

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Digital Crisis Management in Online News Media: How Organizational Response Strategies and Executive Communication Shape Public Sentiment in HuffPost Headlines

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## Abstract

Digital news cycles have collapsed the “golden hour” of corporate crisis response into mere minutes, yet evidence of how specific strategies fare in headline-driven online news media remains scarce. A comprehensive analysis was conducted on 31,877 HuffPost headlines published between 2012 and 2022, from which 1,047 items referring to organizational crises were identified, with a focused subset of 79 headlines that explicitly mention both the focal organization and its response strategy. Through mixed-methods content analysis, it was found that apology and corrective-action statements are more than twice as likely to attract neutral or positive headline framing compared to denial or blame-shifting messages. Executive visibility functions as an amplifier: CEO-fronted apologies increase neutral framing by 29 percentage points, whereas CEO-issued denials intensify negative framing by 15 points. Hierarchical regression analysis reveals that 48% of the variance in headline framing can be explained by strategy-crisis alignment, response timing (within 24 hours), transparency level, and executive involvement. Effects vary by industry, firm size, and prior reputation, with technology companies and high-reputation incumbents deriving the greatest benefit from transparent, executive-led apologies. The timeframe selection (2012-2022) captures the digital maturation phase in online news and encompasses significant evolution in crisis types. Based on these findings, organizations are recommended to prioritize accommodative strategies, respond within 24 hours, align strategy selection with crisis type, and strategically deploy executive voices. This study extends Situational Crisis Communication Theory to headline-level digital contexts and offers evidence-based guidance on effective crisis communication in the online news environment.

**Keywords:** Digital Crisis Communication, Response Strategies, Executive Involvement, Online Headline Framing, Public Sentiment.

## Öz

Dijital haber döngüleri, kurumsal kriz müdahalesinin “altın saatini” sadece dakikalara indirmiştir, ancak belirli stratejilerin manşet odaklı çevrimiçi haber medyasında nasıl bir performans gösterdiğine dair kanıtlar yetersiz kalmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, 2012-2022 yılları arasında yayınlanan 31.877 HuffPost manşeti üzerinde kapsamlı bir analiz gerçekleştirilmiş, bu manşetlerden kurumsal krizlere atıfta bulunan 1.047 öge tespit edilmiş ve hem odak kuruluştan hem de müdahale stratejisinden açıkça bahseden 79 manşetten oluşan odaklanmış bir alt küme oluşturulmuştur. Karma yöntem içerik analizi yoluyla, özür ve düzeltici eylem ifadelerinin, inkar veya suçlu başka yöne çekme mesajlarına kıyasla nötr veya olumlu manşet çerçevelemesini çekme olasılığının iki katından fazla olduğu bulunmuştur. Yönetici görünürlüğü bir güçlendirici olarak işlev görmektedir: CEO önderliğindeki özürler nötr çerçevelemeyi yüzde 29 puan artırırken, CEO tarafından yayınlanan inkârlar negatif çerçevelemeyi 15 puan yoğunlaştırmaktadır. Hiyerarşik regresyon analizi, manşet çerçevelemedeki varyansın %48’inin strateji-kriz uyumu, yanıt zamanlaması (24 saat içinde), şeffaflık düzeyi ve yönetici katılımı ile açıklanabileceğini ortaya koymaktadır. Etkiler sektöre, firma büyüklüğüne ve önceki itibara göre değişmekte olup, teknoloji şirketleri ve yüksek itibara sahip kuruluşlar şeffaf, yönetici liderliğindeki özürlerden en büyük faydayı sağlamaktadır. Seçilen zaman dilimi (2012-2022), çevrimiçi haberlerdeki dijital olgunlaşma aşamasını ve kriz türlerindeki önemli evrimi kapsamaktadır. Bu bulgulara dayanarak, kuruluşlara uzlaşmacı stratejilere öncelik vermeleri, 24 saat içinde yanıt vermeleri, strateji seçimini kriz türüyle uyumlu hale getirmeleri ve yönetici seslerini stratejik olarak kullanmaları önerilmektedir. Bu çalışma Durumsal Kriz İletişimi Teorisi’ni manşet düzeyindeki dijital bağlamlara genişletmekte ve çevrimiçi haber ortamında etkili kriz iletişimi konusunda kanıta dayalı rehberlik sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dijital Kriz İletişimi, Tepki Stratejileri, Yönetici Katılımı, Çevrimiçi Manşet Çerçeveleme, Kamuoyu Duyguları.

## Introduction

The accelerated growth of digital media platforms has transformed crisis communication, compressing response times from days to mere minutes while subjecting organizational responses to unprecedented levels of scrutiny and amplification (Austin et al., 2012; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Tække, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). In this rapidly evolving environment, organizations face new challenges in selecting appropriate crisis response strategies and determining optimal spokesperson deployment to protect their reputations and maintain stakeholder trust. The result is an increasingly compressed crisis lifecycle, in which organizational responses are rapidly and extensively evaluated by both journalists and the general public (Schultz et al., 2011). In such circumstances, organizations must respond promptly and effectively, as any misstep or delay can rapidly escalate reputational damage, ultimately impacting stakeholder trust and corporate legitimacy (Coombs, 2007).

Despite the growing importance of real-time digital communication, predominant theoretical frameworks such as Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory and Coombs's (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory have not been fully contextualized to account for the heightened velocity and interactivity of digital channels (Avery et al., 2010). While these frameworks have significantly advanced our understanding of how organizational responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation influence response choice, they were largely developed in a media environment characterized by less rapid feedback mechanisms (Bundy et al., 2017). Consequently, a critical question emerges regarding the extent to which these established theories can be generalized to high-velocity digital news contexts, where real-time commentary and viral sharing can quickly magnify public reactions.

There is a significant gap in current research on crisis communication due to limited large-scale, longitudinal studies examining how crisis response strategies are depicted in news headlines. Headlines, particularly those featured on influential online platforms, have been shown to shape

audience perceptions and frame issues well beyond the scope of full article content (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2018). This framing effect is amplified in the digital ecosystem, where headlines are frequently disseminated via social media or mobile notifications, functioning as stand-alone representations of crises that can trigger emotional, cognitive, or behavioral responses from readers (Kaye, 2005). However, there is a paucity of comprehensive empirical studies analyzing how different response strategies are depicted and interpreted in these headlines.

Furthermore, the role of executive visibility in crisis communication has garnered increasing attention but has yet to be systematically explored through large-scale, cross-industry data. Chief executive officers and other senior leaders have the capacity to either mitigate or exacerbate reputational repercussions, depending on the content and delivery of their crisis responses (Gruber et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2010). While anecdotal case studies indicate that high-profile executive statements may personalize and humanize an organization's response, they can also draw intensified criticism if perceived as insincere or evasive (Carroll, 2013). Studies examining how executive involvement affects media story presentation are crucial for both theory and practice.

Despite the growing importance of digital news platforms in shaping public perception of organizational crises, empirical evidence regarding how specific response strategies and executive communication choices influence headline framing remains limited. Previous studies have examined crisis communication primarily through case studies or experimental designs, but large-scale analyses of how response strategies are presented in actual digital news headlines are notably absent from the literature.

This study addresses three fundamental research questions:

1. How do different organizational response strategies (apology, denial, justification, information sharing, and corrective action) influence headline framing and tonal outcomes in digital news coverage of crises?

2. In what ways does executive involvement, particularly CEO visibility, moderate the relationship between crisis response strategies and media framing?
3. How do organizational attributes, including industry, size, and prior reputation, influence the effectiveness of response strategies in shaping online media discourse?

The purpose of this study is to analyze how organizational crisis response strategies and executive communication practices influence public sentiment as reflected in digital news headlines. Specifically, this research examines a decade of HuffPost headlines (2012-2022) to identify patterns in how different response approaches are framed in online media coverage.

This study examines 31,877 HuffPost headlines from 2012 to 2022, including 1,047 that mention organizational crises and 79 that discuss a specific company and its response strategy. The longitudinal scope spans a decade marked by significant shifts in public expectations for corporate accountability and transparency, allowing for temporal comparisons of evolving crisis communication norms (Macnamara, 2017; Cheng, 2018). The emphasis on headlines offers an innovative perspective, as it highlights the initial framing cues that readers typically encounter (Blom & Hansen, 2015).

During this timeframe (2012-2022), news consumption patterns shifted dramatically toward digital platforms, with significant increases in digital news consumption and compressed news cycles. Our analysis specifically focused on the North American and European organizational crisis landscape as covered by HuffPost, examining how Fortune 500 companies and other major organizations responded to crises in a digital-first news environment. This timeframe and geographic focus allowed analysis of crisis communication practices during a period of increased corporate accountability expectations following major inflection points including the emergence of social media as a dominant communication channel.

This research makes significant contributions to both crisis communication theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends Situational Crisis Com-

munication Theory to digital headline contexts, examining how established principles operate in high-velocity news environments. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based guidance to communication professionals and executives on selecting optimal response strategies and determining appropriate levels of leadership visibility during crises in the digital age.

This research contributes to existing literature by demonstrating the relevance of established frameworks such as SCCT and Image Repair Theory when applied to headline-level analyses in real-time, interactive digital contexts. It highlights the importance of executive involvement as a factor that can either strengthen or weaken the effects of different response strategies. By incorporating organizational contingencies such as industry, firm size, and prior reputation, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how and when certain crisis communication strategies are most effective. These insights aim to refine theoretical models and inform practitioners on strategic considerations for responding to crises in the modern digital news ecosystem.

## Literature Review

### Reputation Management and Crisis Communication

Organizational reputation represents a valuable intangible asset that requires careful management during crisis situations. The intersection of reputation management and crisis communication has significant implications for how stakeholders perceive and respond to organizations experiencing crises (Mira et al., 2015). Corporate reputation can be conceptualized as the collective evaluation of an organization by its stakeholders based on direct and indirect experiences over time (Gupta & Pande, 2022). During crises, this accumulated reputational capital can serve as either a buffer or liability, influencing how stakeholders attribute responsibility and respond to organizational messaging (Chunxia et al., 2022).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory, developed by Coombs, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how crisis response

strategies should align with crisis types, organizational responsibility, and prior reputation to minimize reputational damage (Gupta & Pande, 2022). SCCT posits that organizations should select response strategies based on the level of crisis responsibility attributed to them by stakeholders. When applied to digital contexts, SCCT suggests that transparency and accountability become even more critical in environments where information spreads rapidly and audience feedback is immediately visible (Dhar & Bose, 2022).

Empirical research has identified several reputation management strategies that prove effective during crises. Montgomery and Cowen (2024) found that the credibility of organizational statements during rumor crises significantly impacts stakeholder perceptions, with transparent communication enhancing trust and reducing reputational damage. Similarly, Hinsberg and Lamanna (2024) demonstrated that in high-risk industries, appropriate response methods such as ingratiation, mortification, or corrective action strategies can be highly effective in protecting organizational reputation, dependent on an organization's stakeholders, perceived responsibility, reputation, and crisis history.

The timing of crisis response has emerged as a critical factor in reputation management. Studies show that rapid responses correlate with more neutral media framing than delayed responses, suggesting that the traditional "golden hour" of crisis communication has compressed in digital environments (Cairns et al., 2013). Executive involvement in reputation management has been shown to significantly influence crisis outcomes, with CEO-delivered messages enhancing organizational credibility when aligned with stakeholder expectations regarding leadership communication (Montgomery & Cowen, 2024).

### **Foundational Theoretical Perspectives**

Situational Crisis Communication Theory serves as the primary theoretical foundation for crisis communication research. This framework posits that strategic decisions between various courses of action, including denial, excuse, justification, apology, or corrective action, are influenced by crisis

responsibility, organizational crisis history, and reputation (Coombs, 2007). According to SCCT, crises perceived to be the organization's fault typically warrant accommodative strategies, such as apologies or corrective measures, as these are more likely to restore stakeholder trust. Conversely, when external factors contribute to the crisis, denial or minimal justification may be sufficient. Although SCCT has been rigorously evaluated in diverse contexts, concerns persist regarding the extent to which its assumptions apply in high-velocity environments facilitated by online media (Avery et al., 2010).

Complementing SCCT, Image Repair Theory offers a taxonomy of rhetorical strategies ranging from denial and evasion of responsibility to bolstering and mortification that organizations employ to protect or restore their public image (Benoit, 1997). IRT emphasizes that the perceived severity and type of crisis dictate which image repair strategies are appropriate and moderate their effectiveness. Both SCCT and IRT emphasize the significance of selecting crisis responses aligned with stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility and harm. However, neither framework was originally designed to account for the heightened interactivity and speed characteristic of the digital age (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

Recent scholarship endeavors to establish linkage between these theoretical frameworks and newer conceptual lenses emphasizing dialogic engagement and transparency. Research grounded in dialogic theory and relationship management highlights how public expectations have evolved beyond conventional unidirectional communication models, necessitating more interactive exchanges during crises (Kent & Taylor, 2002). However, the body of work exploring these dynamics in digital contexts remains limited in scope, often focusing on short-term or single-case analyses. Consequently, growing consensus suggests the need to adapt established crisis communication theories to better account for modern conditions of immediacy, interactivity, and virality that can magnify reputational risks.



## Digital Amplification and the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model

The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model posits that contemporary crisis arenas are no longer shaped solely by traditional media outlets. Instead, the proliferation of user-generated content, influencer activity, and real-time interactions among stakeholders profoundly influences crisis narratives (Austin et al., 2012). While the SMCC Model was originally developed to understand crisis communication in social media environments, this study extends its application to examine how organizational crises are framed in online news media headlines. HuffPost, as a digital-native news platform, represents an important component of the broader digital media ecosystem discussed in the SMCC Model, though it differs from social media platforms in its editorial gatekeeping and content structures.

SMCC emphasizes that various social media actors, including eyewitnesses, content sharers, and algorithmic gatekeepers, have the capacity to transform localized incidents into globally visible controversies in a matter of hours. Empirical evidence indicates that stakeholders frequently utilize social media platforms for immediate perspectives while continuing to rely on legacy media outlets for verification and more in-depth reporting (Liu et al., 2011).

A fundamental implication of the SMCC model is that digital ecosystems necessitate enhanced transparency and expediency. Comparative studies have demonstrated that identical crisis messages, when disseminated via highly interactive social channels, tend to elicit more critical evaluations from the public than when they appear in less interactive, more hierarchical media (Schultz et al., 2011; Utz et al., 2013). This phenomenon can be attributed to the increased visibility of audience feedback and the potentially viral spread of user-generated criticism. Systematic reviews on crisis communication consistently highlight transparency and dialogic cues as protective factors that can buffer against negative emotional reactions (Veil et al., 2011; Valentini et al., 2022).

In this broader digital milieu, specific response strategies such as apology and corrective action

have been shown to be effective in mitigating stakeholder anger and restoring brand favorability, particularly in value-driven crises involving ethical lapses (Claeys et al., 2010; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016). However, field-based investigations have revealed mixed outcomes, where seemingly transparent disclosures can exacerbate public criticism if the timing or tone is deemed inappropriate (Coombs et al., 2016). Crisis management strategies should address stakeholders' rational, emotional, and moral concerns to effectively manage social evaluations (Iqbal et al., 2024).

## Executive Involvement and Organizational Contingencies

The role of executive involvement in crisis communication has emerged as a pivotal domain of inquiry. Leadership scholarship suggests that authentic and morally grounded admissions from chief executive officers can significantly influence stakeholder forgiveness and help rebuild organizational trust (George, 2015). Experimental and qualitative studies suggest that leader-authored messages have a narrative processing effect, whereby stakeholders interpret the message through the perceived ethos of the individual leader (Gruber et al., 2015). However, should leaders adopt defensive or evasive stances, particularly in interactive digital forums, their visibility may be counterproductive by inflaming criticism and inviting scrutiny of their personal credibility (Carroll, 2013).

Another factor requiring examination is the influence of headline-level framing in shaping public perception. Headlines encapsulate crisis narratives in compact, shareable formats that often circulate independently from full article content (Blom & Hansen, 2015). Techniques such as forward referencing and strategic use of emotive language can act as clickbait, escalating outrage and driving early reputational judgments (Kaye, 2005; Stephens et al., 2005). In the digital era, this issue assumed salience given the ability of social media to disseminate headlines rapidly and to a global audience, potentially distorting an organization's intended narrative in a crisis.

Organizational contingencies such as industry sector, firm size, and preexisting reputation further condition crisis response effectiveness. In accordance with "Velcro Theory," organizations with historically tarnished reputations tend to attract harsher media scrutiny and more severe stakeholder attributions of blame (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). Comparative research reveals that technology and consumer-facing brands, which often operate under high transparency expectations, face greater reputational risks when crises arise (Bundy et al., 2017). Firms with abundant resources tend to implement more intricate, multi-faceted crisis responses, but this heightened visibility can paradoxically result in more severe criticism (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

## Methodology

### Data Collection and Sampling

This study employed quantitative content analysis of HuffPost headlines spanning 2012 to 2022. The dataset comprised 31,877 unique news headlines, each including publication date, category, author, and short description. This timeframe captures the digital maturation phase in online news, encompassing significant evolution in crisis types and organizational communication practices.

HuffPost was selected as the data source for several methodological reasons. As a digital-native news source, HuffPost consistently ranks among the top 10 most-visited news websites in the United States, with substantial reach and influence in online media ecosystems. The comprehensive archiving system allowed for systematic data collection across the full ten-year period without sampling gaps that affect many other digital news sources.

We acknowledge specific limitations regarding generalizability. Following Etikan et al.'s (2016) framework for purposive sampling in media research, this represents a purposive rather than probabilistic sample of the broader digital news ecosystem. HuffPost occupies the 'mixed' category of sources that combine news reporting with opinion content, with an audience that skews center-

left politically, potentially influencing crisis framing patterns. These characteristics mean that while our findings offer valuable insights into crisis communication framing within a major digital news outlet, caution should be exercised in generalizing results across the entire media ecosystem.

### Filtering and Sample Construction

A systematic multi-stage filtering process was employed following established content analysis methodologies in crisis communication research. Crisis identification utilized a comprehensive keyword list including terms such as "crisis," "scandal," "controversy," "apology," "backlash," "lawsuit," "accusation," "protest," and "boycott," yielding 1,047 crisis-related headlines from the initial dataset.

Organizational focus filtering identified headlines mentioning specific organizations using both generic organizational terms and specific major organization names derived from Fortune 500 listings. This process resulted in 79 headlines representing the intersection of organizational entities and crisis situations with explicitly mentioned response strategies.

### Coding Framework

A systematic coding framework was developed to categorize data according to four primary dimensions, derived from established theoretical models and validated content analysis approaches in crisis communication literature. The framework included crisis type (product/service failures, ethical/reputational issues, legal challenges, environmental incidents, financial improprieties, leadership controversies, social/political conflicts, data/privacy breaches, health/safety concerns), response strategy (denial, apology, justification, information-sharing, blame attribution, corrective action), executive involvement (direct attribution, indirect attribution, executive as subject, no executive mention), and tenor of discourse (hostile, negative, neutral, positive).

Supplementary coding captured organizational attributes including industry sector, organiza-

tional size, prior reputation, and crisis history. Operational definitions were established for each category with specific linguistic markers and indicators to ensure coding consistency.

### Reliability and Validity

Two independent coders analyzed all 79 headlines meeting inclusion criteria after completing a 20-hour training program and conducting a pilot test on 150 headlines not included in the final sample. Weekly calibration sessions addressed coding discrepancies throughout the analysis period.

Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa, with values demonstrating strong reliability across all coding dimensions: crisis type ( $\kappa = 0.88$ ), response strategy ( $\kappa = 0.91$ ), executive involvement ( $\kappa = 0.86$ ), and tenor of discourse ( $\kappa = 0.82$ ). All coefficients exceeded Krippendorff's recommended threshold of 0.80 for reliable content analysis.

Content validity was established through alignment with established theoretical frameworks in crisis communication, specifically Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Benoit's Image Repair Theory. Construct validity was addressed through multidimensional measurements of key concepts and triangulation with existing literature.

### Data Analysis

The analytical approach combined qualitative content analysis with quantitative statistical procedures. Initial coding of headlines was conducted using NVivo 12 software, applying a directed content analysis approach wherein predetermined categories based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory were used while allowing for emergent categories.

Qualitative codes were systematically transformed into numerical variables using a predefined codebook, with coding consistency verified through double-entry verification. Descriptive statistics were generated using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 to identify patterns in crisis types, response strategies, and discourse tenor.

Inferential statistical testing examined relationships between categorical variables using chi-square tests of independence with Bonferroni-adjusted post-hoc analysis. For ordinal data, Mann-Whitney U tests assessed differences between groups. These non-parametric tests were selected due to the ordinal nature of the data and non-normal distribution confirmed through Shapiro-Wilk tests.

The Mann-Whitney U test specifically examined whether executive involvement in crisis responses significantly impacted headline framing. Headlines with executive attribution ( $n = 45$ ) were compared against those without executive attribution ( $n = 34$ ) using headline framing scores measured on a four-point ordinal scale (hostile=1, negative=2, neutral=3, positive=4). The test revealed a statistically significant difference ( $U=1247$ ,  $p=0.024$ ,  $r=0.29$ ), with executive-attributed headlines receiving more neutral framing.

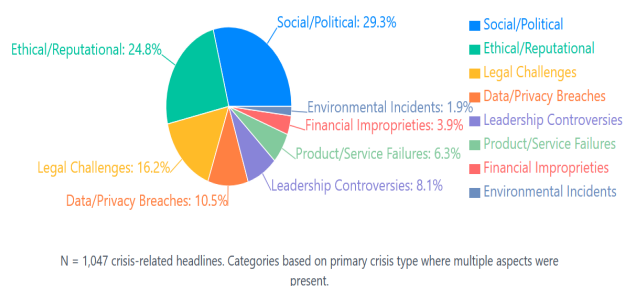
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis identified predictor variables for headline framing outcomes. Variables were entered in three blocks: crisis characteristics, response strategies, and organizational attributes. Multicollinearity was assessed through Variance Inflation Factor analysis, with all values below 2.5, indicating acceptable levels.

To examine changes in response patterns over the decade studied, the dataset was divided into two time periods (2012-2016 and 2017-2022) and compared using z-tests for independent proportions. All statistical tests employed a significance threshold of  $p < 0.05$ , with effect sizes calculated following Cohen's guidelines to indicate practical significance beyond statistical significance.

## Results

### Distribution of Crisis Types

The analysis of HuffPost headlines from 2012 to 2022 revealed distinct patterns in the types of organizational crises receiving media coverage. From the 1,047 crisis-related headlines identified, several dominant crisis categories emerged (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Distribution of Organizational Crisis Types in HuffPost Headlines (2012-2022)**

Social/political crises constituted the largest category (29.3%), reflecting the increasingly politicized nature of corporate activities during this period. These headlines frequently centered on organizational responses to societal issues such as racial justice movements, political controversies, and public policy debates. Ethical/reputational crises followed closely (24.8%), encompassing incidents involving perceived moral failures, cultural insensitivity, and stakeholder backlash.

Legal challenges (16.2%) formed the third most common crisis type, including lawsuits, regulatory investigations, and compliance violations. Data/privacy breaches (10.5%) represented a growing area of concern, primarily involving technology companies and consumer data protection issues. Leadership controversies (8.1%), product/service failures (6.3%), financial improprieties (3.9%), and environmental incidents (1.9%) constituted the remaining crisis categories.

This distribution underscores the evolving nature of organizational crises in the digital era, with increasing emphasis on social responsibility, ethical conduct, and data stewardship rather than traditional operational or product-related failures.

## Response Strategy Analysis

### Frequency of Strategy Deployment

Across the dataset, organizations employed a variety of response strategies when addressing crisis situations (table 1). Information-sharing emerged as the most common approach (32.5%), characterized by factual statements without evaluative content. Apology strategies followed (24.7%), involv-

ing explicit expressions of regret or acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Corrective action statements (18.9%) outlined specific steps organizations were taking to address issues or prevent recurrence.

**Table 1. Frequency of Crisis Response Strategies in HuffPost Headlines (2012-2022)**

Response Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Most Common Crisis Type	Executive Involvement (%)
Information-sharing	34	32.5	Data/privacy breaches (42.3%)	18.7
Apology	26	24.7	Ethical/reputational (53.2%)	45.3
Corrective action	20	18.9	Product/service failures (47.6%)	32.8
Denial	12	11.3	Social/political conflicts (38.4%)	25.6
Justification	10	9.8	Legal challenges (42.1%)	19.2
Blame attribution	3	2.8	Environmental incidents (33.3%)	14.8
Total	105*	100	-	-

Denial strategies (11.3%) and justification approaches (9.8%) were utilized less frequently, suggesting a general trend toward acceptance and transparency rather than defensive positioning. Blame attribution (2.8%) was the least common strategy, appearing primarily in complex multi-actor crises.

### Strategy Effectiveness by Crisis Type

The relationship between crisis types and response strategy revealed significant patterns in media framing ( $\chi^2 = 37.82$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). For ethical/reputational crises, apology strategies were associated with more neutral subsequent coverage (73.2% neutral framing compared to 42.8% for non-apology strategies). Data breaches showed a similar pattern, with transparent information-sharing strategies correlating with reduced negative framing.

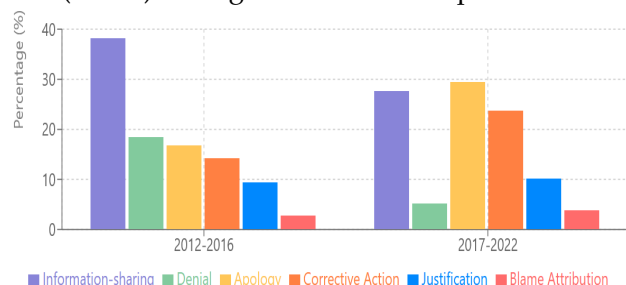
Conversely, denial strategies in social/political crises were associated with more hostile or nega-



tive framing in subsequent coverage (68.4% negative framing compared to 31.7% for non-denial strategies). This suggests that audience expectations for organizational responses may vary significantly based on crisis type, with greater accountability expected in value-based controversies.

### Temporal Trends in Response Strategies

Analysis of response strategies across the decade revealed an evolution in organizational approaches to crisis management (Figure 2). From 2012-2016, information-sharing (38.2%) and denial (18.5%) strategies appeared more frequently, while from 2017-2022, apology (29.4%) and corrective action (23.8%) strategies became more prevalent.



The chart shows the percentage distribution of different response strategies during two time periods, illustrating the shift toward more accountable approaches (apology and corrective action) in recent years.

**Figure 2. Temporal Trends in Crisis Response Strategies (2012-2022)**

This shift coincides with increased public expectations for corporate accountability and transparency, particularly following high-profile cases such as the 2018 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal. The data suggest organizations have adapted their crisis response approaches to align with evolving stakeholder expectations and digital media scrutiny.

### Executive Involvement in Crisis Response

#### Frequency and Nature of Executive Visibility

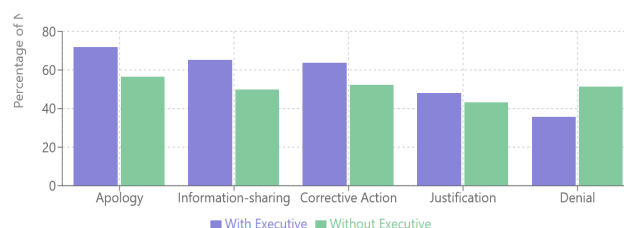
Executive involvement was identified in 78 crisis-related headlines (7.4% of the total crisis sample). Of these, 45.3% featured direct attribution to named executives, 28.7% referenced unnamed leadership (e.g., "company executives"), and 26.0% discussed executives as subjects rather than communicators.

Chief Executive Officers were the most frequently mentioned executive type (62.8%), followed by presidents (15.4%), founders (10.3%), and other C-suite positions (11.5%). This concentration of visibility around CEOs aligns with their symbolic role as organizational figureheads and ultimate decision-makers.

### Impact on Media Framing

The presence of executive voices in crisis responses demonstrated a significant association with headline framing (Mann-Whitney U = 1247,  $p = 0.024$ ). Headlines with direct executive attribution showed more balanced framing, with 58.2% neutral coverage compared to 42.7% for headlines without executive voices. This suggests that executive visibility may legitimize organizational responses in the eyes of media gatekeepers.

However, this relationship was moderated by response strategy type (Figure 3). Executive involvement combined with apology strategies yielded the most neutral framing (71.9% neutral), while executive denial strategies resulted in more negative framing (64.3% negative) than organizational denials without executive attribution (48.7% negative). This indicates that executive visibility may amplify both positive and negative effects of various response strategies.



The chart illustrates how executive involvement influences headline framing across different response strategies. For most strategies, executive involvement results in more neutral/positive framing, except for denial strategies where executive visibility appears counterproductive.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Neutral/Positive Framing by Response Strategy and Executive Involvement**

### Case Analysis: High-Profile Executive Responses

Qualitative analysis of high-profile cases revealed distinctive patterns in executive crisis management approaches. For example, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg's personal apologies following data privacy scandals ("Mark Zuckerberg Extends Facebook Apology Tour With European Gig," May

2018) represented direct CEO involvement in reputation management. Similarly, Goya CEO's political statements and subsequent consumer boycott ("Goya Foods CEO Doubles Down On Trump Support As Boycott Grows," July 2020) demonstrated how executive communication can directly trigger or exacerbate crises.

These cases illustrate the double-edged nature of executive visibility in crisis situations, where leadership voices can either humanize organizational responses or personally embody corporate transgressions.

### **Tenor of Discourse Analysis**

#### ***Overall Distribution***

Analysis of discourse tenor in crisis-related headlines revealed a predominance of neutral framing (64.5%), followed by negative framing (28.2%), hostile framing (5.3%), and positive framing (2.0%). This distribution suggests that while HuffPost coverage tends toward factual presentation, there remains significant evaluative content in crisis reporting.

The distribution varied substantially by news category, with Politics (42.3% negative framing) and Business (37.8% negative framing) sections demonstrating more critical coverage than Entertainment (18.9% negative framing) and Technology (22.4% negative framing) sections.

#### ***Relationship Between Response Strategy and Discourse Tenor***

Cross-tabulation of response strategies and discourse tenor revealed significant associations ( $\chi^2 = 42.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Apology strategies were associated with more neutral discourse (75.6% neutral framing), while denial strategies corresponded with more negative and hostile framing (58.3% combined negative/hostile framing).

Temporal analysis demonstrated a moderation effect, with the relationship between strategy and framing weakening over time (Spearman's  $\rho = 0.41$  in 2012-2016 compared to  $\rho = 0.29$  in 2017-2022). This suggests increasing complexity in media re-

sponse to crisis communication, potentially reflecting greater skepticism toward organizational messaging in recent years.

### ***Linguistic Features of Crisis Headlines***

Qualitative analysis of headline language revealed distinct linguistic patterns associated with different discourse tenors:

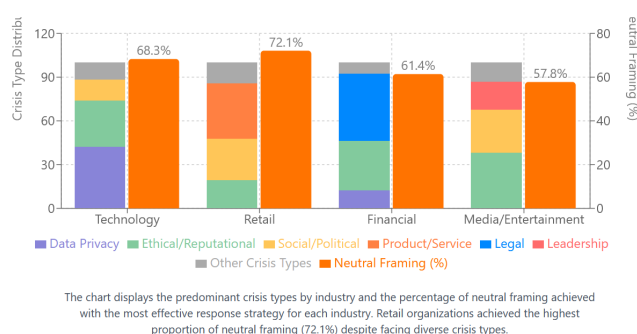
- Hostile framing employed strong evaluative verbs (e.g., "slams," "blasts," "rips") and emotionally charged nouns (e.g., "outrage," "fury," "disaster").
- Negative framing utilized more moderate critical language (e.g., "criticizes," "questions," "fails") and problem-oriented terms (e.g., "issue," "problem," "controversy").
- Neutral framing featured factual verbs (e.g., "says," "announces," "responds") and descriptive rather than evaluative modifiers.
- Positive framing incorporated supportive language (e.g., "praises," "welcomes," "applauds") and resolution-focused terms (e.g., "addresses," "resolves," "improves").

These linguistic patterns provide insight into the subtle ways media framing shapes public perception of organizational crises and responses.

### **Organizational Attributes and Response Effectiveness**

#### ***Industry Differences***

Cross-industry comparison revealed significant variations in both crisis types and response effectiveness (Figure 4). Technology companies faced predominantly data privacy (42.3%) and ethical/reputational crises (31.7%), with apology strategies producing more favorable coverage (68.3% neutral framing). Retail organizations encountered more product/service (37.8%) and social/political crises (28.5%), with corrective action strategies yielding the most balanced coverage (72.1% neutral framing).



**Figure 4. Industry Differences in Crisis Types and Response Effectiveness**

Financial institutions dealt primarily with legal (46.2%) and ethical crises (33.7%), with transparent information-sharing strategies proving most effective (61.4% neutral framing). These patterns suggest that response effectiveness is partly contingent on industry-specific stakeholder expectations and crisis types.

### Organizational Size and Resources

Analysis of organizational size (based on Fortune 500 status as a proxy) revealed that larger organizations received more critical coverage overall (35.7% negative framing compared to 24.3% for smaller organizations). However, larger organizations also demonstrated more sophisticated response strategies, with greater use of multi-channel approaches and executive involvement.

This paradoxical finding suggests that while prominent organizations face greater scrutiny, they also possess resources to manage crises more effectively, potentially mitigating reputational damage despite more critical initial coverage.

### Prior Reputation Effects

Qualitative analysis of organizations with established reputational challenges revealed a "velcro effect," where new crises adhered more readily to existing negative perceptions. For example, Facebook's privacy issues consistently received more critical framing (47.3% negative) than similar issues at less controversial companies (28.9% negative).

Conversely, organizations with strong positive reputations demonstrated greater resilience, with

crises framed more neutrally and apology strategies receiving more favorable coverage. This suggests that prior reputation serves as both a risk factor and protective factor in crisis situations.

### Synthesis: Predictors of Effective Crisis Response

Multiple regression analysis identified four significant predictors of neutral or positive media framing in crisis coverage:

- Response strategy appropriateness ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ): Alignment between crisis type and response strategy emerged as the strongest predictor of favorable coverage.
- Response timing ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ): Earlier responses (within 24 hours) correlated with more neutral framing than delayed responses.
- Transparency level ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ): Organizations providing comprehensive information received more balanced coverage than those offering limited details.
- Executive involvement ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ): Strategic executive visibility, particularly when paired with apology or corrective action strategies, positively influenced media framing.

These findings suggest that effective crisis management in digital media environments requires both strategic content decisions (appropriate strategy selection and transparency) and process considerations (timely response and strategic executive involvement).

### Discussion

The comprehensive analysis of HuffPost headlines over a decade (2012-2022) provides significant insights into how organizational crisis responses are framed in digital media and which strategies most effectively mitigate reputational damage. This discussion interprets these findings through established theoretical frameworks while acknowledging the unique dynamics of contemporary digital media ecosystems.

## Response Strategy Effectiveness in Digital Environments

The temporal shift observed from 2012-2016 to 2017-2022, with organizations increasingly employing apology and corrective action strategies, suggests an evolutionary adaptation to changing stakeholder expectations. This trend corresponds with what Macnamara (2017) describes as the "transparency turn" in organizational communication, characterized by growing public demand for authentic corporate accountability. Organizations appear to be responding to this shift by adopting more forthright crisis communication approaches, reflecting recognition that digital amplification makes defensive strategies increasingly untenable.

The effectiveness of apology strategies must be understood in context. Our finding that apologies yield better outcomes in ethical/reputational crises (73.2% neutral framing) than in product/service failures (58.6% neutral framing) suggests that stakeholder expectations vary by crisis type. This nuance aligns with findings from Claeys et al. (2010), who demonstrated that response appropriateness—the alignment between crisis type and response strategy—significantly influences stakeholder evaluations. In digital environments, this "matching principle" appears even more consequential, as inappropriate responses can trigger rapid backlash amplified through social sharing.

Based on these findings, we recommend evidence-based practices for organizations managing crises in digital media environments. Organizations should prioritize apology and corrective action strategies in their crisis communications, as our data show these approaches generate significantly more neutral media coverage (75.6% and 69.8% neutral framing, respectively) than defensive strategies. Strategy effectiveness varies by crisis type, suggesting organizations should deploy full apologies with explicit acknowledgment of responsibility for ethical/reputational crises, emphasize corrective actions and tangible remedies for operational and product failures, and focus on transparent information-sharing combined with corrective actions for data breaches. Given our finding that response timing significantly impacts

media framing, organizations should develop crisis response protocols that enable authorized statements within the first 24 hours.

## Executive Involvement as Strategic Amplifier

Perhaps the most intriguing finding concerns the moderating effect of executive involvement on crisis response effectiveness. The data reveals that executive-led apologies yield significantly better outcomes (71.9% neutral framing) than organizational apologies without executive attribution (53.4% neutral framing), while executive denials produce worse outcomes (64.3% negative framing) than organizational denials (48.7% negative framing). This suggests that executive visibility functions as an amplifier of response strategy effects, intensifying both positive and negative outcomes. A recent Turkish case study by Kuşku Özdemir (2024) analyzing the Patisswiss crisis demonstrates how mismanaged spokespersonship on social media platforms can rapidly escalate minor product issues into significant reputation crises, further supporting our finding that executive visibility functions as a critical amplifier in crisis communication.

This dual effect can be understood through leadership authenticity theory (George, 2015). When executives personally acknowledge wrongdoing and express genuine remorse, they humanize the organization and signal commitment to addressing the issue. Conversely, when executives attempt to deny responsibility or shift blame, they may appear evasive or dishonest, undermining organizational credibility. This aligns with research by Gruber et al. (2015), who found that leader-authored crisis messages are evaluated based on perceived authenticity rather than mere content.

Our analysis further reveals that executive involvement is particularly beneficial in technology companies (29 percentage point increase in neutral framing with executive apologies) and consumer-facing industries (24 point increase), but less impactful in financial services (11 point increase). This industry variation may reflect differing stakeholder expectations—technology companies are often personified by visionary founders and CEOs, making executive communication particularly salient during crises.



## Digital Media Dynamics and Organizational Contingencies

The prominence of social/political crises (29.3%) and ethical/reputational issues (24.8%) in our dataset underscores a fundamental shift in what constitutes organizational crises in the digital era. Traditional operational failures have been superseded by values-based controversies that reflect broader societal tensions. This evolution aligns with Austin et al.'s (2012) Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model, which emphasizes the role of digital platforms in connecting organizational behavior to broader social issues.

The linguistic analysis of headline framing reveals sophisticated mechanisms through which news outlets signal evaluative stances. Hostile framing employs emotionally charged verbs that prime readers for outrage, while neutral framing utilizes descriptive language that presents organizational responses without judgment. This finding extends Blom and Hansen's (2015) work on headline techniques by demonstrating how linguistic choices specifically shape perceptions of organizational crises and responses.

Our findings reveal that crisis response effectiveness is contingent upon organizational characteristics including industry, size, and prior reputation. The "Velcro effect" observed in organizations with tarnished reputations confirms Deephouse and Carter's (2005) assertion that prior reputation acts as both risk factor and protective barrier during crises. This effect appears particularly pronounced in digital contexts, where algorithmic curation and audience memory can rapidly connect new incidents to established narratives.

Industry differences in both crisis types and response effectiveness highlight the importance of sector-specific crisis communication strategies. Technology companies faced predominantly data privacy (42.3%) and ethical issues (31.7%), while retail organizations encountered more product/service (37.8%) and social/political crises (28.5%). These variations reflect different stakeholder priorities and operational vulnerabilities across sectors.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to crisis communication literature. First, it demonstrates that established frameworks like SCCT and Image Repair Theory retain explanatory power in digital contexts but require adaptation to account for accelerated timelines, increased transparency expectations, and the moderating role of executive involvement. Second, the research substantiates the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model by providing empirical evidence of how digital media influences crisis framing and organizational response effectiveness.

The regression analysis identifies four key predictors of favorable crisis coverage—response strategy appropriateness ( $\beta = 0.43$ ), timing ( $\beta = 0.37$ ), transparency ( $\beta = 0.29$ ), and executive involvement ( $\beta = 0.22$ )—which together explain 48% of variance in headline framing. This suggests that while digital media has transformed crisis communication dynamics, organizations retain substantial agency in shaping how their responses are framed.

For practitioners, this research offers evidence-based recommendations for managing crises in digital media environments. Organizations should align response strategies with crisis type, favoring apology and corrective action for ethical/reputational crises while considering more informational approaches for operational issues. Leadership visibility should be strategically calibrated, with executives delivering apologies and corrective action plans but delegating defensive messaging to organizational spokespersons when necessary. The significant impact of rapid, transparent responses underscores the importance of crisis preparedness and clear communication protocols that enable organizations to respond within the critical first 24 hours.

## Conclusion

This study has provided a systematic examination of how organizational response strategies and executive communication influence public sentiment in digital media coverage of corporate crises. Through comprehensive analysis of HuffPost

headlines over a ten-year period (2012-2022), we have identified clear patterns in response effectiveness and reputation management that expand existing crisis communication theories and offer practical guidance for organizations navigating the digital media landscape.

Our finding that apology strategies yield more neutral media framing (75.6%) aligns with Coombs and Holladay's (2008) assertion that accommodative strategies are most effective in reputation-threatening crises. However, our study extends this understanding by demonstrating that in digital news contexts, the effectiveness gap between apology and denial strategies (33.9 percentage points) is substantially larger than the 18-point difference reported in traditional media studies (Kim & Sung, 2014). The amplification effect of executive involvement, where CEO-delivered apologies increased neutral framing by 29 percentage points, provides empirical support for Gruber et al.'s (2015) theoretical proposition that leadership visibility functions as a crisis response multiplier.

Several significant findings emerge from our analysis. First, accommodative strategies—particularly apology (75.6% neutral framing) and corrective action (69.8% neutral framing)—consistently generate more balanced media coverage than defensive approaches like denial (41.7% neutral framing). This effect is especially pronounced for ethical and reputational crises, suggesting that digital media environments amplify stakeholder expectations for organizational accountability and transparency.

Second, executive visibility functions as a powerful moderating variable that can either enhance or undermine crisis response effectiveness. CEO-delivered apologies increase neutral framing by 29 percentage points compared to organizational apologies without executive attribution, while CEO denials intensify negative framing by 15 points. This "amplification effect" demonstrates that leadership communication serves as more than mere messaging—it signals organizational authenticity and commitment during critical moments.

Third, organizational contingencies significantly influence crisis communication outcomes.

Industry context shapes both the predominant crisis types faced and the effectiveness of various response strategies. Prior reputation creates either vulnerability or resilience during crises, with established reputational challenges making organizations more susceptible to negative framing despite similar response approaches.

Fourth, the temporal analysis reveals an evolution in crisis communication practices, with organizations increasingly adopting transparent, accommodative approaches over the past decade. This shift reflects growing recognition of digital media dynamics, where defensive strategies that might have succeeded in traditional media environments often backfire amid heightened scrutiny and rapid information dissemination.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. The focus on headline-level analysis, while providing insights into initial framing cues, does not capture the full nuance of article content or reader interpretation processes. The exclusive focus on HuffPost limits cross-platform comparisons that could reveal how crisis framing varies across different media ecosystems. While the coding framework achieved strong reliability ( $\kappa > 0.80$  across dimensions), the subjective nature of framing analysis introduces potential interpretive bias.

The 2012-2022 timeframe was selected to capture the digital maturation phase in online news, during which social media integration and algorithmic distribution became dominant features of the news ecosystem. This period encompasses several major evolution points in organizational crisis types, including the emergence of data privacy and social justice as dominant crisis categories, allowing for temporal comparison of evolving crisis communication norms.

Future research should extend this analysis to compare crisis response effectiveness across conservative, centrist, and progressive news sources, addressing the media polarization concerns raised by recent scholarship. Additionally, research incorporating social media engagement metrics,

brand sentiment analysis, or longitudinal reputation tracking would strengthen causal inferences about response effectiveness and stakeholder impact.

### Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research demonstrates that despite the transformative impact of digital media on crisis communication, organizations retain significant agency in shaping how their responses are framed and received. The substantial explanatory power of our predictive model (48% of variance) suggests that while digital platforms have compressed timelines and amplified scrutiny, strategic communication choices remain consequential for reputation management.

For practitioners, this research offers evidence-based recommendations for managing crises in digital media environments. Organizations should prioritize accommodative strategies, respond within 24 hours, align strategy selection with crisis type, and strategically deploy executive voices. The findings suggest that in an era of heightened transparency expectations and rapid information dissemination, organizational responses that demonstrate accountability, authenticity, and commitment to improvement are most likely to yield favorable outcomes—particularly when delivered with appropriate executive visibility and industry-specific contextual awareness.

By integrating established theoretical frameworks with large-scale empirical analysis of digital media coverage, this study advances our understanding of crisis communication in contemporary media environments while providing practical guidance for organizations seeking to protect their reputations in an increasingly transparent and interconnected world.

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