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Public expectations of crisis outcomes in the social media era in China: A communication-mediated psychological mechanism

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ABSTRACT

This study theoretically and empirically identifies a new typology of Chinese publics' normative expectations of crisis outcomes. It classifies the concept into three culturally relevant dimensions—public expectations of (a) organizational accommodative responses (i.e., how an in-crisis organization should respond), (b) punishment of the organization (i.e., how publics collectively should respond), and (c) government intervention (i.e., how government should respond) for desirable crisis outcomes. Using an online survey of the Beijing public, this study investigates the degree to which information seeking and online expression mediate relationships between crisis blame and the three types of expectations. The study finds that as the level of crisis blame increases, active information seekers expect more regarding organizational accommodation and government intervention, whereas active expressers expect stronger punishments of the organization and less government intervention in China.

1. Introduction

Prior research has strived to develop and test effective crisis communication strategies in terms of protecting organizational reputation in crisis. However, a meta-analysis of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) studies has revealed that the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies on reputational protection is in fact rather limited (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Crisis communication scholars such as Coombs (2016) have thus called for new light to be shed on outcome variables other than reputation. As a response to the call, this study takes a step back to explore normative expectations of consumer publics (hereafter publics) toward crisis outcomes. Normative expectations emphasize desired outcomes for an expectant based on social values or personal preferences (Miller, 2000). Such expectations can serve as frames within which publics evaluate corporate reputation or organization-public relationship. From a strategic management perspective, when a company meets publics' expectations, it can better mitigate the reputational damage inflicted by the crisis; when it fails to meet those expectations, threats to its reputation begin to grow (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

Previous crisis communication studies have generally emphasized the significance of understanding publics' expectations (e.g., Kim, 2014;

Tao, 2018). However, the overwhelming majority of studies consider "expectation" as a taken-for-granted term. As a result, the conceptual understanding of the term is often at a cursory level (Olkkonen & Luoma-Aho, 2015). The current knowledge is quite scant regarding what publics' expectations, in times of crisis, conceptually are for crisis outcomes or the psychological and behavioral mechanism of these public expectations. To fill the void, this study attempts to identify a typology of normative public expectations toward crisis outcomes, i.e., desired crisis outcomes in preventable crisis situations (i.e., an organization is deemed as a culprit [Coombs, 2007]). Built upon social cognitive theory's (Bandura, 1986) three available agents in an uncertain situation like a crisis—primary, collective, and proxy agents—for achieving desirable outcomes, this study conceptualizes public expectations of crisis outcomes in the following three dimensions: public expectations of (a) organizational accommodative responses (i.e., how an in-crisis organization as a primary agent should respond), (b) punishment of the organization (i.e., how publics collectively should respond as a collective agent), and (c) government intervention (i.e., how government as a proxy agent should respond).

This research also aims to explore an incubating set of psychological and behavioral mechanisms that lead to various expectations toward crisis outcomes. In this study, we assume crisis blame as an antecedent

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variable for expectations toward crisis outcomes and communication behaviors as mediators in the relationship between crisis blame and expectations. When confronted with a crisis, publics spontaneously engage in responsibility attribution activities; that is, they quickly form judgements about who is to blame (Weiner, 1985). Motivated by initial evaluations, publics seek more crisis information and take part in online discussions (Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). These online communication behaviors can help them figure out what happened, verify their initial evaluations, elaborate opinions, and develop expectations of the outcome (Lev-On, 2012; Nabi, 2003). Instead of treating publics' psychological crisis responses as a linear process, this study considers such psychological activities—from crisis blame to expectations toward crisis outcomes—as back-and-forth revisions shaped by communication behaviors (Lee, 2005). Previous research in political communication has suggested the mediating role of communication behaviors (e.g., Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). However, knowledge is still limited regarding whether communication mediates psychological dynamics in the corporate crisis context and if it does, how.

Through developing a new typology of public's expectations of crisis outcomes and integrating communication behaviors as mediators, this study theoretically delineates a comprehensive psychological mechanism of public expectations of crisis outcomes. In this way, it assists practitioners in identifying and predicting such expectations and coordinating precise organizational efforts. In addition, by setting its research context in China, this study responds to previous calls for contextually and culturally sensitive research of crisis communication (Huang, Wu, & Cheng, 2016). A great number of crisis communication theories are predominately applicable to democratic countries; relatively few theoretical perspectives are available concerning publics' psychological dynamics in non-democratic societies such as China (Huang et al., 2016). An investigation of Chinese publics' expectations of crisis outcomes extends cross-cultural understandings of the current crisis communication scholarship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public expectations toward crisis outcomes in China

Olkkonen and Luoma-Aho (2015) found that in the public relations field only eight of 197 journal articles provided explicit definitions for expectations—either as beliefs of what should happen or as reference points against which judgments are made, or as collective values about appropriateness and acceptability. This lack of its conceptualization is partly due to the fact that scholars primarily employ the term “expectations” to explain other concepts, such as reputation, responsibility, relationship, legitimacy, or satisfaction (Kim, 2014). Olkkonen and Luoma-Aho (2019) reported that the literature contains seven theories related to expectations. They are social exchange theory, expectancy-value theory, symbolic interaction theory, expectation states theory, expectancy disconfirmation theory, the gap model, and expectation violations theory. While applying these various theories, there has been an underlying assumption in the public relations literature. It is that the only object of public expectations is the organization. It makes sense when dealing with public expectations in the organizational contexts. However, in today's social media era, an organizational crisis often transcends organizational contexts and attracts public attention and debate, ultimately getting transformed into a salient event in the public domain (Authors, 2020; Jaques, 2012). As a result, publics tend to hold expectations of a variety of agents. For instance, during Uber's

sexism scandal,¹ publics expected systematic changes to California's arbitration law. Thus, this study attempts to explore public expectations beyond organizational contexts by investigating them regarding multiple agents using a corporate crisis context that escalated into a high-profile social issue.

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001), human beings can achieve desired outcomes through three types of agents—primary, proxy, and collective agents. In times of corporate crisis, the primary agent tends to be the in-crisis company, which is supposed to solve the crisis and produce desirable outcomes. Bandura (1986) considered that the proxy agent is usually powerful and able to affect outcomes, being responsive to publics' calls and sufficiently benevolent to act on the public behalf. During a preventable crisis, proxy agents could be government, media organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and judiciary institutions (Campbell, 2007). A collective agent refers to a group of people who can achieve desirable outcomes through socially interdependent efforts (e.g., collective consumer boycotts, Bandura, 2001).

Adopting the perspective of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), this study proposes public expectations of crisis outcomes in three dimensions: public expectations of (a) organizational accommodative responses (i.e., how an in-crisis organization as a primary agent should respond), (b) punishment of the organization (i.e., how publics collectively should respond as a collective agent), and (c) government intervention (i.e., how government as a proxy agent should respond). It is based on the assumption that publics would hold expectations toward crisis outcomes from primary, collective, and proxy agents in preventable crisis situations. Such expectations are normative expectations defined as crisis outcomes that publics consider desirable based on their personal values and social norms (Miller, 2000). In a preventable crisis, which by definition is caused by internal factors of a company (Coombs, 2007), the in-crisis company is the primary agent people expect to bring about desirable outcomes. Since publics regard the company as a transgressor, they expect it to adopt accommodative organizational responses such as admitting its wrongdoings, adopting corrective actions, and compensating victims (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). As such, crisis communication theories such as SCCT and contingency theory (CT) hold that an organization in a preventable crisis ought to take an accommodative stance (Coombs, 2007; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010).

The study proposes punishment from collective agents as a second dimension of public expectations for crisis outcomes. This dimension concerns how the general public collectively should respond. Prior literature suggests that during a preventable crisis, publics tend to vent negative emotions against the transgressor and expect it to be punished (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012; Nabi, 2003). For instance, consumers, as a collective agent, boycott and engage in negative publicity about the organization; investors, as a collective agent, dump the organization's stocks (Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). That is, publics may hold normative expectations of some collective agents to discipline and sanction the organization (Levenson, 1981). Such an expectation dimension pertains to retaliation for past misbehaviors and may be motivated by the notion of justice or the venting of negative emotions; the goal is to seek revenge against an unethical organization (Weiner, 2010).

In the past, public expectations toward collective agents may have been less substantial than they are in today's social media era considering a relatively weaker collective power over crisis outcomes compared to corporate power (Li, 2016). Indeed, in the past collective connections and coordination at the societal level tended to be difficult, complicated, and costly (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In today's social

¹ In February 2017, former Uber engineer Susan Fowler accused Uber of having a toxic culture, which ignored sexual harassment incidents and protected power abusers. Her allegation triggered massive criticism of Uber and high-technology companies in Silicon Valley.

media era, however, publics are highly aware of their collective power to retaliate against unethical corporate behaviors (Li & Stacks, 2014). The ubiquitous connectivity established via social media enables the formation of crisis-induced online communities and activist groups (Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Sommerfeldt, 2011). Any social media user can engage in online activism to punish a company through posting, reposting, and using hashtags (e.g., Halpern, Valenzuela, & Katz, 2017). Thus, this study considers that public expectations toward collective agents merit further attention. Public reliance on collective agents in China is still relatively limited compared to that in other democratic countries. Nonetheless, Chinese publics are increasingly vocal online and have boycotted companies (Luo, Zhang, & Marquis, 2016). Social media has certainly empowered Chinese publics to express their concerns in the business domain (Yang, 2013). Therefore, this study proposes that collective punishment of an in-crisis organization is valid in Chinese contexts.

As a third dimension of public expectations of crisis outcomes, the study proposes intervention from proxy agents (i.e. how proxy agents should respond). This paper pays particular attention to government intervention in China. Such government intervention includes government regulations, legislation, and public policy remediation at the societal level (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Hillier-Brown et al., 2014). In China, the only powerful and legitimate proxy agent for regulating unethical and illegal corporate behaviors seems to be the government (Hawes, 2008; Wu, 2007). Other available proxy agents such as media organizations, NGOs, activist groups, and legal institutions are relatively ill-equipped to offset unethical and illegal corporate behaviors in China (Authors, 2020; Yang, 2013). These agents tend to be either officially affiliated with or closely monitored by the government. Under such a socio-cultural context, Chinese publics tend to expect government agencies to intervene in a corporate crisis (Huang & Kim, 2018). From a utilitarian perspective, government intervention would redress unethical practices at the society level and avoid future occurrences of similar crises. In the Sanlu milk scandal, for instance, government intervention has led to radical changes in milk-industry practices.

In democratic countries with laissez-faire capitalist systems, government intervention is relatively minimal (Egorov & Harstad, 2017). Yet a recent survey in the United States suggests that an increasing number of publics expect their government to intervene in corporate crises (Public Affairs Council, 2018). This shift might be because in the current social media era publics can more easily witness corporate crises threatening the social well-being and perceive such threats to be greater (Lim, 2017). Moreover, publics increasingly consider part of the government's responsibility is to safeguard the well-being of a society (Campbell, 2007; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Thus, we believe public expectations of government intervention in preventable crises can be considered universal (Authors, 2020; Campbell, 2007), but in Chinese contexts such expectations would be particularly more salient.

Endorsing social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), this study argues that publics may simultaneously have multiple normative expectations toward various agents such as the in-crisis organization, collective agents (e.g., consumers), and proxy agents (e.g., government in China). Based on the discussion above, this study proposes three dimensions of normative expectations toward outcomes of preventable crisis in China: (a) organizational accommodative responses, (b) punishment of the organization, and c) government intervention.

2.2. Crisis blame as an antecedent

At the center of crisis literature has been a persistent interest in how publics attribute blame for a crisis. When publics face a crisis, one of their initial cognitive reactions is to assign blame, which serves a fundamental psychological need (Weiner, 1985). Crisis blame also helps shape publics' attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral responses to a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Kim & Sung, 2014; Kim, 2014; Tao, 2018). These responses carry implications for an organization's reputation,

legitimacy, and even survival (Coombs, 2016). In times of preventable crisis, publics tend to attribute a high level of blame to the in-crisis company in comparison with blame levels during a victim crisis and accident crisis (Coombs, 2007). The higher the levels of attributed crisis blame, the more likely publics are to demand an organizational accommodative stance (Coombs, 2007). This suggests a positive relationship between crisis blame and publics' expectations for organizational accommodative responses.

Scholars examining emotional approaches have argued that when publics blame a transgressor, they usually experience anger and tend to call for retaliation (e.g., Nabi, 2003; Jin et al., 2012). This study thus posits that crisis blame is also positively related to expectations for an in-crisis organization to be punished. According to the literature, during a preventable crisis, publics are more likely to expect government regulation because they may either believe that the company is unable to clear up the damage or similar crises might happen to other companies (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Rosenthal & Kouzman, 1997). Under either situation, publics tend to blame the company more, suggesting a positive relationship between crisis blame and expectations of government intervention (Lee, 2005). In this sense, when people blame a company heavily, they may further expect government to control or regulate the company so as to derive desirable outcomes. In addition, people tend to utilize all available agents to derive desirable outcomes (Bandura, 1986). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1. Crisis blame positively predicts publics expectations for (a) organizational accommodative responses, (b) punishment, and (c) government intervention.

2.3. Communication-mediated psychological mechanism

Researchers have found that during crises, publics' informational and expressive needs surge exponentially (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Macias et al., 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). A vital motivator of such communication behaviors tends to be initial crisis blame (Austin, Fraustino, Jin, & Liu, 2017; Choi & Lin, 2009; Lee & Song, 2010). As publics attribute greater crisis responsibility to an in-crisis organization, they are more likely to be cognitively and emotionally involved in the crisis (Jin et al., 2012; Kim, 2014; Lee, 2005). In the social media era, publics tend to seek information online and to express themselves there too (Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Stephens & Malone, 2009). Such communication behaviors would in turn affect publics' psychological responses to a crisis such as expectations toward crisis outcomes (Hong & Cameron, 2017). Through participating in social media communication behaviors, publics may bridge their own psychological responses to others' collective reactions, revisit their own attributional activities, and shape their expectations toward crisis outcomes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Hong & Chiu, 2001; Nabi, 2003).

Extant crisis communication literature primarily regards communication behaviors either as outcome variables or as antecedents of publics' psychological activities (e.g., Cho & Gower, 2006; Kim & Grunig, 2011; Nabi, 2003; Zhang, Borden, & Kim, 2018). Researchers have overlooked, relatively, the mediating role that social media communication behaviors play in psychological dynamics. Yet political communication and cultural psychology studies have largely endorsed the notion that communication behaviors mediate attitude changes (e.g., Shah et al., 2005; Hong & Chiu, 2001).

Political communication scholars have assumed that being exposed to or discussing various opinions helps publics "grapple with ideas, elaborate arguments, and reflect upon the information acquired" (Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012, p. 165). Such reflective thinking contributes to strengthening or revising their initial political attitudes and to influencing subsequent participation (Ji, Zhou, & Kim, 2017). Cultural psychologists have demonstrated that communication bridges individual and collective perceptions. Through communication, individuals better understand the consensus of opinions, share beliefs

and codes, which further contributes to the refinement of their initial judgments and formation of subsequent attitudes (Hong & Chiu, 2001). This is because individuals' perceptions, attributions, and evaluations are subject to social influences (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). Seeking and expressing varied viewpoints on social media facilitate publics' reflections on and revisions of their initial psychological and cognitive responses to a crisis. This in turn gives rise to their crisis outcome expectations, suggesting that communication behaviors during a crisis act as a mediator in publics' psychological dynamics.

When it comes to the direction of communication behaviors' mediating roles, the communication-mediated expectations toward crisis outcomes will be largely dependent on information content that publics seek out or on the online discussions in which they participate. Framing studies have found that when publics have access to information that blames society, they are more likely to call for societal solutions, such as those involving government intervention (Iyengar, 1991). When publics have access to information that blames the in-crisis organization, they are more likely to expect organizational accommodation (Coombs, 2007; Pang et al., 2010). When publics have access to information framed with anger, they are more likely to call for retributive solutions (Nabi, 2003). As such, the direction of communication behaviors' mediating roles can vary depending on the content and angle of information to which publics are exposed. The current study aims to investigate the mediating roles of communication behaviors rather than the effect of information content. Hence, it sets forth no specific hypotheses regarding the directions of communication's mediation effects on three types of expectations. Rather, it raises research questions about mediations of communication behaviors:

- RQ1: How does information seeking mediate the impacts of crisis blame on publics' expectations of (a) organizational accommodative responses, (b) organization punishment, and (c) government intervention?
- RQ2: How does online expression mediate the impacts of crisis blame on publics' expectations of (a) organizational accommodative responses, (b) organization punishment, and (c) government intervention?

3. Method

3.1. Data collection procedures and survey sample

This study concerns publics' actual reactions and communication behaviors in times of crisis. Therefore, it employed an online survey, following a real preventable corporate crisis (i.e., Beijing RYB Kindergarten crisis² in which RYB was accused as an offender). In early December of 2017, two weeks after the Beijing RYB Kindergarten crisis, Beijing consumer panels were invited from parenthood community sites as members of these sites were considered most relevant publics (including parents of young kids, adults who are planning for pregnancy, and grandparents who are involved in parenting) to the selected crisis. The screening question directed only those who were aware of the crisis to proceed to the survey. Each respondent was rewarded US\$2.33 in exchange for their participation. The survey was administered online and took on average 10 min to complete.

Included in the final sample were a total of 508 responses. Females accounted for 66.3 % (n = 337). The average age was 29, ranging from 18 to 57 (SD = 7.40). Approximately 92.2 % (n = 464) were college or

² RYB Education is a New-York listed company with almost 500 kindergartens and over 1,300 play-and-learn centers in approximately 300 cities in China (Reuters, 2017). RYP crisis summary: In late November 2017, Children attending RYB kindergarten at Xintiandi, Chaoyang District, Beijing, had been pierced with needles and fed unidentified pills by a teacher named Liu, who was later arrested by Beijing police.

higher degree graduates. Approximately 83.9 % (n = 427) of participants spent over an hour on social media each day. The average monthly income of Beijing residents is US\$683 (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Of this study's participants, approximately 57 % (n = 290) had a higher income, more than US\$1,148. The target RYB consumers are urban residents who are willing to pay a relatively high tuition for early childhood education and whose children range in age from a new-born to six years old (RYB, 2021, n.d.). The sample of the study was deemed appropriate because, in terms of age and income, the participants generally matched the traits of RYB target consumers.

3.2. Survey instruments

The survey was administrated in Chinese and all variables were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). To ensure the accuracy and cultural relevance, all borrowed items were translated into Chinese using a back-translation method and modified to fit with the Chinese context. Crisis blame (M = 5.71, SD = 1.09, Cronbach's α = .84) was measured through an established scale with four items (Kim, 2014). A sample item is "The company is highly responsible for the crisis." Online information seeking (M = 4.59, SD = 1.55, Cronbach's α = .90) were measured with five items, which were adapted from communicative action in problem solving scale (Chen, Hung-Baesecke, & Kim, 2016). A sample item is "I actively sought for relevant information on social media." Online expression (M = 2.69, SD = 1.35, Cronbach's α = .92) was measured with five items, which were borrowed from Lovari and Parisi (2015). Sample items are "I shared social media posts related to this topic" and "I wrote comments on the posts related to this topic on social media."

Regarding the three dimensions of public expectations toward crisis outcomes, the scale of corporate accommodative responses was adapted from SCCT and Jin and Cameron (2006). Items for punishment of the organization were developed based upon consumer power studies (e.g., French, Raven, & Cartwright, 1959; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). The scale of government intervention was developed based on issue management and public health research (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2009; Hillier-Brown et al., 2014). See Table 1 for measurement items of the three dimensions of public expectations.

Table 1
The Scale of Public Expectations toward Crisis Outcomes.

Items	Factor Loadings		
	Gov	Acco	Puni
I expect the adoption of related public policies.	.94		
I expect the government to regulate the kindergarten education industry.	.86		
I expect related legislation.	.78		
I expect regulatory intervention for the crisis.	.74		
I expect the company should admit wrongdoing and take responsibility for the crisis.		.87	
I expect the company should apologize to publics.		.85	
I expect the company should ensure the victims receive adequate treatment.		.85	
I expect the company should collaborate with publics to settle the crisis.		.80	
I expect consumers should boycott the company.			.92
I expect investors should dump stocks of the company.			.88
I expect the company should go bankrupt.			.83
Eigenvalues	5.42	2.28	1.11
Variances	45.38 %	18.53 %	7.63 %
Cronbach's Alpha	.91	.91	.90
Mean (SD)	6.50 (0.80)	6.17 (0.91)	4.48 (1.43)

Note: Gov = Government Intervention; Acco = Organizational Accommodative Responses; Puni = Punishment of the organization; N = 508; A principal axis factoring analysis with promax rotation was conducted.

4. Results

4.1. Construct validity tests

Before testing the hypotheses, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to examine the three-dimensional structure of publics' expectations toward crisis outcomes. Satisfactory results were obtained, i. e., Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measures of sampling adequacy were .90, and Bartlett's tests of sphericity were significant ($p < .000$); all three dimensions have been identified as significant factors, with Eigenvalues greater than 1 and factor loadings for each item greater than .07 (See Table 1). Then, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed with all variables included so as to examine their discriminant and convergent validities. The results revealed a good model fit for the measurement model: $\chi^2 = 332.72$ with 194 *df*, $\chi^2/df = 1.72$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .98, incremental fit index (IFI) = .98, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .04 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The discriminant and convergent validities of all constructs were of no concern in terms of the criteria of Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson, 2009; see Table 2).

4.2. Testing the communication-mediated model

To test all hypotheses in a model, this study employed a structural equation modeling method using AMOS 23 rather than PROCESS Macro. PROCESS can investigate only one dependent variable at a time. The SEM model revealed a satisfactory model fit: $\chi^2 = 321.86$ with 195 *df*, $\chi^2/df = 1.65$, CFI = .98, TLI = .98, IFI = .99, RMSEA = .04. For simple mediation hypothesis tests, this study, using AMOS 23 with an indirect effect plugin (StatWiki, 2021, n.d.), took the bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs) approach (10,000 bootstrap samples for bias-corrected bootstrap, 95 %). The bootstrap method provides relatively higher power and lower Type 1 error rates (Kim, 2019).

H1s were concerned with whether crisis blame positively predicted various expectations toward crisis outcomes. Results revealed that there were positively significant direct impacts of crisis blame on (a)

Table 2
Discriminant and Convergent Validities of All Constructs and Correlations.

Constructs	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR (H)
Crisis Blame (Blam)	.88	.70	.47	.95
Organizational Accommodative Responses (Acco)	.91	.71	.47	.91
Punishment (Puni)	.91	.76	.25	.98
Government Intervention (Gov)	.91	.72	.41	.98
Online Expression (Expr)	.92	.75	.25	.98
Information Seeking (Info)	.90	.70	.25	.97

Correlations matrix and the square root of AVE on the diagonal						
Constructs	Blame	Acco	Punish	Gov	Expr	Info
Blam	.84					
Acco	.68	.84				
Puni	.50	.45	.87			
Gov	.40	.64	.19	.85		
Expr	.12	.12	.21	-.01	.87	
Info	.19	.24	.18	.14	.50	.84

Note:

1. CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted, MSV = maximum shared variance, MaxR(H) = maximal reliability.
2. Satisfactory convergent validities indicate that the following criteria were met: for each construct (a) the composite reliability was greater than .70; (b), the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) was larger than .50; (c) the composite reliability was larger than AVE.
3. An acceptable discriminant validity for each construct means that the AVE was greater than the square of the correlation, maximum shared variances (MSVs).
4. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

organizational accommodative responses ($\beta = .66, p < .001$), (b) punishment of the organization ($\beta = .48, p < .001$), and (c) government intervention ($\beta = .39, p < .001$). Hence, H1a, H1b, and H1c were supported. These results suggest that the more publics blame an in-crisis organization, the more they expect to see the following: the organization being accommodating, the organization being punished, and society intervening. The standardized estimate for organizational accommodative responses was larger than those for the other two dimensions. See Fig. 1 for standardized estimates for all paths.

RQ1s asked how information seeking mediates the relationship between crisis blame and the three types of expectations of crisis outcomes—(a) organization being accommodating, (b) organization being punished, and (c) society intervening. In terms of RQ1a and RQ1b, results of simple mediation tests in SEM showed that the indirect effects of information seeking between crisis blame and (a) organizational accommodative responses ($Effect = .022, SE = .009, CIs = [.008, .047]$) and (c) government intervention ($Effect = .021, SE = .009, CIs = [.007, .047]$) were positively significant, as 95 % CIs were entirely above zero. These results indicate that publics' crisis blame increased their information-seeking behaviors, and, in turn, heightened their expectations of organizational accommodative responses and government intervention.

Regarding RQ1b, however, the indirect effect of crisis blame via information seeking on expectations for the organization being punished was negative and insignificant, as 95 % CIs included zero ($Effect = -.007, SE = .016, CIs = [-.042, .023]$). The results reveal that although publics' blame for the crisis significantly increased their information-seeking behaviors ($\beta = .19, p < .001$), their information-seeking behaviors did not predict their expectations of punishment ($\beta = -.02, p > .05$; see Fig. 1 for path estimates). Therefore, mediations through information seeking failed to occur for punishment-related expectations.

RQ2s concerned the mediation effects of online expression in the publics' psychological dynamics. Results of RQ2a revealed that the indirect effect of crisis blame—via online expression—on expectations of organizational accommodative responses was negative and insignificant, as 95 % of CIs fell into a zero-included range ($Effect = -.004, SE = .005, CIs = [-.017, .004]$). As shown in Fig. 1, crisis blame positively contributed to their online expression behaviors ($\beta = .12, p < .05$). However, such online expression did not influence publics' expectations of the organization to be accommodating ($\beta = -.03, p > .05$).

Nevertheless, results of RQ2b demonstrate that the mediation effects of online expression on the relationship between crisis blame and expectations of the organization being punished were positively significant, as 95 % CIs were above zero ($Effect = .028, SE = .015, CIs = [.007, .068]$). This indicates that crisis blame increased publics' online expression behaviors, and, in turn, raised their expectations of the organization punishment by social actors. The significant mediation effects of online expression were also found in the process from crisis blame to expectations of government intervention (RQ3c), as 95 % CIs fell outside the region including zero ($Effect = -.016, SE = .008, CIs = [-.039, -.004]$). Interestingly, the direction of such significant indirect effects was negative. This would suggest that publics' increased online expression behaviors due to crisis blame decreased their expectations of government intervention ($\beta = -.15, p < .01$; see Fig. 1 for path estimates).

5. Discussion

5.1. Chinese public expectations toward crisis outcomes

The findings of the study suggest that expectations are concurrently held in the three categories, and of the three the highest expectation concerns government intervention. This high level of expectation about intervention could be explained by the prominent role that the government plays in China. Building on 2000 years of administrative bureaucracy and a contemporary socialist market economy, the Chinese

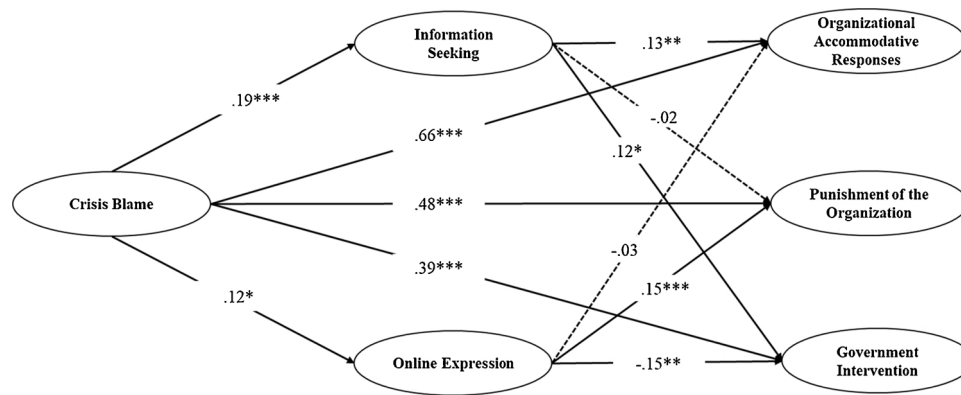


Fig. 1. Results of Estimated Standardized Effects among the Constructs in the SEM Model.

Note: $N = 508$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; solid lines indicate significant paths and dashed lines refer to insignificant paths.

government has both cultural and political legitimacy to regulate corporate behavior (Wu, 2007). Consequently, Chinese publics tend to regard the government as their adjudicator, arbiter, and protector when faced with a preventable corporate crisis (Authors, 2019; Huang & Kim, 2018). Chinese publics may expect the government to intervene because they believe that its intervention through policy revision and regulation is the most effective solution to prevent similar crises in the future (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2009).

The findings also suggest that people reveal relatively low expectations for the organization being punished. Although Chinese publics have exercised collective power in the business domain (Yang, 2013), they have relatively little experience in achieving desirable outcomes through collective agents (i.e., successfully punishing the organization through collective boycotts). Despite its relatively low level, the significance of the punishment dimension indicates that this expectation is nevertheless held among Chinese publics. According to psychology literature, punishment is closely related to negative feelings and notions of justice (Weiner, 2010). Thus, the existence of collective punishment expectations could be interpreted as that Chinese publics are also expecting the culprit of the crisis to be punished through venting negative emotions and seeking justice.

The study's results also suggest that people highly expect the in-crisis organization to take an accommodative stance. This is consistent with mainstream crisis communication literature (e.g., SCCT and CT studies). This field of research tends to emphasize the significance of an in-crisis organization applying accommodative responses to meet publics' expectations during preventable crisis.

When comparing effect sizes of crisis blame on the three dimensional expectations, the smallest effect is on government intervention; a moderate effect is on punishment of the organization, and the largest effect is on organizational accommodation in crisis responses. That is, crisis blame is most likely to lead people expecting the organization to be accommodating in its response. Given the object of crisis blame measured is the primary agent (i.e., the in-crisis organization), it is not surprising for organizational accommodative responses to have the strongest relationship with crisis blame.

5.2. Mediating role of communication behaviors

Noteworthy findings of the study are the mediating roles communication behaviors play in publics' psychological processes. The study finds the mediation mechanism to be inconsistent depending on whether communication is included as a mediator. Without the impacts of communication behaviors, psychological mechanisms from crisis blame to the three distinct expectations are all positive and significant. However, with communication behaviors as mediators, the mediation model manifests quite diverse psychological paths leading to different expectations, including positive, negative, and insignificant paths. In this

sense, we argue that communication as a mediator changes publics' psychological dynamic. The findings can be interpreted such that communication contributes to a deeper intrapersonal reflection and rational reasoning process and thus may alter publics' attitudes (Ji et al., 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2012). The findings may also suggest that publics' expectations can change according to the communication that forms their collective crisis judgments (Hong & Chiu, 2001; Lau, Chiu, & Lee, 2001). Regardless of how the findings are interpreted, the mediating roles of communication merit further academic attention. Especially, in today's social media era, publics may be more subjected to the impacts of pervasive communication behaviors (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017).

In terms of specific communication behaviors, when information seeking is a mediator, the present work finds significant and positive indirect effects of crisis blame on expectations of organizational accommodation and government intervention. As the level of crisis blame increases, publics tend to participate in more information-seeking behavior, and they might, in turn, expect more accommodating responses and government intervention. As discussed above, what publics expect in terms of crisis outcomes is affected by the information that publics seek out during a crisis or the collective opinions to which they are exposed. In our research context, the RYB crisis shook up China's early childhood education industry. The widely-supported mainstream online opinion not only demanded accommodations to be made by RYB but also called for industry-wide regulations and societal-level solutions (Reuters, 2017). It seems that information seekers who were exposed to these online opinions expected the organization to be accommodative and the government to be spurred to action through regulatory intervention, legislation, policy making, and industry cleanup (Ji & Kim, 2020; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). These findings hint at the potential impact of crisis information framing based on the framing theory (Iyengar, 1991; Nabi, 2003), and future research can further investigate the interplay between information content (e.g., frames) and communication behavior in forming specific public expectations of crisis outcomes.

In contrast, information seeking does not mediate the relationship between crisis blame and expectations of an organization being punished. That said, the way crisis blame affects public expectations of organization punishment does not differ by the level of information-seeking behavior. This particular finding can also be explained by the mainstream online opinions concerning crisis solutions during the given crisis (Reuters, 2017). People do not necessarily believe that punishing an organization contributes to solving a crisis. Rather, expecting an organization to be punished is primarily a function of the need to vent emotions (e.g., anger, Jin et al., 2012) and of consumer power executions (French et al., 1959; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Thus, the mediating effects of information seeking may fade in the publics' psychological dynamics.

A related finding is that, with online expression as the mediator, the indirect effects of crisis blame on publics' expectations of the organization punishment are positive and significant. The more that publics actively engage in online expression behaviors—with higher crisis blame—the more they expect to see the organization punished. This result can also be interpreted from an emotional approach. Previous studies have found that the angrier the publics, the more likely they are to expect the organization to be punished (Jin et al., 2012; Nabi, 2003; Weiner, 2010). Literature has also suggested that in times of a crisis, publics tend to vent their grief and anger through online expressions (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Macias et al., 2009). Driven by negative emotions, especially anger, publics' online expression behaviors tend to bridge their crisis blame with subsequent expectations of punishment.

In addition, the study suggests that the initially significant and positive relationship between crisis blame and expectations of organizational accommodative responses becomes insignificant when mediated by online expression. That is, the relationship of crisis blame intensifying the degree to which people expect an organization to be accommodating does not differ by the people's level of online expression. That is, expressing their feelings online does not affect the degree to which people expect an organization to be accommodating. As discussed above, a possible explanation is that those who express themselves online tend to be emotion venters (Jin et al., 2012; Kim, 2016).

When online expression is included as the mediator, the positive direct effects of crisis blame on publics' expectations of government intervention turn negative. That is, for publics actively publishing their opinions online, the higher the crisis blame they hold, the less they expect the government to intervene. This finding goes against existing knowledge. Previous studies have suggested that online expression functions to mobilize resources and achieve external help in crises (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Thus, it is rational to infer that online expressers are more likely to expect intervention from social institutions such as media and government because such social institutions are better equipped to address the crisis effectively. This contradictory finding might be explained by looking at China's unique context. China's Internet censorship is comprehensively tight and potent (Morozov, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). Although social media empowers ordinary users to discuss social issues, Chinese publics are far from being entirely free to express opinions related to political institutionalization (e.g., legislation and policy-making) and to collective action mobilization (Faris & Villeneuve, 2008; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2014). In the political context, Chinese social media users practice a high level of self-censorship (Ji et al., 2017). The more they express their opinions online, the more they are likely to avoid political appeals, while restricting their online expressions to the company-consumer domain (MacKinnon, 2011). This unique context might have contributed to the negative relationship between online expression and expectations of social intervention.

5.3. Theoretical and practical implications

This study proposes an examination of publics' expectations of crisis outcomes through a three-dimensional approach. The concept of public expectation in this study is pertinent to the outcomes that publics desire most in a preventable crisis based on personal values and socially shared beliefs. Hinging on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), the study categorizes what publics expect as outcomes from primary, collective, and proxy agents. The outcomes are as follows: (a) the in-crisis organization's accommodative responses, (b) collective punishment of the organization, and (c) government intervention. This conceptual understanding sheds light on the normative aspect of expectations and rests on one presumption. That is, in the social media era, a corporate crisis may easily escalate into a high-profile event in the public domain wherein publics hold multiple expectations toward a variety of agents (Bandura, 1986; Jaques, 2012). This assumption differs from a good deal of the crisis communication literature, which assumes that an in-crisis

organization is the sole agent to shoulder publics' expectations (Olkkonen & Luoma-Aho, 2015). By considering public expectations of crisis outcomes beyond the organizational contexts, this study provides fresh insights into the current conceptual understandings of public expectations.

In addition, to understand communication behaviors in the social media era, this study puts forward a dynamic perspective (Hong & Chiu, 2001; Shah et al., 2005). That is, communication behaviors are not only a consequence of immediate psychological responses to a crisis such as crisis blame but also as an influencer of subsequent perceptions, evaluations, and attitudes such as expectations toward crisis outcomes (Hong & Chiu, 2001; Kim & Grunig, 2011). Practically, these findings provide valuable implications. First, given the direct effect of crisis blame attribution on public expectations of crisis, crisis managers should assess the level of blame publics are attributing to the company. Doing so will help managers anticipate the levels of organizational accommodation, punishment, and governmental intervention that the publics will expect. Being able to make reasonable conjectures about such expectations will in fact help crisis manager better manage public expectations. Indeed, during a crisis what is critical to reducing negative public reactions is for an in-crisis organization to meet and exceed public expectations toward the three different agents regarding crisis outcomes. Second, utilizing communication behaviors as a segmentation tool, crisis managers can identify varied public expectations for crisis outcomes and even predict them. Crisis managers can segment publics based on their communication behaviors through identifying active information seekers and online expressers. Active information seekers and online expressers can be classified using publics' demographic characteristics, crisis-involvement levels, media or news consumption patterns, and previous online activities. In this way, managers can match the organization's efforts with the publics' crisis expectations. To appease active information seekers, crisis managers should proactively adopt an information strategy, such as a timely crisis information disclosure (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). In today's social media era, if active information seekers cannot have access to effective information from the organization, they will seek out information coming from third parties such as the media or key opinion leaders. In this case, the organization will miss the opportunity to manage the narrative (e.g., content, tone, and timing of crisis information; Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). To pacify online expressers, crisis managers should also consider adopting emotion-related strategies (e.g., showing sympathy). It is because online expressers tend to have higher expectations of punishment of the organization, giving rise to organizational risks of facing online activism such as consumer boycotts.

6. Limitations and future research

The findings of the study should be interpreted with caution due to its limitations. A primary one is that the study employed an online survey. As with all online surveys, the sample is essentially a convenient sample and its representativeness is difficult to evaluate (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). Thus, this study calls for more studies with a variety of samples to examine a replication of findings, which would further extend our understanding of public expectations of crisis outcomes. In addition, since survey data cannot detect causal relationships in nature, future studies should adopt experimental methods to further examine the mediated psychological mechanisms discovered herein. Moreover, the typology of public expectations toward crisis outcomes was newly developed and empirically tested in the context of China. Thus, the relationships found in this study may not be generalizable to other countries. The present research calls for future studies to explore its applicability in other societies. Besides, public expectations of crisis outcomes tested in this study are grounded only in preventable crisis situations. For generalizability, future studies should examine them in other crisis types. Lastly, this study recommends future research to investigate the relationships between publics' expectations toward crisis

outcomes and organizational crisis-response strategies. Such a stream of research would contribute to both crisis communication scholarship and effective crisis management.

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