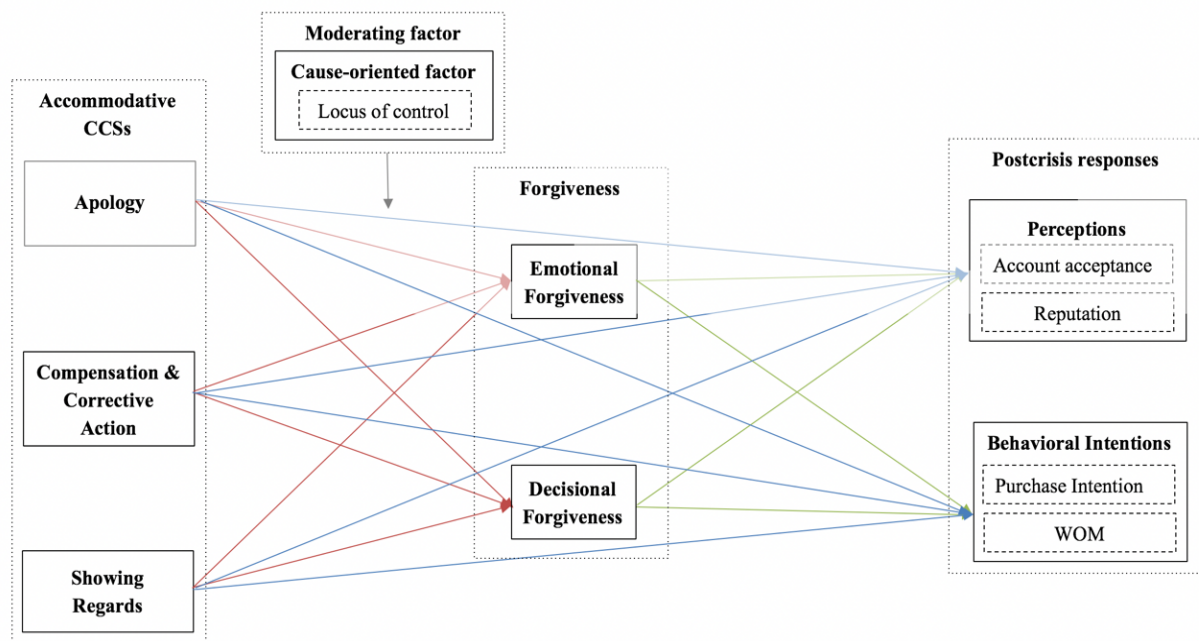


Figure 1. *The forgiveness-mediated crisis communication model.*

When matching CCSs and crisis types, the responsibility attributed to a crisis cluster moderates the effectiveness of CCSs. Built on attribution theory, which argues that people make judgments based on the locus (whether the event was caused by internal or external factors), stability (whether the cause varied over time), and controllability (whether the cause is beyond control) of the cause (Weiner, 1986), SCCT stresses both main and interactive effects of attributed responsibility on reputation (Coombs, 2016; Ma & Zhan, 2016).

Empirical studies using SCCT also revealed significant impacts of crisis severity and organizational precrisis performance on reputation (Claeys et al., 2010). This study investigated all three intensifiers of SCCT as moderators of the effectiveness of CCSs, providing a holistic understanding of crisis situations.

The Role of Forgiveness in Crisis Communication

Forgiveness is defined as a willful act of forswearing resentment of a wrongdoer while acknowledging the seriousness of the wrongdoing and the responsibility of the wrongdoer (Baskin & Enright, 2004), and includes the transformation of negative emotions, cognitions, and behavioral intentions (Baskin & Enright, 2004).

Literature on service management has extensively investigated the role of forgiveness in conflicts between organizations and publics (Takaku, 2001). However, exploration of crisis communication is lacking. Organizationally, a crisis is an abrupt event that causes damage to the responsible organization's reputation and discourages publics from interacting with the organization (Coombs, 1995), endangering its relationship with them (Jorgensen, 1996). Responses such as negative word of mouth (WOM) and boycotts threaten the reputation and financial performance of crisis-involved organizations (Coombs, 2007). The goal of organizational crisis communication is to transform negative public responses into favorable ones.

Forgiveness is a favorable public response used by crisis-involved organizations (Carroll, 2009; Moon & Rhee, 2012). Although researchers have noticed the role of forgiveness in crisis communication, the conceptualization of forgiveness and the mechanisms that underpin its role in crisis communication are not fully understood.

Forgiveness in Crisis Communication Scale

Recent studies on forgiveness have proposed two types: emotional and decisional forgiveness (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Emotional forgiveness is defined as "the replacement of negative emotions with positive or other-oriented emotions" (Wade et al., 2005, p. 242). If a wrongdoer performs as the offended person expects after a transgression, that person will experience a decrease of fear-conditioned emotions and an increase of prosocial ones (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Fear-Conditioned Emotions

Fear-conditioned emotions include fear and other emotions triggered by fear, such as anger and worry, as emotional responses to offenses (Worthington, 1998).

Fear. When a person is wronged, the hurt, injustice, or offense constitutes the unconditioned stimulus, and the wrongdoer is the conditioned stimulus (Worthington, 1998). The offended person will then associate responses of unforgiveness with the wrongdoer. During a crisis, the uncertainties experienced by publics trigger immediate emotions of fear (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012).

Worry. Worry is heightened when fear causes distress (Kashdan, Zvolensky, & McLeish, 2008), leading to delayed decision making regarding forgiveness. Worry also poses a challenge to customers during service failure; they may feel reluctant to forgive a service transgression because of excessive worry about the failure occurring frequently and resulting in greater inconvenience (Zourrig et al., 2009).

Anger. Anger is a strong negative feeling of displeasure and antagonism associated with specific cognitive processes, physiological changes, and behavioral tendencies (Fitzgibbons, 1986). Anger reduction has been identified as a significant manifestation of forgiveness (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Worthington, 1998) because anger is the most frequently manifested emotion experienced by publics during crises (Choi & Lin, 2009), negatively affecting their behavioral intentions (Coombs, 2007).

Prosocial Emotions

This study identifies empathy, sympathy, and emotional relief as pertinent prosocial emotions in crisis communication.

Empathy and sympathy. Empathy refers to an involuntary affective reaction of warmth, compassion, and concern when experiencing discomfort about other people's negative experiences (Davis, 1979). Conceptually similar, sympathy refers to the feeling of regarding other people's predicaments as needing to be alleviated (Wispé, 1986). People who are more empathetic and sympathetic toward wrongdoers are more likely to forgive (Davis & Gold, 2011). If a person knows that a wrongdoer feels remorseful about a transgression, the person is more likely to forgive to ease the wrongdoer's suffering (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Empathy and sympathy are also primary positive affective responses of publics that organizations expect in crisis communication (Choi & Lin, 2009).

Emotional relief. Forgiveness is a relief from negative emotions such as sadness, fear, and anger (Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). After granting forgiveness, one is expected to experience emotional relief from the injury (Baskin & Enright, 2004). In crises, emotional relief focuses on what could have happened and is mainly experienced by people who are free from further risk (Choi & Lin, 2009).

Emotional forgiveness is a potent variable measuring public response because crisis communication affects organizational reputation and public reactions through the recipient (Choi & Lin, 2009). Transformation of the publics' emotion correlates with cause attribution of crisis events and significantly predicts organizational reputation, secondary crisis communication reactions (e.g., WOM), secondary crisis reactions (e.g., boycotting), and purchase intentions (Choi & Lin, 2009).

Decisional Forgiveness

Decisional forgiveness is a cognitive decision to forswear revenge on or avoidance of a wrongdoer (Wade et al., 2005). It is a decision to release a wrongdoer from debt and behave the same toward this person as before the transgression (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Decisional forgiveness can be achieved by positively differentiating resentful thoughts from feelings of hurt. Healing can then occur by making

peace with one's own bitterness (DiBlasio, 1998). Therefore, one may grant decisional forgiveness even if he or she is emotionally upset toward the wrongdoer (DiBlasio, 1998; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Operationally, decisional forgiveness involves an increase in people's general prosocial intentions as well as a decrease in harmful intentions toward an offender (Worthington Hook, Utsey, Williams, & Neil, 2007). Prosocial intention refers to intentions that benefit others, whereas harmful intention refers to intentions that hinder others from benefits (Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010). Decisional forgiveness indicates public willingness to understand an organization's motivation for causing a crisis, help it out of difficulty, think positively about it, and want the best outcome for it.

Crisis Communication Strategies to Win Forgiveness

As forgiveness is an anticipated public response in crisis communication, appropriate communicative strategies inspire publics to care more about the crisis-involved organization and become amenable to forgiveness (Davis & Gold, 2011). Kelley (1998) identified five frequently used forgiveness-seeking behaviors: explicit acknowledgment (apology, remorse), nonverbal assurance (eye contact, hugs), compensation (gifts, repeated efforts), explanation (reasons), and humor (joking). Of these forgiveness-seeking tactics, three are widely used in crisis communication: apology, showing regards, and compensation and corrective action.

Apology: A Symbolic Accommodative Strategy With Taking Blame

Apology (AP) is narrowly defined here as a public statement taking full responsibility and asking for forgiveness (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). An AP effectively restores reputation and repairs relationships with publics when an organization is perceived as being responsible for a crisis (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1995). Although repentance can lead publics to attribute responsibility to an organization, previous studies argued that confession evokes sympathy and forgiveness (Coombs, 1995). When an organization is perceived as being responsible for a crisis, people will expect AP before granting forgiveness (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1995).

H1: People are more likely to grant (a) emotional forgiveness and (b) decisional forgiveness when AP is present (vs. absent) in crisis communication.

Showing Regards: A Symbolic Accommodative Strategy Without Taking Blame

Showing regards (SR) means expressing sympathy, caring, and regret to comfort victims, but it does not necessarily involve taking responsibility. Studies have suggested using symbolic accommodative strategies such as SR to win forgiveness (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1995), as SR focuses on offsetting victims' emotional suffering. Though not as repentant as AP, SR is as effective as AP in neutralizing negative emotions and behavioral intentions (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

H2: People are more likely to grant (a) emotional forgiveness and (b) decisional forgiveness when SR is present (vs. absent) in crisis communication.

Compensation and Corrective Action: Substantive Accommodative Strategies

Compensation and corrective (CC) actions are substantive accommodative strategies that involve making a fair payment to help victims weather consequences and acting to protect people from similar crises. People will forgive an organization if it acts to help them (Coombs, 1995). Publics' forgiveness can be prompted by a perception that the crisis-involved organization has prioritized protecting people over its own reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Compensation lessens negative feelings by offering money, goods, or aid to victims (Coombs, 1995) and alters customers' impressions of tangible outcomes of a transgression (Kelley, Hoffman, & Davis, 1993). People tend to replace their negative emotions and think positively of an organization if the compensation offsets their suffering (Kelley et al., 1993).

Corrective action refers to actions taken by an organization to prevent the recurrence of similar crises (Benoit, 1997) by correcting current problems, restoring affairs to their precrisis state, making promises to prevent recurrence, and establishing mechanisms to protect people (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1995). Although corrective action is not meant to change perceptions of the tangible outcomes of a crisis, it helps to rebuild justice by creating a fair situation in future relationships between an organization and publics.

H3: People are more likely to grant (a) emotional forgiveness and (b) decisional forgiveness when CC is present (vs. absent) in crisis communication.

Role of Accommodative CCSs in the Chinese Context

Culture influences organizations' selection of CCSs and publics' perceptions and responses to crises. Previous literature identified two cultural dimensions that affect crisis communication practices in China: (1) face saving, which refers to maintaining harmony at the superficial level—"golden mean" strategies such as SR are widely used, whereas "extreme" strategies such as public AP are often avoided (Huang, Wu, & Cheng, 2016); (2) collectivists such as the Chinese regard AP as acknowledgment of sufferings by the wronged rather than admission of fault (Zhu et al., 2017). The line between SR and AP is blurred in Chinese crisis communication.

Accommodative CCSs were not frequently used by Chinese organizations in the first decade of the 21st century (Huang et al., 2016). The government in China has requisite access to intervene in organizations' crisis communication for maintaining social stability (Lyu, 2012). In many cases, organizations initiated crisis communication with denial or remained silent instead of apologizing while seeking guidance from local governments (Lyu, 2012). However, the Chinese government learned from the pain of the SARS outbreak and issued policies to practice professional crisis communication. Accommodative CCSs are expected to play an increasingly important role in Chinese crisis communication.

Effectiveness of Crisis Communication: The Public Perspective

This study investigates whether publics' forgiveness leads to positive or less negative perceptual or behavioral responses to an organization. The following concepts are the most frequently used methods for measuring publics' responses during crises.

Public Perceptions

Image restoration is conceptualized as the aggregate of individuals' transformed perceptions of an organization's image, reputation, trust, and crisis severity.

Account acceptance refers to people's evaluation of whether crisis responses issued by an organization are acceptable and trustworthy. If the organization uses appropriate crisis response strategies, its account will gain greater acceptance from publics and its reputation will be enhanced (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

Perceived reputation is stakeholders' overall evaluation of an organization, which can be seriously threatened by a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The accumulation of images influences an organization's reputation. Effective crisis response strategies should discount negative images and protect the organization's reputation.

Public Behavioral Intentions

People's behavioral responses are directly associated with an organization's fulfillment of responsibility and financial performance. Decreased purchase intentions lead to an atrophied market (Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992). Communication actions such as negative WOM lead to falling stock prices.

Purchase intentions falter after a crisis because people are anxious about a recurrence (Jin & Pang, 2010). Crisis communication may reverse declining purchase intentions by shifting people's experiences in favor of an organization (Jorgensen, 1996).

Word of mouth refers to a customer-to-customer exchange of knowledge (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). People tend to speak ill of an organization when a crisis provokes negative opinions (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). However, positive WOM can affect customers' perceptions of product value and their likelihood of recommending a product (Gruen et al., 2006).

Accommodative strategies are the most effective tool for organizations to repair damaged reputations after crises (Benoit, 1995). An AP has a strong positive impact on public perceptions and behavioral intentions toward an organization (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Showing sympathy and providing compensation also perform well in promoting positive perceptions and behavioral intentions during crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

Other than a reorganization of the significance of forgiveness in research (Moon & Rhee, 2012), no attempts have been made to examine the mediating role of forgiveness in the relationship between crisis communication strategies and outcomes. Moon and Rhee (2012) conceptualized forgiveness as an outcome variable for crisis communication. However, corporate crisis managers attempt to control financial loss and restore organizational image to the greatest degree possible. Thus, forgiveness is more of a psychological mechanism that mediates crisis communication and an organization's reputation and financial assets (Coombs, 2007).

RQ1: Will AP, SR, or CC affect people's perceptions of an organization through (a) emotional forgiveness and (b) decisional forgiveness?

RQ2: Will AP, SR, or CC affect people's behavioral intentions toward an organization through (a) emotional forgiveness and (b) decisional forgiveness?

Emotional and decisional forgiveness do not always occur simultaneously, though one may trigger the other. The offended may grant decisional forgiveness even when he or she is emotionally upset (Worthington & Scherer, 2004) and vice versa. Therefore, this study investigates which dimension of forgiveness is more influential in perceptual and behavioral responses to crisis communication.

RQ3: Which dimension of forgiveness is most effective in mediating crisis communication strategies and people's (a) perceptions of and (b) behavioral intentions toward an organization?

Contextual Moderating Factors: The Mechanism of Winning Forgiveness

This section proposes that the performance of CCSs in winning forgiveness depends on crisis situations and precrisis relationships between an organization and its publics. Three major contextual factors are studied: locus of control, perceived severity, and precrisis satisfaction.

Locus of Control: The Cause of a Crisis Event

Locus of control refers to whether the cause of an incident is external or internal to the crisis-involved organization (Coombs, 1995). It is a cause-oriented indicator of how people attribute blame for a crisis. Attribution incurs affective and behavioral responses to organizations (Coombs, 1995, 2007). Internal locus of control leads to the perception that an organization should be blamed, evoking negative emotions, perceptions, and behavioral intentions (Coombs, 2007).

Crisis communication literature has shown how the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies is contingent on blame attribution. Accommodative strategies have been identified as the most effective when the cause of a crisis is internal. Bradford and Garratt (1995) found that accommodative strategies were most effective when an organization was accused of responsibility for an event. Moon and Rhee (2012) found that emotion-centered messages such as a sincere apology, showing compassion for victims, and promising corrective action were more likely to earn emotional forgiveness for internally caused crises than providing rational information. Coombs (1995) proposed that accommodative

strategies are preferable when the cause of a crisis is internal. When the cause is external, accommodative strategies are less effective than merely providing information (Moon & Rhee, 2012).

H4: People in a crisis with an internal cause will be more likely to forgive an organization when it responds with (a) AP, (b) SR, or (c) CC than those in a crisis with an external cause.

Perceived Severity: The Consequences of a Crisis Event

Perceived severity refers to perceptions of the degree of damage caused by a crisis. This consequence-oriented factor influences people's judgment of an offensive situation. People tend to adopt harsher moral standards toward wrongdoers when they experience severely hurtful consequences, even when the offense was unintentional (Walster, 1966). More blame is attributed to a wrongdoer when damage is perceived as severe because people are inclined to believe that the social environment is stable and just, and someone must be responsible for severe consequences (Miller & Vidmar, 1981), and apologies and reconciling actions by a wrongdoer are expected (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). In contrast, if the consequences are not perceived as severe, it is unlikely that an incident will cause psychological or material loss, and people will not have to forgive it. Forgiveness-seeking tactics can transform emotional and cognitive states to a greater extent in situations where the consequences are severe.

H5: People who perceive a crisis as more severe are more likely to forgive an organization when it responds with (a) AP, (b) SR, or (c) CC than those who perceive a crisis as less severe.

Pre-crisis Satisfaction: A Relationship-Oriented Factor

As a conceptual dimension of relationships between organizations and publics, satisfaction encompasses cognitive reinforcement of the positive expectations of a situation and favorable affective responses to the other party in a relationship (Hecht, 1978; Huang, 2001). Customers' pre-crisis evaluation of an organization shapes crisis situations. If customers perceive themselves as having been poorly treated by the organization in other consumption contexts, the effectiveness of crisis communication efforts can be hindered (Coombs, 2007). People's reactions to transgressions are moderated by the nature of pretransgression relationships. Victims tend to have more positive cognitive and behavioral responses toward transgressions that occur in highly committed relationships (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002).

H6: People who are more satisfied with an organization are more likely to forgive the organization when it responds with (a) AP, (b) SR, or (c) CC than those who are less satisfied with the organization.

Method

Study Design

This study employed a 2 (locus of control: external vs. internal) $\times$ 2 (AP: present vs. absent) $\times$ 2 (SR: present vs. absent) $\times$ 2 (CC: present vs. absent) between-subjects experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 16 experimental conditions composed of different combinations of locus of control and accommodative strategies.

A fictitious crisis was created involving a threat to personal information security. The hypothetical crisis involved a possible leak of personal information and trip records from Didi Taxi, the predominant transportation network company in China. Didi allows consumers to use smartphones to request a trip from nearby taxis or drivers who want to offer a ride in their own cars.

Procedure and Participants

Subject recruitment and data collection were conducted with the help of Sojump (www.sojump.com), an online research company in China that offers professional sampling and data collection services to industries and academies. Sojump's clients include universities from Mainland China and other places (the U.S., Hong Kong, etc.). Sojump has a national sampling pool of more than 2.6 million panel members in Mainland China. Participants are invited from multiple sources such as collaborators, search engines, blogs, and BBS recruitments. To ascertain the authenticity of personal information, Sojump vets all potential respondents by verifying e-mail accounts and mobile numbers. The sampling pool consists of potential respondents from a wide range of occupational backgrounds.

We recruited participants from the sampling pool of Sojump in March 2016 ($N = 800$). The response rate was 53.1%. Table 1 describes the demographic profile of the participants. Participants under the age of 20 had less than a proportionate share of the sampling pool because most Didi taxi users were adults. People under 20 were less likely to find the experiment relevant. All participants were exposed to a piece of fictitious news describing a hypothetical crisis involving a possible leak of personal information and trip records from Didi Taxi. Internet companies' information security has become a critical concern for the Chinese public. People living in China increasingly rely on online services such as Internet trade, Internet finance, and mobile payments. The risks of information leaks are challenging to both the industry and users of Internet services. The participants answered questions measuring their forgiveness before exposure to the crisis response of the organization. Each participant was then randomly assigned to read one of the 16 statements from Didi Taxi and answer questions measuring his or her forgiveness and other variables. All written scenarios and questions were presented in Chinese. At the end of the experiment, the participants were informed that the crisis was fictitious.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants.

		Participants (%)	Sampling pool of Sojump.com (%)	Didi Taxi users (%)
<i>Age in years</i>	≤20	1.1	21.0	
	21–30	40.5	54.3	
	31–40	42.4	16.3	
	≥40	16.0	8.3	
	≤15	0		0.1
	16–25	13.9		22.5
	26–35	55.6		67.1
	36–45	23.5		8.3
	≥46	7.0		2.0
<i>Gender</i>	Male	50.8	52.0	62.9
	Female	49.3	48.0	37.1
<i>Education</i>	High school or less	9.1		Not available
	College	81.2		
	Postgraduate	9.7	Not available	
<i>Monthly income</i>	<¥2001	5.4		Not available
	¥2001–¥5000	31.6		
	¥5001–¥10000	45.6		
	¥10001–¥20000	14.8		
	>¥20000	2.6	Not available	

Experimental Stimuli

A pilot study ($N = 215$) was conducted using sojump.com to examine the reliability of measures and the effectiveness of manipulation. In the pilot study, Cronbach's α coefficients of all scales were above .70. The pilot study indicated that participants tended to attribute the cause externally if the information leak resulted from hacking; participants tended to think the cause was internal if the information leak was caused by managerial negligence. Therefore, in the external cause condition, participants were told the information leak was caused by a hostile attack from a competitor; in the internal condition, participants were told the information leak was caused by employee error.

Participants in the AP condition were told that Didi Taxi apologized to its customers for any inconvenience or concerns. Participants in the CC condition were told that a technician fixed the security vulnerabilities, the information security system was upgraded to the highest level of the domain, and a travel voucher of CN¥50 would be sent to all customers as compensation. Participants in the SR condition were told that Didi Taxi was grateful for all the love and support, that they deeply regretted any loss or inconvenience, and that they sincerely greeted all customers with regards. Participants in the control group were provided with basic information about the company.

Manipulation Check

A series of chi-square tests and independent-sample *t* tests showed that participants in different conditions did not significantly differ in age, gender, education, income, customer satisfaction, or dependency. The independent-sample *t* tests suggested the manipulation checks of locus of control and CCSs were successful. Participants were asked to rate their blame attribution before and after they read the official statements using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) about the following statements: "Didi Taxi should be responsible for this incident," "This incident is Didi Taxi's fault," and "I blame this incident on Didi Taxi." The following statements checked the manipulation of communicative strategies using the same scale: "The company apologized to its public in the official statement," "The company has expressed an apology to publics in the official statement," "The company provided compensation to publics," "The company took corrective action to avoid reoccurrence," "The company showed regards to publics," and "The company showed care for publics."

Measures

In this study, forgiveness was defined as a transformation of experiences. Emotional forgiveness involves the neutralization of fear-conditioned emotions (fear, anger, and worry) and an increase of prosocial emotions (empathy, sympathy, and emotional relief). Prosocial emotional forgiveness was measured using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *extremely so*) asking participants whether they experienced empathy, sympathy, and emotional relief before ($\alpha = .79$) and after ($\alpha = .86$) reading the official statements. Fear-conditioned emotional forgiveness was measured by asking whether participants experienced fear, anger, or worry before ($\alpha = .81$) and after ($\alpha = .88$) reading the official statements. Emotional forgiveness was created by adding the average increase in prosocial emotions after reading the official statements to the average decrease in fear-conditioned emotions ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 2.66$).

Decisional forgiveness was measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *extremely so*) adapted from the Decisional Forgiveness Scale (DFS; Worthington et al., 2007). Prosocial intentions were measured by asking whether participants would "try to act toward the company in the same way as before the crisis," "help the company if it was in need," "act friendly toward the company," and "wish the company would become a more prosperous business" ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .84$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .87$). Harmful intentions were measured by asking whether participants would like to "witness a downturn in the financial performance of the company," "see the company pay a price for the transgression," or "see the company suffer from setbacks during development" ($\alpha_{\text{before}} = .84$; $\alpha_{\text{after}} = .86$). To create decisional forgiveness, the average increase in prosocial attitudes after reading the official statement was added to the average decrease in harmful intentions ($M = .58$, $SD = 1.70$). Other variables were also measured using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *extremely so*; see Table 2). Participants' dependency on Didi Taxi's services, referring to how much they relied on the service, was controlled.

Table 2. Measures of Outcome Variables and Control Variables.

Variables	Measures	Descriptions
<i>Account acceptance</i>	The organization's response to the crisis is appropriate.	$\alpha = .90$
	The organization's response to the crisis is acceptable.	$M = 4.88$
	The organization's response to the crisis is sincere.	$SD = 1.25$
	The organization's response to the crisis is adequate. (Blumstein et al., 1974)	
<i>Reputation</i>	The organization is concerned with the well-being of its publics.	$\alpha = .81$
	Under most circumstances, I believe what the organization says.	$M = 4.93$
	I believe the company will be honest when there is a crisis. (Coombs & Holladay, 2002)	$SD = 1.09$
<i>Purchase intention</i>	I am very likely to use this company's service.	$\alpha = .88$
	I will purchase this company's service the next time I need a ride.	$M = 5.02$
	I will definitely try this company's service. (Grewal, Monroe, & Krishnam, 1998)	$SD = 1.19$
<i>WOM</i>	I would encourage friends or relatives to buy products from the company.	$\alpha = .92$
	I would recommend the company's products.	$M = 4.77$
	I would say positive things about the company and its products to others.	$SD = 1.25$
	If asked, I would give positive comments about the company. (Coombs & Holladay, 2008)	
<i>Perceived severity</i>	The crisis was a severe incident.	$\alpha = .87$
	The crisis caused serious consequences.	$M = 5.51$
	The crisis severely affected customers.	$SD = 1.08$
<i>Customer satisfaction</i>	Didi Taxi's service was generally satisfactory.	$\alpha = .82$
	Didi Taxi's service met expectations.	$M = 4.91$
	Didi Taxi's service was close to their ideal service. (Hausknecht, 1990)	$SD = .99$
<i>Dependency</i>	Using Didi Taxi is part of my daily routine.	$\alpha = .88$
	It will be inconvenient if Didi Taxi discontinues its service.	$M = 4.61$
	Didi Taxi has become an important option for my daily trips. (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)	$SD = 1.35$

Results

Reliability and Validity of Forgiveness in the Crisis Communication Scale

The results of reliability tests of the two dimensions of forgiveness were acceptable, as the Cronbach's alpha, which should range from 0.7 to 1.0, was .82 for emotional forgiveness and .74 for decisional forgiveness. The structural model is presented in Figure 2. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 20.0 indicated adequate validity of the two constructs, $\chi^2 = 297.17$, $p = .000$, $df = 72$, $\chi^2/df = 4.13$, normed fit index (NFI) = .92, root mean square residual (RMR) = .53, comparative fit index (CFI) = .94; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .06.

The Effectiveness of CCSs in Winning Public Forgiveness

Paired-sample t tests were conducted to evaluate whether participants experienced emotional and decisional transformation after reading the official statement. The results indicated that the means of prosocial emotions—(M before = 3.49, SD before = 1.42 vs. M after = 4.46, SD after = 1.31), $t(799) = -19.29$, $p < .001$; fear-conditioned emotions (M before = 5.37, SD before = 1.16 vs. M after = 3.98, SD after = 1.47), $t(799) = 23.26$, $p < .001$; prosocial intentions (M before = 4.43, SD before = 1.19 vs. M after = 4.81, SD after = 1.14), $t(799) = -10.94$, $p < .001$; and harmful intentions (M before = 3.74, SD before = 1.37 vs. M after = 3.54, SD after = 1.38), $t(799) = 5.27$, $p < .001$ —after stimulus were all significantly different than before stimulus, indicating that an official crisis response could enhance participants' positive experiences and neutralize negative ones.

This study investigated whether accommodative strategies lead to public emotional forgiveness and decisional forgiveness. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted to examine whether AP (H1), SR (H2), or CC (H3) affected people's experience of forgiveness. Box's multivariate test for homogeneity of dispersion matrices was not significant, $F(21, 2241424) = 30.26$, $p = .09$, indicating that the data fulfilled the assumption that the population variance and covariance among dependent variables are the same across all levels of factors. There was a main effect of CC (Wilks' $\lambda = .96$), $F(1, 784) = 17.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, but none were found for AP (Wilks' $\lambda = 1.00$), $F(1, 784) = .06$, $p = .56$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, or SR (Wilks' $\lambda = 1.00$), $F(1, 784) = 1.804$, $p = .17$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

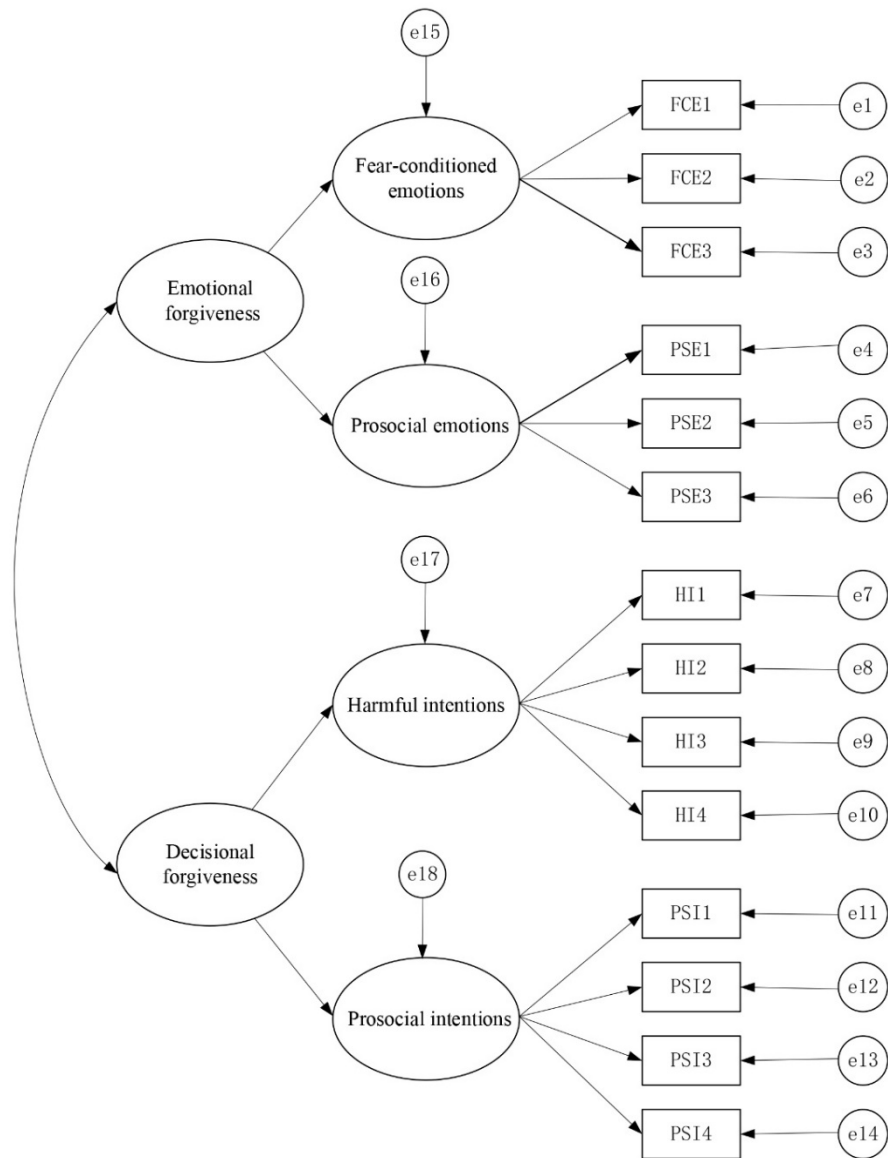


Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis of forgiveness in the context of crisis communication (FCCS).

Analyses of covariances (ANCOVAs) were conducted as follow-up tests to the MANCOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANCOVA was tested at the 0.025 level. Subsequent univariate analyses revealed that CC had a statistically significant effect on emotional forgiveness, $F(1, 785) = 31.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$, and decisional forgiveness, $F(1, 785) = 18.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Participants in the CC condition were more willing to grant emotional ($M = 2.84, SE = .13$ vs. $M = 1.85, SE = .13$) and decisional ($M = .84, SE = .08$ vs. $M = .33, SE = .08$) forgiveness than those in other groups. No significant differences were found between the absence and presence of AP or SR. Therefore, H3 was supported, and H1 and H2 were not.

Testing the Forgiveness-Mediated Model

RQ1 and RQ2 asked whether forgiveness mediated the relationship among CCSs and postcrisis public perceptions and behavioral intentions. A path analysis was conducted to test the proposed forgiveness-mediated model. The PROCESS macro for SPSS was used to test the indirect effects of accommodative strategies on postcrisis public perceptions and behavioral intentions via forgiveness. Model 4 in PROCESS (5,000 bootstraps, 95% confidence interval) was employed to test its indirect effect on the four outcome variables via emotional and decisional forgiveness. The path model is shown in Figure 3.

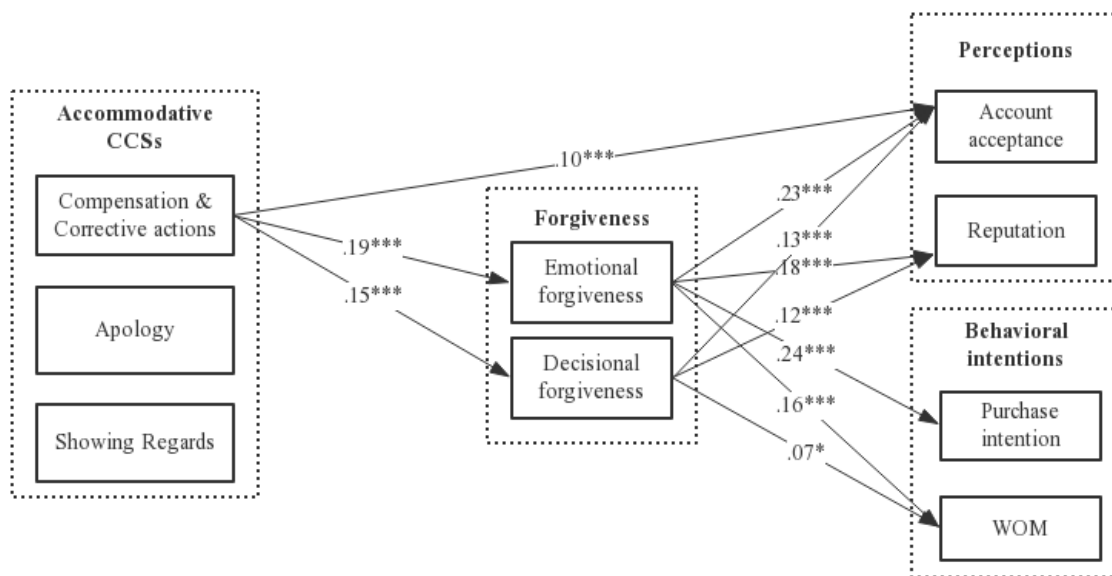


Figure 3. Results from path analysis with demographics, crisis situations, and precrisis relationship controlled. Insignificant relationships are not presented.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The results revealed indirect effects of CC on postcrisis perceptions through both types of forgiveness, and CC indirectly influenced account acceptance through emotional ($B = .11$, $SE = .02$, $CI [.07, .17]$, $p = .000$) and decisional forgiveness ($B = .05$, $SE = .02$, $CI [.02, .10]$, $p = .015$). When partialing out the indirect effects through emotional forgiveness and decisional forgiveness, the direct effect of CC on account acceptance remained significant ($B = .24$, $SE = .07$, $CI [.11, .37]$, $p = .000$).

The indirect effects of CC on reputation through emotional ($B = .07$, $SE = .02$, $CI [.04, .12]$, $p = .000$) and decisional forgiveness ($B = .04$, $SE = .01$, $CI [.02, .08]$, $p = .008$) were also significant. When the indirect effect of forgiveness was ruled out, the direct effect of CC on reputation was not significant ($B = .06$, $SE = .06$, $CI [-.06, .18]$, $p = .356$).

The results for postcrisis behavioral intentions revealed a different pattern: CC indirectly influenced people's purchase intentions through emotional forgiveness ($B = .10$, $SE = .02$, $CI [.06, .16]$, $p = .000$), but not decisional forgiveness ($B = .01$, $SE = .01$, $CI [-.01, .03]$, $p = .367$). The indirect effect through emotional forgiveness explained the total impact of the substantive accommodative strategies on participants' purchase intentions.

Although emotional forgiveness had a significant indirect effect on WOM ($B = .07$, $SE = .02$, $CI [.04, .12]$, $p = .000$), the indirect effect through decisional forgiveness was not significant ($B = .03$, $SE = .01$, $CI [.00, .06]$, $p = .058$). Although the indirect effect through emotional forgiveness was significant, the total effect of CC was not significant in this model ($B = .07$, $SE = .07$, $CI [-.06, .21]$, $p = .289$).

To summarize, CC has indirect effects on postcrisis public perceptions through both emotional forgiveness and decisional forgiveness, but indirect effects on postcrisis public behavioral intentions only pass through emotional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness has more extensive effects in mediating CCSs and postcrisis public responses.

The Mechanism of Winning Forgiveness in Crisis Communication

This study hypothesized that people were more likely to forgive an organization after accommodative strategies were used if the cause of the crisis was perceived as being internal (H4). A MANCOVA was conducted to test the series of hypotheses. Controlling for demographic information and perceived severity, use satisfaction, and dependency of the service, the three types of accommodative strategies did not lead to more forgiving experiences when the crisis was caused by an internal unauthorized leak; H4 was not supported.

Perceived severity and use satisfaction were converted from composited continuous variables into three-group ordinal variables. We first examined the frequency distributions of the original variables. Based on the accumulated percentages of each score, we obtained the cut points that divided the cases into three approximately equal groups. With these cut points, values of perceived severity were recoded into high ($n = 238$, $M = 6.15$, $SD = .58$), medium ($n = 273$, $M = 4.52$, $SD = .50$), and low ($n = 289$, $M = 2.33$, $SD = .70$) severity; values of use satisfaction were recoded into very satisfied ($n = 219$, $M = 5.75$, $SD = .43$), neutral ($n = 351$, $M = 4.46$, $SD = .48$), and dissatisfied ($n = 230$, $M = 2.48$, $SD = .86$).

H5a–c proposed that people were more likely to forgive an organization if AP, SR, or CC were used when publics perceived the crisis as more severe. Box's multivariate test for homogeneity of dispersion matrices

was not significant, $F(69, 457606.86) = 109.88$, $p = .002$, at $p < .001$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). The MANCOVA yielded a significant interaction effect between CC and perceived severity of the crisis event (Wilks' $\lambda = .99$), $F(2, 1542) = 2.67$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Therefore, H5c was supported, but H5a and H5b were not. The subsequent ANCOVA using the Bonferroni method showed that CC performed differently at the three levels of perceived severity, $F(1, 772) = 31.04$, $p = .012$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. The ANCOVA on decisional forgiveness yielded a marginally significant two-way interaction between CC and perceived severity, $F(1, 772) = 3.12$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. The results indicated that CC was particularly effective in winning forgiveness in crisis situations of considerable severity (see Figures 4–5).

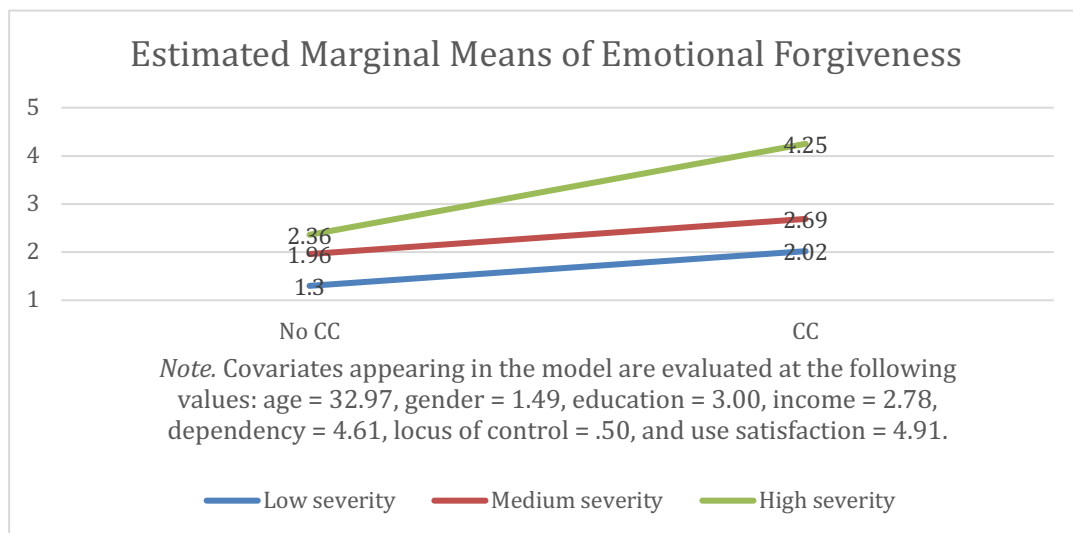


Figure 4. Effects of CC on emotional forgiveness at different perceived severities.

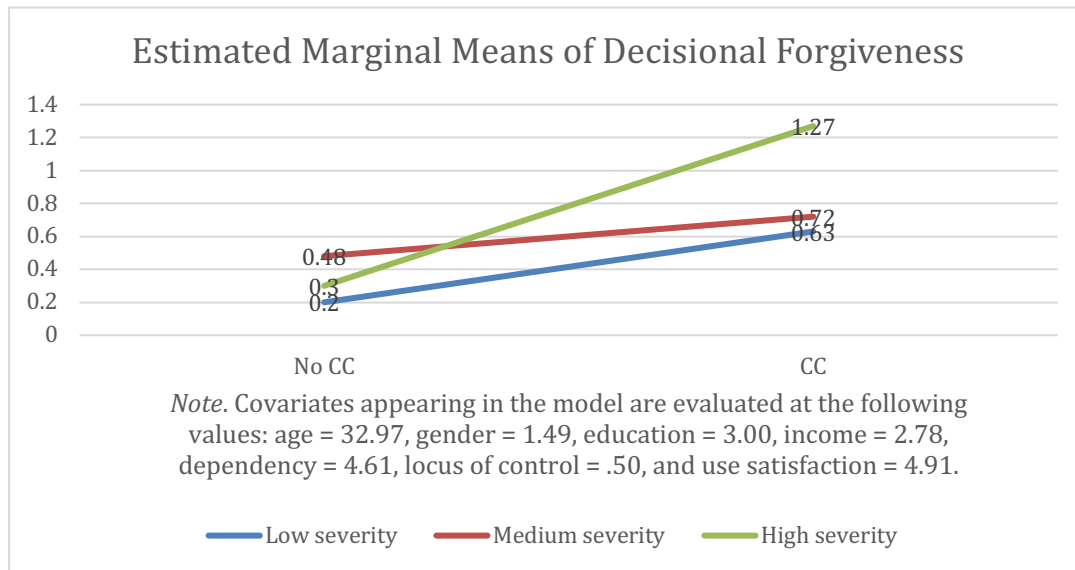


Figure 5. Effects of CC on decisional forgiveness at different perceived severities.

H6a-c posited that the effects of accommodative strategies on increasing forgiveness are moderated by use satisfaction. A MANCOVA was conducted to test this. Box's test was significant in this model, $F(69, 365179.70) = 134.18, p = .000$, indicating a potential heterogeneity of covariance matrices. However, no discrepancy was present in sample sizes between cells (no cell had a sample of 1.5 times that of any other cell). The distortion in the alpha levels of the test was limited. To draw more confident conclusions, Pillai's trace, a more conservative and robust criterion, was used instead of Wilks' λ . The results revealed that the interaction effect between use satisfaction and CC was significant (Pillai's trace = .01), $F(2, 1544) = 2.57, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .01$. The interaction effect between AP and use satisfaction was not significant, nor was the effect between SR and use satisfaction. Therefore, H6c was supported, but H6a and H6b were not.

The subsequent ANCOVA showed that the interaction effect on emotional forgiveness between use satisfaction and CC was significant, $F(1, 772) = 3.49, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .01$, and CC was more effective at winning emotional forgiveness from participants who were highly satisfied with the service (see Figure 6). The performance of CC in winning decisional forgiveness did not vary significantly at different satisfactions.

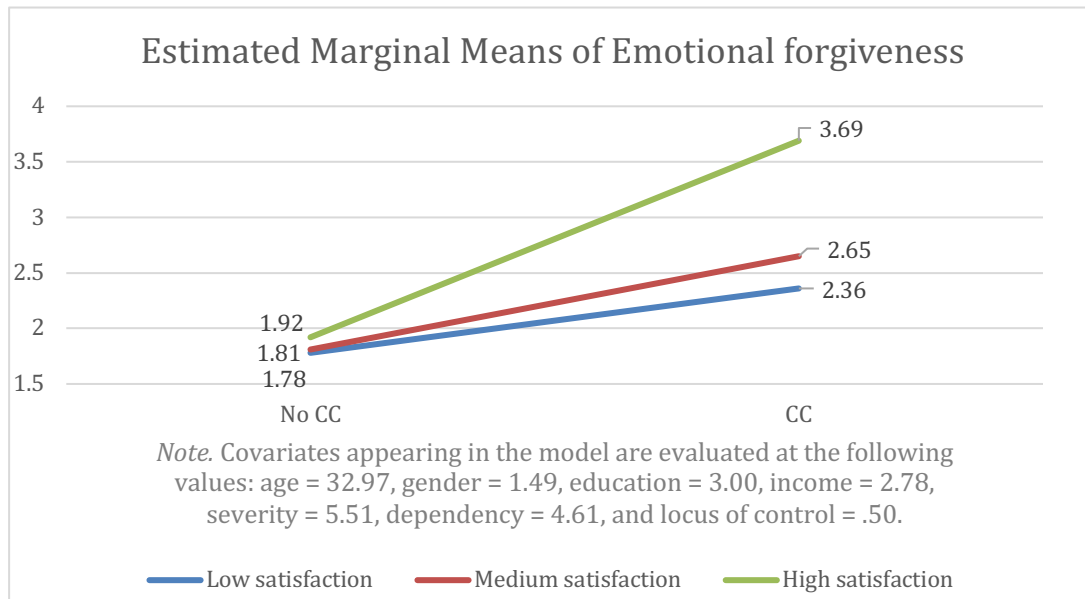


Figure 6. Effects of CC on emotional forgiveness at different satisfactions.

Discussion

A Forgiveness-Mediated Model in Crisis Communication

Coombs (2016) suggested that researchers examine outcomes of crisis communication other than organizational reputation. This study introduces forgiveness as an outcome from the public perspective as a supplement of SCCT. Defined as publics' transformation of affective and attitudinal experiences, forgiveness functions as a coping strategy directly related to publics' psychological well-being during crises. This study found that crisis communication indirectly influenced postcrisis perceptions and behavioral intentions by increasing forgiveness.

To further test the mechanism of the forgiveness-mediated model, this study included the three intensifiers of crisis situations from SCCT: responsibility attribution, precrisis performance, and severity. Although responsibility attribution was strongly associated with organizational reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016), this study found that participants expressed similar rates of forgiveness among the accommodative strategies regardless of whether they perceived the cause as internal or external to the organization. In contrast, perceived severity was more influential than locus of cause. The study argues that evaluating a crisis situation only by cause is insufficient when considering public experiences; consequence-oriented factors should be included in the theoretical framework of SCCT as an additional dimension of crisis evaluation rather than only part of the crisis responsibility adjustment process (Coombs, 1995, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

The significance of precrisis relationships was empirically supported. Substantive accommodative strategies were most effective in winning forgiveness from those who were highly satisfied with the service provided by the organization. This finding echoes the argument that positive relationships between organizations and the people minimize the damage caused by a crisis. Therefore, the best crisis communication practices call for precrisis communication with publics.

The Efficacies of Emotional Forgiveness and Decisional Forgiveness

This study indicated that emotional forgiveness has more extensive influence on people's postcrisis perceptions and behavioral intentions, although both types of forgiveness can be achieved using substantive accommodative strategies. Results revealed that emotional and decisional forgiveness were positively related to participants' account acceptance, perceptions of organizational reputation, and WOM. However, only emotional forgiveness was a significant predictor of purchase intentions.

These findings raise the practical implication that neutralizing emotional experiences is more vital than changing cognitive judgments in crisis communication. Built on attribution theory, classic crisis communication theories propose that organizations address crises by managing attribution of blame. Crisis managers are advised to either admit blame or disassociate their organizations from the cause of a crisis (Bradford & Garratt, 1995). This study argues that improving emotional experiences is just as important, if not more vital, than providing facts and reasons.

The Possibilities and Limitations of Accommodative CCSs

This study found that CC was the most effective accommodative strategy, and the effectiveness was robust across different types of forgiveness. When the crisis-involved organization provided material compensation to offset the damage and acted to remedy the problem, participants were more willing to grant both emotional and decisional forgiveness.

This study found that participants did not forgive the organization after it apologized, a contrast to previous studies that identified AP as the best crisis response (Benoit, 1995). The definition of apology may vary in the Chinese sample. In previous literature, apology was marked by Western views of acceptance of responsibility (Fuchs-Burnett, 2002). A comparative study revealed that apologizing is usually perceived as an acknowledgement of guilt in the U.S. (Maddux, Kim, Okumura, & Brett, 2011) rather than an expression of regret to alleviate interpersonal stress in damaged relationships, as defined in Eastern cultures (Sugimoto, 1997). Apology is more frequently used in Eastern societies than in the U.S., so it is less likely to be viewed as a serious concession in forgiveness narratives. Further studies should investigate the cultural implications of apology in crisis communication.

The findings also indicate people's expectations of organizations during crises. Although scholars have argued that relationships between organizations and publics are similar to close human relationships of trust and understanding (e.g., Huang, 2001), to most people organizations are different from significant others. People tend to forgive organizations that promise to take substantive action to offset damages and prevent the reoccurrence of crises.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study uses a fictitious crisis, compromising external validity. Future studies should investigate the effects in real-world crisis scenarios.

Second, only one crisis was used to test the forgiveness-mediated model of crisis communication. Information security generates less severe damage than other types of crises that may directly threaten human health and safety.

As discussed, the sample used in this study may introduce variation into the definitions of AP and forgiveness. Comparative studies should be conducted to investigate the cultural implications of AP as a forgiveness-seeking tactic in crisis communication.

Despite the limitations, this study revisited the crisis communication scholarship by proposing a forgiveness-mediated crisis communication model. It explains the response–reputation association in SCCT and indicates the possibility of restoring damaged reputations and control downturns in financial performance by ameliorating people’s psychological experiences during crises.

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