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Breaking the Sound of Silence: Explication in the Use of Strategic Silence in Crisis Communication

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Abstract

Crises present organizations with the "rhetorical exigency" to enact control. Silence is not an option. This study, as the first empirical examination of Le et al's (2019) seminal study on silence in crisis communication, examines, first, if silence can be strategically used as a bona fide strategy; second, under what circumstances should silence be broken; and third, when silence is broken, how it affects (a) organizational reputation, (b) societal risk perception, and (c) the publics' crisis information sharing intention. An online experiment was conducted using a nationally representative sample in the United States. Participants were recruited in 2019 via a Qualtrics panel. The stimuli used in this study consisted of two components: (1) an explanation about a fictitious company; and (2) two types of silence breaking (forced vs. planned) embedded in each stimulus accordingly after the same crisis incident. Four hypothesis were conceptualized. They were all supported. Collectively, they showed that the effect of silence-breaking type on crisis information sharing intention was mediated by societal risk perception, which is conditioned by participants' level of perceived organizational reputation. Silence, or failure to fill the information vacuum, has not been an option to consider thus far as it suggests the organization is "not in control." However, this study suggests the types of silence organizations can adopt and the modes the organizational silence can be broken. It provides a new lens for organizations to engage in business communication.

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Introduction

Crises can affect an organization's image and reputation. Crises, thus, present organizations with the "rhetorical exigency" to enact control and to assure and win stakeholders' confidence (Heath, 2004, p. 167). One way to enact control is to use strategies "to minimize damage to the image of the organization" (Fearn-Banks, 2017, p. 2). Research in crisis communication has been focused on shaping organizational response strategies, with the Image Repair theory and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) dominating perspectives (Diers-Lawson & Pang, 2016; Timothy Coombs et al., 2010). For instance, Image Repair theory, described as the "dominant paradigm for examining corporate communication in times of crises" (Dardis & Haigh, 2009, p. 101), asserts that when an organization is accused of wrongdoing, it needs to repair its image. To do so, the theory posits five major rhetorical typologies (e.g., Benoit & Pang, 2008)—denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The basic premise of the theory is that during crisis, organizations should respond to accusations by offering explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, and even excuses for one's actions (e.g., Benoit & Pang, 2008). Image repair argued that silence is not a rhetorical strategy (Benoit, 1995).

If image repair is part of the textual stream in crisis research (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017), SCCT (e.g., Coombs, 2008), which examines the contexts in which the organization is situated, recommends crisis responses based on crisis history and prior reputation. The SCCT is divided into three postures: deny, diminish, and deal. Deny has three sub-categories, denial, attack the accuser, and scapegoating. Diminish has two strategies, excuse and justification. Deal includes five sub-categories, ingratiation, concern, compensation, expression of regret, and apology. SCCT argues that communicating information is the first priority.

The thrust of both theories, thus, is they provide rhetorical responses for organizations to use in times of crises. Bradford and Garrett (1995) had suggested that organizations focus on *how* to respond instead of deciding on whether or not to respond. The examination of the role of silence in times of crisis, has remained, silent (pun intended). Silence suggests the organization is "not in control" (Coombs, 2015, p. 177). Silence signals to the media that there might be guilt and there is something to hide (Richards, 1998). "Silence is often speech. . .it is speech that is in competition with that which is spoken aloud. . .Silence is speech transfigured," writes Corbin (2018) in his book, *A history of Silence*. If silence is speech, it is critical for us to examine the role of silence in times of crisis when speech (crisis response) is most expected and critical. This study has three purposes. First, this study contributes to what Maier and Crist

(2017) described as interests by communication scholars to examine strategies used. Ferguson et al. (2018) argued that the discussion of the use of silence in crisis communication has been "limited" (p. 9). This study addresses the call by professionals and scholars to examine the use of silence (Kim et al., 2004) as a strategy. Second, a conceptual framework posited by Le et al., 2019 has identified the types of silence organizations can adopt and the modes by which organizational silence can be broken. This study represents the first empirical examination of Le et al.'s (2019) propositions to build "new avenues of research" (p. 176). Third, Stieglitz et al. (2019) argued that silence "may be a strategy in certain situations in which other strategies are expected to yield no success" (p. 934). Using a nationally representative sample in the United States (US), the authors seek to examine how silence can be strategically used by a crisisstricken organization and what impact this would have on (a) organizational reputation, (b) societal-risk perception, and (c) the publics' crisis information sharing intention.

Literature Review

Silence in an Era of Noise

Silence is rarely studied because stakeholders expect organizations to respond in times of crises; they want to hear from the organizations. Silence is anti-thesis to what is considered a hallmark of crisis communication, which is constant communication (Seeger, 2006). Where silence had been examined, it was not found to be effective (Benoit & Drew, 1997; Ferguson et al., 2018). For all intents and purposes, the silence discussed by Ferguson et al. (2018) can be classified as "natural silence" (Penuel et al., 2013).

Strategic silence in times of crises. However, there is another type of silence called strategic silence. In Dimitrov's (2018) exploration of silence in strategic communication, he defined them in the plural and listed the criteria of strategic silences:

(a) It is intentional, audience-directed: there is a strategy and it gives "agency direction" (p. 132).
(b) It is mostly communicative: it is a form of communication and conveys meaning.
(c) It is discourse: a system of "interrelated meanings" (p. 133) that can be in text or verbally produced, framed and thematized.
(d) It is relevant to situations where communication, either verbal or non-verbal, is exchanged.
(e) It involves different degrees of indirectness, for instance, where "implicit silence is more indirect than the explicit ones" (p. 135)
(f) It involves actionable listening: silence "elevates listening as an equal. . .it assigns agency to heeding; it transforms it to actionable listening" (p. 136).

While these are useful guides, strategic silence used in this study is the one defined by

Le et al. (2019) as "a deliberate lack of organizational communication; and where there is any, the information is intentionally scant and ambiguous" (p. 163). Le et al. (2019) further argued that strategic silence may be practiced when organizations are proscribed by legal and regulatory requirements, or to signal patience, composure or to avoid sidetracking an issue while it is being worked on.

In some cultures, silence is accepted and tolerated. For instance, in Japan, silence is socio-culturally acceptable and widely perceived as meaningful (Fujio, 2004). Keeping silent has become one of the hallmarks of the Chinese's approach to crisis management (Ye & Pang, 2011) to avoid more criticism and invite investigations that may unearth more problems for the organization.

Typologies of strategic silence—and when they are broken. In their study of strategic silence in crisis communication, Le et al. (2019) proposed three typologies: *Avoiding silence* is used when the organization/leader intends to avoid certain stakeholder and/or issues at hand; *hiding silenc*e is used to hide relevant information from stakeholders; and *delaying silence* is employed to signal work-in-progress and buy time for a primary response.

Le et al. (2019) also found that silence can be broken two ways: forced and planned.

- *Planned*: Keeping silent allows time to plan and prepare an official primary response. This is when silence is broken after preparatory or investigative work is completed and when sufficient information is obtained. The organization leader or organization is prepared to share information and the release of information either through a statement or announcement. There are several facets to a planned breaking of silence. First, the organization or leader use the duration of silence to gather information and take preparatory actions that would satisfy its stakeholders and provide closure; second, the date to release information could be timed with a strategic initiative; third, the planned breaking of silence is considered, deliberated, and determined; four, no reputational threat is intensified during the period of silence. Thus, when silence is timed to be broken, it is seen as part of a deliberate move. The strategies used could vary from *justification*, arguing the need for time, or compensation, as a form of closure and conclusion to the investigation, or reflected *ingratiation*, to thank stakeholders for their patience and support.
- *Forced*: The crisis situation evolves. New events may unfold or new information may become available, forcing the organization to change its position or break silence. This can occur when threats become more imminent, have grown in size, commitment, and power. The threats can be intensified with the support of prominent bodies or individuals or when stakeholder demands are legitimized by law. There are several facets to a forced breaking of silence, mainly driven by situational factors or factors beyond the organization's control. First, organizational image continues to be battered with prolonged silence. Second, media coverage of the issue intensifies and coverage draws further attention to

the issue at hand. The strategies used can vary from compensation, promising to pay for the mistakes or inconvenience, or *scapegoat*, issuing a statement to push the blame to another entity, or *excuse*, *expressing* bafflement, or in some cases, expressing *concern* and deep *regret*, claiming full responsibility in an *apology* to all affected.

Le et al. (2019) found that when *avoiding/hiding silence* is used but broken forcefully, it produces a negative effect on stakeholders' perceptions of the organization both during the information vacuum and post-silence. However, when *delaying silence* is used, it can be tolerated by certain stakeholders during the period of silence. The opportune time to break *delaying silence* is when the organization has gathered enough information or is sufficiently prepared. If the organization manages to break the *delaying silence* with an appropriate response strategy as planned, stakeholders are more likely to maintain/regain confidence in the organization.

Of the three typologies of strategic silence, delaying silence is argued to be a viable crisis response strategy. Le et al. (2019) claimed five advantages: First, "when used to signal work-in-progress, delaying silence may be more tolerable toward stakeholders and could reduce intensification of the crisis" (p. 174); second, when threats and stakeholder sentiments are constantly monitored, "delaying silence may be able to withstand the pressures of such situational factors" (p. 174); third, "delaying silence would put the organization in a proactive position as they would determine the breaking of silence, thus giving them control over the crisis" (p. 174); four, "delaying silence can also be used to provide the organization with additional time to conduct further investigation" (p. 174), and lastly, "if implemented well, delaying silence has shown to have a possibility of image recovery for the organization" (p. 174). This study further focuses on the impact of silence on organizational reputation, how societal risk is perceived to be caused by the organizational crisis, and the publics' intention to further share the crisis information with others.

Based on the above discussion, this study examines:

RQ: How, if at all, does silence-breaking type exert any direct effect on (a) organizational reputation, (b) societal-risk perception, and (c) crisis information sharing intention?

Impact of silence (and how it is broken) on organizations, society and publics. How and when organizations break their silence, arguably, has an impact on the organization, society, and publics.

Organizational reputation. Reputation can be considered the track record of the organization (Wilcox et al, 2015), which is evaluated based on a suite of indicators including financial performance, social responsibility, and ability to deliver on goods and services. It is evaluative (Avraham & Ketter, 2008), and stakeholders who consider an organization with strong reputation would set it apart and this is a source of

competitive advantage (Cornelissen, 2011). Organization reputation is built up over time (Fombrun, 1996) by "individual appraisals of a company by its constituents" (p. 395). Such appraisals could be based on credibility, reliability, trustworthiness and responsibility (Fombrun, 1996), and the organization's ability to fulfill stakeholder expectations (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Similarly, Dowling (2001) suggested that evaluations are based on values, like authenticity, honesty, responsibility, and integrity, which are triggered by how the organizations perform and communicate to their stakeholders. Further, Smythe et al. (1992) argued that such values are kept alive in the collective memory of an organization's behavior and often originate from its leaders or the vision of its founders.

During crisis, the question on the minds of stakeholders when the organization is called to task but remained silent, is whether the organization has something to hide or is simply refusing to address the accusations. Benoit and Pang (2008) argued that addressing accusations as soon as possible, particularly when one is accused of an offensive act, is a key component of image repair and crisis communication. This necessitates a rhetorical response as soon as possible instead of remaining silent (Le et al, 2019).

Societal-risk perception. Even as reputation is often regarded as the primary reserve of the organization, it is also examined in the larger context of the society's perception of and appetite for risks (Shrum & Wuthnow, 1988). Risk perception theory underscores the need to assess and understand how messages may be crafted to accurately convey risk level to appropriate audiences. Such an approach has been used in exploring hazard/emergency preparedness (e.g., regarding fires or cyclones), risk information/communication regarding controversial technologies (e.g., nuclear energy or genetic engineering), occupational safety (e.g., work accident prevention), and health education (e.g., regarding smoking, AIDS, skin cancer) (Rohrmann, 1998).

In times of crises, risks come in two forms, personal risks and societal risks. The latter is examined here as an outcome variable of strategic silence employed by a crisis-stricken organization. Snyder and Rouse (1995) defined societal risk as how the problem is viewed as something that will affect others. Societal risks can be spread via the media. Tyler and Cook (1984) looked at the impact the media had on societal- and personal-risk perceptions, and while they found that media had a greater effect on societal-risk perception, they were careful to acknowledge that one's personal risk can possibly be influenced by the media as well.

Oh et al. (2015) examined how the media shaped societal-risk level perception in their study of the impact of H1N1 influenza in South Korea. The study found that the perception of risk had triggered both cognitive and emotional dimensions, depending on the kind of media people consumed. Those who watched a dramatic entertainment program and were emotionally affected exhibited personal- and societal-risk level perception. The authors noted that while they had identified how people felt as important in risk perception, they acknowledged that their study was based on the then-emerging H1N1 flu, which had extensive media coverage resulting in much public fear

and uncertainty. Paek et al. (2016) studied how media messages with a fear component could exacerbate personal-risk and societal-risk perceptions—and how these messages could prompt people to talk about it. The study also showed that those who perceived a personal risk to themselves were more likely to talk about it than if they perceived the risk at a societal level.

Given how the communication landscape has changed over the years, and how social media have transformed the way information is consumed, people want information quickly, especially in a crisis situation. Many are turning to social media as they believe they can get more timely information. Yoo et al.'s (2020) study on the use of social media in risk perception showed that in a crisis, people were more likely to turn to content-oriented social media platforms (i.e., Flickr, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs), instead of user-oriented content ones such as Facebook, as the former had more usable information while the latter was used to build relationships. To build relationships, Le et al. (2019) developed the integrated media model, arguing that it is critical for organizations to harness both the organization's digital tools as well as mainstream media and to integrate media agenda building with stakeholder engagements.

Jin et al (2012) defined risk as the "expected loss" of an alternative to be chosen. Risk is the expected loss if a particular strategy is chosen, given the information available, which is inevitably influenced by cultural cognition and varied worldviews of different organizations. A hallmark of risk communication, argued Wilcox et al. (2015), thus, is to reduce the danger and threat posed through communication. Despite the earlier call for integrating risk communication elements to crisis communication (Williams & Olaniran, 1998), few crisis studies have empirically examined the impact of an organizational crisis on publics' societal-risk perception, which goes beyond the crisis impact on the organization itself. This study, by including publics' risk perception (as induced by the crisis) as a key cognitive crisis response triggered by how the organizational silence is broken (planned vs. forced), helps close this research gap in integrating crisis and risk literature.

Publics' crisis information sharing intention. Publics' immense and immediate communication needs, namely, information seeking and sharing, which addresses both the need for information and the need for spreading information to others (Thelwall & Stuart, 2007), appeared to be heightened with the prevalence of social media. This plays a pivotal role in crisis escalation and can impact publics' understanding and interpretation of a crisis situation (Schultz & Raupp, 2010; van der Meer, 2016). Further, *crisis information seeking* and *crisis information sharing* are identified by the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model as two distinct constructs that function as core behavioral outcomes of crisis communication online and offline (Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Liu et al., 2012; Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2015, 2016).

According to Lee and Jin (2019), information seeking and sharing are two constructs composed by multiple actions taken by publics, respectively, which need to be assessed

at the behavioral level (Fraustino, Jin, & Liu, 2016; Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2016). This is exacerbated in an information vacuum. Further, in order to comprehensively capture publics' crisis information seeking and sharing actions, researchers should not only include channels and platforms of crisis information, but also take the ownership or source of different online channels and platforms into consideration (Fraustino, Jin, & Liu, 2016; Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2016, 2016b).

In light of these SMCC considerations and recommendations, Lee and Jin (2019) refined a theoretical framework for crisis information seeking and sharing (CISS) in the context of public health crises. At the behavioral level, publics' communication activities regarding a crisis issue can be observed by: (1) their communications via online public channels (e.g., different social media platforms and websites), interpersonal channels (interpersonal channels such as texting and phone calls); and (2) their communication activities engaging different crisis information sources (e.g., traditional news media, organizations, and peers).

Public relations related information can be shared by the publics via various channels in different forms, such as sharing "content, opinions, experiences, insights, and media themselves" (Lariscy et al., 2009; p. 314), and/or engaging with an organization via their "views, likes, comments, and shares" in response to crisis information disseminated by organizations and other sources on social media platforms (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 82). In the context of crisis communication, Liu, Fraustino and Jin (2016) further identified two clusters for publics' crisis information sharing behavior, grounded in existing studies and empirical findings: (1) *Crisis information sharing on social media*: Chua et al (2017) found that source credibility and message plausibility were likely factors to trigger information sharing. Information with visual cues has been found to have higher traction of retransmission (Chua et al., 2017). Tweets are found to be more likely to get retweeted if the information in it is seen as credible, important, interesting, or could garner a high amount of interest or further retweets (Yeo et al., 2020). (2) *Information sharing through interpersonal channels* (e.g., Myrick & Wojdynski, 2016): People's information sharing intention can be captured by telling those they know via face-to-face conversations about the crisis, telling people they know by emailing them about the crisis, calling people they know by phone to talk about the crisis, and texting people they know about the crisis.

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes a moderated mediation model and proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Silence-breaking type will lead to varied societal-risk perception.

H2: Perceived organizational reputation will interact with silence-breaking type to exert its effect on societal-risk perception.

H3: Societal-risk perception will be positively associated with crisis information sharing intention.

H4: The effect of silence-breaking type will (a) indirectly influence crisis information sharing intention through societal-risk perception, which will be (b) moderated by perceived organizational reputation.

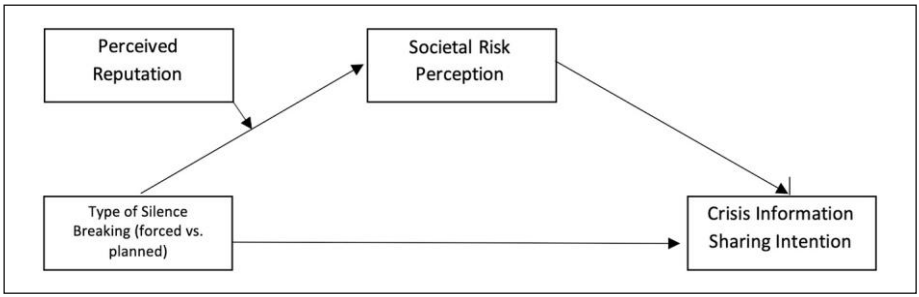

Figure 1. A conceptual model of the effects of silence-breaking type on crisis information sharing intention, as moderated by perceived reputation level and mediated by societal risk perception.

Method

This study used a one factor (silence breaking type: forced vs. planned) betweensubjects experiment design to examine the effects of silence breaking type on publics' perceived reputation of the crisis-stricken organization (in this study, a home security solution provider company facing a data breach crisis), their perception of societal risk caused by the crisis, and their intention to share the crisis information to others.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the end of March to the beginning of May 2019 via a Qualtrics panel. Given the data breach crisis situation involving home security solution related products and services, it was necessary to ensure our experiment stimuli were relevant to participants and they were likely to be involved with the crisis situation according to their experience or familiarity with home security product/service in general. Therefore, screening questions were in place: only individuals who had purchased or ever considered purchasing home security products/services would be in the participant pool for study recruitment. As a result, a total of 241 adult (over 18 years old) residents in the US were recruited. They all completed this study and correctly answered an attention check question. Quotas were set for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and income by the professional survey firm to obtain a representative sample that reflects US demographics (see Table 1).

Stimuli and Procedures

The stimuli used in this study consisted of two components: (1) an explanation about a fictitious company; and (2) two types of silence breaking (forced vs. planned) embedded in each stimulus accordingly after the same crisis incident was presented in both scenarios.

Table 1. Demographics of Study Participants.

Demographic	Percentages by category
Age (M = 45.38, SD = 169w.28)	18–24: 11.2% 25–34: 19.1% 35–44: 17.4% 45–54: 18.7% 55–64: 17.4% 65+: 16.2%
Gender	Female: 51.9% Male: 48.1%
Race/ethnicity	African American: 10.8% Asian and Pacific Islander: 7.5% Hispanic: 18.3% Caucasian: 61% Multiracial: 1.2% Other: 1.2%
Income	Under $25,000: 24.5% $25,000–$29,999: 5.4% $30,000–$39,999: 11.6% $40,000–$49,999: 6.2% $50,000–$59,999: 11.6% $60,000–$69,999: 5.8% $70,000–$99,999: 16.2% $100,000+: 18.7%

After agreeing to participate in the online experiment, participants were instructed to read the background of a fictitious company. Then, they were randomly assigned to read a crisis scenario affecting the company and further asked to respond to a set of survey questions about their perceived organizational reputation, perceived societal risk caused by the crisis, and crisis information sharing intention, in response to the scenario, and their demographic information.

At the beginning of each scenario, the background of a fictitious company, SafeHome Company, was provided to the participants. SafeHome Company is an "established US-headquartered home security solution provider company, SafeHome Company, with 50 years of history, with considerable consumer trust. Over the last decade, it has successfully ventured into the e-commerce sphere, and has been selling its home security camera and monitoring software solutions to consumers via its electronic portal. The consumers install security cameras at home and are able to monitor the recorded videos using their registered account on the SafeHome Company's proprietary cloud-based platform."

Next, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two crisis scenarios in which the company first kept silent about the crisis and later broke the silence either as

forced (N = 121) or as *planned* (N = 120). The background of a data breach crisis situation expressed by the company was provided, which is consistent across the two scenarios: "In January 2019, the company encountered a data hack of their cloud server, a breach that affected some 150,000 consumers from all over the world. The leaked information covers personal information, bank details, home addresses and personal media such as photos and home videos. The leaked data was uploaded anonymously into public domain, resulting in an instant public media outcry," followed by a description of how the company remained silent after the crisis incident happened.

For participants randomly assigned to the *forced* silence-breaking scenario, detailed descriptions of how the company was compelled to break its silence were included, with the sentence "SafeHome Company had no choice but to hold a press briefing to announce its investigation" at the end. Conversely, for participants randomly assigned to the *planned* silence-breaking scenario, detailed descriptions of how the company made plans to break its silence were included, with the sentence ". . .as planned, the company held a press briefing to announce the report findings" at the end.

Dependent Measures

Three dependent measures were assessed by participants after their exposure to the stimuli: (1) *Organizational reputation*, a five-item organizational reputation measure (Brown & Ki, 2013; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2002) using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); (2) *Societal-risk perception* (the level of societal risk the crisis causes as perceived by publics [risk perceptionsocietal]), a four-item measure adapted from Yoo et al.'s (2020) study, using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); and (3) *Sharing intention*, a three-item measure adapted from Myrick and Wojdynski's (2016) study, using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely) (see Table 2).

Results

Manipulation Checks

Two items were used to evaluate the manipulation of silence-breaking type: (1) "This company is forced to announce its investigation to the press in the end"; and (2) "This company announced its investigation to the press, as it has planned, in the end." Results of two independent sample *t*-tests indicated that participants in the *forced* silence-breaking condition reported a significantly higher level of perception that the company was forced to break its silence (M = 5.81, SD = 1.60) than those in the *planned* silence-breaking condition (M = 4.87, SD = 1.92) ($t(239) = -4.11$, $p < .001$). Results also showed that participants who were assigned to the *planned* silence-breaking condition scored significantly higher in their perception that the company broke its silence as planned (M = 5.18, SD = 1.73) than those in the *forced* silence-breaking condition (M = 4.00, SD = 2.13) ($t(239) = 4.75$, $p < .001$). Therefore, the manipulation of the type of silence breaking was successful.

Table 2. Dependent Measures.

Measure (*M*, *SD*, and Cronbach's α)	Items
Organizational reputation (*M* = 3.45, *SD* = 1.29, α = .77)	The company is concerned with the well-being of its publics. The company is basically DISHONEST [reversed]. I do NOT trust the company to tell the truth about the incident [reversed]. Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what the company says. The company is NOT concerned with the wellbeing of its publics [reversed].
Societal risk perception (*M* = 5.62, *SD* = 1.15, α = .91)	The problem of the company is serious to Americans. I am worried that Americans would be affected by the company. It is likely that Americans would be affected by the company. Americans felt at risk from the company.
Sharing intention (*M* = 4.38, *SD* = 1.61, α = .77)	I'd like to talk to a friend or family member about this story. I'd like to email or send a private message with a link or information about this story. I'd like to post information about or a link to this story on social media.

Direct Effect of Silence-Breaking Type

The RQ asked how, if at all, silence-breaking type might exert any direct effect on (a) organizational reputation, (b) societal-risk perception, and (c) crisis information sharing intention. A one-way MANOVA was conducted to evaluate the effects of the two types of silence breaking (forced vs. planned) on participants' perceived organizational reputation, societal-risk perception, and their crisis information sharing intention. The results revealed a significant main effect of silence-breaking type on organizational *reputation* (F [1, 239] = 8.44, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .034$). Participants in the *planned* silence-breaking condition reported *more* favorable organizational reputation ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.33$) than those in the forced silence-breaking condition ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.21$).

However, no significant main effect of silence-breaking type was detected on societal-risk perception (F [1, 239] = .25, $p = .620$, $\eta^2 = .001$) or crisis information sharing intention (F [1, 239] = .18, $p = .671$, $\eta^2 = .001$).

Indirect Effect of Silence-Breaking Type on Crisis Information Sharing Intention

The hypotheses (see Figure 1) were tested via a moderated mediation analysis using Hayes (2013) PROCESS Macro model 7. For moderated mediation analysis, the

dummy-coded type of silence breaking (0 = forced, 1 = planned) served as an independent variable. A moderated mediation analysis was conducted with risk perceptionsocietal as a mediator, perceived organizational reputation as a moderator (categorized into low, moderate, and high levels by PROCESS Macro), and crisis information sharing intention as the dependent variable. In the analysis, we used 5,000 bootstrap estimates for the construction of 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effects as suggested by Preacher et al. (2007).

H1 predicted that silence-breaking type will lead to varied societal-risk perception. A part of the moderated mediation analysis showed a significant effect of the silencebreaking type on risk perception-societal ($B = -1.15$, $SE = .40$, $t(237) = -2.87$, $p < .05$), suggesting that participants exposed to the *forced* silence-breaking scenario perceived a greater societal risk caused by the crisis than those exposed to the *planned* conditions. Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that perceived organizational reputation will interact with silencebreaking type to exert its effect on societal-risk perception. A part of the moderated mediation analysis detected a significant interaction between the silence-break type and the level of perceived organizational reputation ($B = .36$, $SE = .11$, $t(237) = 3.24$, $p < .01$). Based on this observation, we further employed the Johnson-Neyman technique to further identify whether the effect of silence-breaking is (or not) significant on societal-risk perception in each of the three regions along the reputation range (low-reputation perception vs. medium-reputation perception, vs. high-reputation perception). According to the Johnson-Neyman statistic results, we detected that the significant interaction effects occurred when the perceived organizational reputation was at-or-above 4.36 and at-or-below 1.65, specifically: (1) for all values of reputation at or above 4.36, the *planned* silence-breaking condition produced significantly higher societal-risk perception than the forced silence-breaking condition; and (2) conversely, for all values of reputation at or below 1.65, the *forced* silence-breaking condition resulted in significantly higher societal-risk perception than the planned condition. Thus, H2 was supported.

H3 predicted that societal-risk perception will be positively associated with crisis information sharing intention. According to the moderated mediation analysis, the level of societal-risk perception was found to be positively associated with crisis information sharing intention ($B = .40$, $SE = .09$, $t(238) = 4.65$, $p < .001$). Higher societalrisk perception led to participants' higher intention to share the crisis information with others. Thus, H3 was supported.

H4 further posited the moderated mediation model: (a) Mediation: The effect of silence-breaking type will indirectly influence crisis information sharing intention through societal-risk perception; and (b) Moderation: This indirect effect hypothesized in (a) will be moderated by the level of perceived organizational reputation. In the moderated mediation analysis, a moderated mediation was significant (effect = .14, $SE = .06$, 95% Confidence Interval [CI] [0.04, 0.27]). Specifically, the significant indirect effect of the type of silence breaking on participants' crisis information sharing intention was present when the perceived organizational reputation was *high* (indirect effect = .20, $SE = .10$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.41]), while the indirect effect was not significant when the perceived organizational reputation were low (indirect effect = .−15, $SE = .09$,

95% CI [−0.34, 0.00]) and medium (indirect effect = .02, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.15]). The level of perceived organizational reputation is higher (instead of medium or low level), planned silence breaking led to higher societal-risk perception, which further led to higher crisis information sharing intention.

Taken together, the above results (H1 through H4) showed that the effect of silencebreaking type on crisis information sharing intention was mediated by societal-risk perception, which is conditioned by participants' level of perceived organizational reputation, thereby supporting H4 (see Figure 2).

Discussion

The findings of our online experiment suggested that if silence is employed by an organization strategically in an ongoing crisis, how such intentional silence is broken, either as forced or as planned, matters to publics and affects their crisis responses. Our study unearthed the mechanism of both direct and indirect effects of silence-breaking type (forced vs. planned) on key communication outcomes in an ongoing organizational crisis situation. The posited and moderated mediation model of the effects of silence-breaking type on publics' crisis information sharing was further supported. Specifically, silence-breaking type exerts: (1) direct effect on organizational reputation; (2) interaction effect according to reputation level (on societal-risk perception); and (3) indirect effect on publics' crisis information sharing intention via their societal-risk perception that depends on their perception of the crisis-stricken organization's reputation. The evidence-based insights provide theoretical and practical insights for crisis communication scholars and practitioners.

When Silence is Broken Forcibly: Information Vacuum Generated Impact Organization Reputation

Our findings provide clear evidence that how an organization's strategic silence is broken directly impacts its reputation in an ongoing crisis. Compared to the choice of breaking the silence in a planned mode, if an organization's silence is broken by force, the publics will regard the organization as less favorable reputation-wise.

In a crisis, an information vacuum is immediately generated (Pang, 2013a). Pang (2013a) argued that this insatiable thirst for information is driven by primary stakeholders who have grown used to accessing information online as well as the media that incessantly seek answers to questions during crises that have become "media events" (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007, p. 175). Chua et al. (2017) contended that organizations' silence provokes a response intensified by public dissatisfaction and media glare. Societal pressure and informational demand exerted by the media and stakeholders birthed the information vacuum. When the organization does finally respond, albeit belatedly and amidst pressure, stakeholders are likely to attribute culpability and lower their regard for the organization as if it had something to hide, was guilty and/or secretive (Pang, 2013a). This is evident in Stieglitz et al.'s (2019)

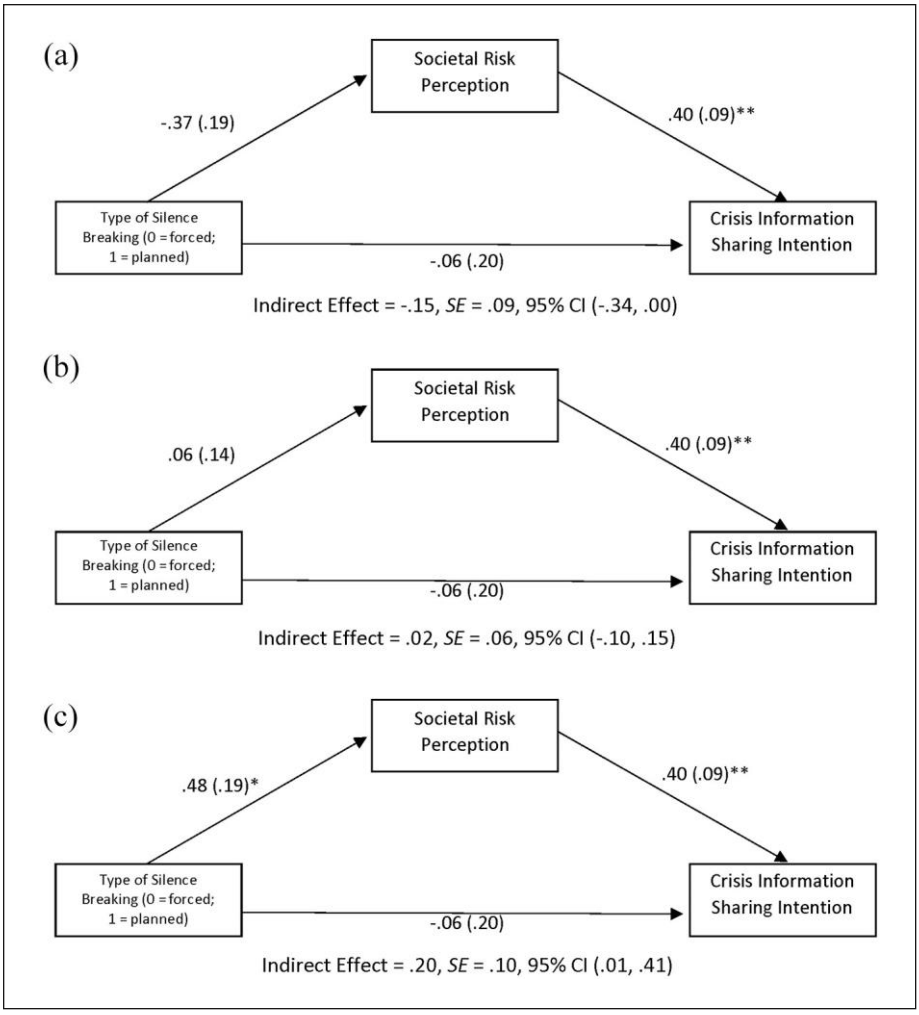

Figure 2. (a) Indirect effects of silence-breaking type on sharing intention via societal risk perception with low-reputation perception, (b) indirect effects of silence-breaking type on sharing intention via societal risk perception with medium-reputation perception, and (c) indirect effects of silence-breaking type on sharing intention via societal risk perception with high-reputation perception.
*y < .05. **y < .01 coefficients in the parentheses are standard error.

study on how Volkswagen broke its silence belatedly in its management of the emission's crisis in 2015 by issuing an apology: Instead of recovering its reputation, the apology was deemed ineffective "since VW is assumed to have willingly deceived the global public and public administration over a long period" (p. 933).

Application: Where possible, we recommend against using forced silence breaking to minimize reputational damage and/or contain publics' blame on the organization and their perceived societal risk caused by the crisis situation. Even if there are internal and external forces compelling the organization not to respond quickly, crisis managers should strategize the organization's crisis messaging so that the silence is perceived to be broken as designed rather than by default.

Planned Silence Breaking: Accentuate Relationship Building

Le et al. (2019) suggested that delaying silence could be used when the organization needed time to investigate the crisis, especially when the cause is unclear; to fix an issue with a clear cause without inciting panic; or to gather information or make arrangements for a primary response. In such cases, delaying silence can be used as a supporting strategy to prepare for a primary response. The silence that is broken should be planned.

When a silence is intentionally broken to the news media and publics in a way that appears planned and implemented deliberately, publics tend to view the organization in a more favorable light. However, planned silence breaking does carry some risks: on one hand, for publics who perceive the organization favorably are likely to hold the organization accountable and expect its communication to be more authentic. On the other hand, publics who perceive the organization with relatively lower reputation are less likely to assign blame to the organization. This observation is supported by studies. When publics have favorable perceptions of the organization, more is expected (Coombs & Holladay, 2015)

The suggestion is to reframe the planned breaking of silence as a form of relationship building. One way to do so is to thank stakeholders for being patient while the organization takes time to release information. Given that information has been released, the organization is now ready to speak, engage, and listen to take the issue forward. This leads to several positive outcomes, including favorable public attitudes toward the organization (Yang et al., 2010). Sellnow and Sellnow (2010) described this as a form of dialog which is essential to crisis communication. Shin et al. (2015) stated that engaging in dialogs can accentuate relationship-building with stakeholders.

Application: An organization's reputation is built over a long period of time (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Trust is tested during crises when organizations do not respond promptly. Communication can help restore some level of trust (Ye & Pang, 2011). When relationships between the organization and public are strong prior to the crisis, communication can also help further invigorate relationships (Ning, 2019). When relationships are weak, communication can strengthen relationships.

Societal-Risk Perception: Propensity to Share Information Generating Social Media Hype

Publics' societal-risk perception, or what Coombs (2010) described as audience analysis, is an understudied construct in crisis communication. This study shows this

as an important crisis communication outcome variable for scholars and practitioners to consider. Although the silence-breaking type did not seem to directly affect our participants' societal-risk perception, it does shed further light on the propensity of publics to share crisis information. Chua et al. (2017) argued that "social media users are often described as prosumers because of their ability to create, consume, and distribute content" (p. 4). One manifestation of this, Pang (2013b) suggested, is the phenomenon of social media hype. This is enabled by user-to-user and platform-to-platform accessibility. Social media hype can be defined as a "netizen-generated hype that causes huge interest that is triggered by a key event and sustained by a self-reinforcing quality in its ability for users to engage in conversation" (p. 333).

This study provides strong evidence that the higher societal risk caused by the crisis, as perceived by publics, the more likely the publics would share crisis information.

Application: For crisis managers, amidst the various crisis communication priority tasks, it is important to be mindful about how publics perceive the relevance of the crisis incident and how they share information. This can impact the timing of the release of information, and if silence is planned or forcibly broken.

Conclusion

This first empirical study, investigating a key component of the new theoretical development on silence strategy in crisis communication (Le et al., 2019), has examined under what circumstances should a strategically employed silence be broken and when it is broken, how it affects organizational reputation, societal-risk perception, and the publics' crisis information sharing intention.

The study has a few limitations which can be addressed by future research. First, this study used a US adult sample. The reported findings cannot be generalized to populations outside of the US Therefore, future studies should apply the current conceptualization and mediated moderation model among the identified key constructs to other countries with different cultures, where publics from these cultures might have varied expectations and acceptance of silence being used and/or how it is broken.

Second, this study is situated in the context of a data breach crisis using a fictitious company. This only represents one of many challenging crisis situations in which an organization has to employ silence strategically and plan for silence breaking or respond to silence-breaking pressure internally and/or externally. Future studies need to examine different crisis types. If a real organization is used in the study design, the organization's crisis history and crisis responsibility attribution need to be controlled or factored in during analyses.

Third, given the critical role time and timing play in crisis communication (Coombs, 2019), future studies should consider exploring the following questions in the larger context of crisis communication life cycle in a given crisis situation: Does the timing of breaking silence matter? If so, does the timing depend on the silence-breaking type in order to be effective?

Fourth, to complete the full initial examination of the new strategic silence typology posited by Le et al. (2019), future studies need to examine the direct and indirect effects of the type of silence strategy (avoiding vs. hiding vs. delaying), which is employed prior to the decision of silence-breaking type takes place, on crisis communication outcomes. The potential role strategic silence might play, when appropriate and necessary, in conjunction with other crisis response strategies under certain specific conditions merits further conceptualization and empirical examination.

Fifth, our study aimed to examine how a crisis-stricken organization's reputation might vary, after the occurrence of a crisis event, as a function of different silencebreaking mode, thus using reputation as a dependent variable. Future studies should further investigate how pre-crisis or pre-silence-breaking organizational reputation, as an independent variable, might interact with the effect of different silence strategies and/or silence-breaking modes to exact impact on publics' organizational crisis responses.

Sixth, the small or non-significant direct effects observed in the current study need to be assessed further in future studies using similar experimental design. The current study needs to be replicated by crisis scholars, including conducting a second study with (1) a stronger manipulation for the forced/planned silence breaking and (2) a manipulation for the crisis-stricken organization's pre-crisis or pre-silence-breaking reputation variable.

Last but not least, to further integrate risk communication literature with crisis communication theories, risk perception—as a key risk communication construct—can be further refined and used in crisis research. Due to the lack of societal-risk perception measure in crisis communication literature, this study adapted items from Yoo et al.'s (2020) risk communication research. Despite the demonstrated high reliability of this adapted multi-item measure and the relevance of individual items to risk and crisis issues, crisis scholars need to conduct future research to develop a crisis communication specific measure that would capture the publics' perceived societal risk associated with different crisis situations/issues and advance our understanding of crisis communication outcomes at the societal level. In addition to societal risk, as examined and proved to be valuable theoretically and practically, personal risk perception (i.e., how an ongoing organizational crisis is likely to affect oneself) can be examined so as to discern how publics perceive the potential risk caused by the crisis in relation to themselves and how they might respond (first-person effect) versus their perceived risk to others and their estimate of how others might respond to the crisis (third-person effect).

Silence, in the bigger scheme of living, exerts a profound impact on our lives. Author-philosopher Robert Fulghum (1995) writes that we must make space for the "eloquence of silence":

> "Silence is always part of great music.
> Silence is always part of great art.
> Silence is always part of a great life" (p. 244).

How can silence be part of great crisis communication? The potential to examine remains enormous.

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