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CORPORATE CONSCIENCE: APPLYING ETHICS OF CARE INFORMED

CRISIS RESPONSES TO CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY BACKLASH

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Christen Lauren Buckley

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The dissertation of Christen Buckley was reviewed and approved by the following:

Denise Sevick Bortree
Professor of Advertising and Public Relations
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Holly Overton
Associate Professor of Advertising and Public Relations

Colleen Connolly-Ahern
Associate Professor of Advertising and Public Relations

Patrick Plaisance
Don W. Davis Professor in Ethics

Anthony Olorunnisola
Professor of Film-Video Media Studies
Head of the Department or Chair of the Graduate Program

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is threefold. First, this study improves practitioners' and scholars' understanding of the efficacy of incorporating ethically informed language into crisis responses, specifically the degree of ethics of care. Second, the present study applies the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to explore the most effective crisis responses (rebuild-apology x diminish-excuse) to backlash to a corporate social advocacy (CSA) initiative. The tertiary goal of this study is to explore how different ethics-of-care-informed crisis responses, specifically diminish-excuse or rebuild-apology, impact corporate reputation, subsequent supportive or non-supportive behavioral intentions toward the corporation, and activism intentions toward the issue. Methodologically, this study contributes to the growing body of research on CSA and provides an empirically tested example of incorporating ethics of care into experimental research. In addition, this study considers the potential of mitigating or elevating crisis as a result of backlash to CSA and teases out both supportive and non-supportive intentions toward a company, as well as increased activism intentions on behalf of an issue. Results indicate that stakeholders may respond to lower perceived care in diminish-excuse crisis response with greater activism intentions in an attempt to fill a perceived void in the corporations' CSA efforts. In addition, findings indicate that providing no response to backlash to CSA as a crisis can potentially increase boycott intentions. The practical and theoretical implications of applying SCCT and ethics of care to a CSA context, as well as future research, are posited.

Keywords: corporate social advocacy, situational crisis communication theory, ethics of care, crisis response type, corporate reputation

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2018, the coffee giant Starbucks was implicated in a public relations crisis. On April 12th, business partners Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson were arrested in a Philadelphia Starbucks after an employee called the police (Neuman, 2018). The two African American men had been sitting in the store without having ordered anything yet waiting for an associate. Their subsequent arrest was viewed by many to be a prime example of racism. After the video of their arrest by Philadelphia police went viral, Starbucks and the city of Philadelphia were faced with intense backlash on social media. Protests and calls for boycotts threatened Starbucks's reputation and its relationship with stakeholders. In response, Starbucks shut down 8,000 of its stores for an entire day for mandatory racial-bias training (Neuman, 2018). It also agreed to a settlement with the two businessmen for an undisclosed sum and included an offer of free college tuition to complete bachelor's degrees through an online program with Arizona State University that was created four years ago for Starbucks employees (Neuman, 2018).

In 2015, in response to a series of racially charged police shootings that became prevalent in the public discourse, Starbucks presented its "Race Together" campaign. The campaign was intended to establish racial justice as a foundational company value and to associate Starbucks with facilitating open discussion and encouraging conversations of racial inequality by having baristas write "#RaceTogether" on cups. Unfortunately, the campaign was deemed to be a failure. Both supporters and opponents of racial justice disparaged the campaign online as a misalignment of values. Starbucks was accused of being patronizing and "seizing upon a moment of national crisis to promote the brand and preach through the company megaphone" (Taylor, 2019, para. 9). After billions of Twitter impressions, Starbucks quietly rolled back the initiative. In 2012,

Starbucks aligned itself with another social-political issue and released statements on its Facebook page in support of same-sex marriage in Washington State (Yim, 2021). Several conservative groups organized boycotts of the brand; however, the scope of the negative online conversation was much more contained than in 2015. In this instance, Starbucks's CEO doubled down on the company's stance and suggested that dissenting shareholders 'sell [their] shares of Starbucks and buy shares in another company. Thank you very much' (Carr, 2015).

Consider these scenarios and the differing responses from the organization. Each response was salient for a different stakeholder group, and the nuances of each situation elicited different responses from Starbucks. These real-world scenarios reflect the findings of literature surrounding crisis management that encourage a situational evaluation of potential crises and crisis responses. This is broadly known as situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), a framework that has been widely used in communication research to classify crises and crisis responses in typographies that will best mitigate reputational harm (Coombs, 2017).

The Starbucks examples in 2012 and 2015, represent a particular practice that involves "controversial, contemporary, and overt statements made by corporations on social issues" (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020, p. 351) and that increases the risk of reputational harm if ill-received. This is known as Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) (Dodd, 2018). CSA is understood to represent corporate participation in controversial social-political issues (Dodd, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014). CSA presents several benefits to both practitioners and theorists, including but not limited to engaging the public (Ciszek & Logan, 2018) and building upon past conceptualizations of organizational investment in society through public relationships, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSA issues range from broad social justice initiatives, such as Ben and Jerry's support of LGBTQ+ rights (Ciszek & Logan, 2018), to more salient issues, such as the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020), and have involved corporations from numerous industries. CSA scholarship has identified the

benefits of such campaigns on corporate reputation and supportive outcomes, with variables such as perceived fit, perceived authenticity, etc., often influencing the relationships between such campaigns and communicative outcomes (Lim & Young, 2021).

By virtue of its controversial nature, CSA has the potential to elicit backlash. This can become a crisis when stakeholders' negative reactions to the CSA initiative are prolific enough to threaten the organization's reputation. For example, Starbucks's stance on same-sex marriage in 2012 upset a small group of stakeholders, which the CEO dismissed in his statement. However, the 2015 "Race Together" campaign has become a textbook example of CSA gone awry (Overton et al., 2020; Abitbol, et al., 2018). To better understand the impact of backlash to CSA, this study will apply the SCCT framework to navigate when backlash to CSA becomes a crisis, which will both expand upon crisis management literature and contribute to the growing body of literature on CSA. As publics continue to expect companies to be actively involved in societal issues, applying situational crisis frameworks will allow corporations to mitigate reputational harm from backlash.

According to Coombs (2007a; 2012), stakeholders should be the first priority, and reputation should be the second priority within SCCT; however, it is easy to see why this doesn't always occur in practice, as organizations navigate their survival in an ever-changing market. This claim is especially salient to consider when navigating a crisis in a CSA context. If corporations are going to align themselves with social-political issues, they must do so ethically and with consideration of the potential harm of such campaigns. Beyond the harm that comes from alienating stakeholders, a company's misused ownership of an issue could potentially take away agency from marginalized groups at the heart of the issue or impact how the issue is situated in society at large (Madden & Alt, 2021). At the same time, the controversial nature of CSA puts a spotlight on different sides of issues, which has the potential to amplify previously overlooked perspectives and to invite communication from *all* stakeholders if conducted ethically. As social-political issues become pervasive throughout our communication systems,

there is a need for CSA communication that considers the interests of the publics, can accommodate the divisive nature of such issues, and can shepherd stakeholders through the corporations' CSA initiatives with care.

Ethics of care also presents public relations scholars with the opportunity to build upon the situational approach to crisis communication theory in an ethically sound manner (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Corporations are beholden to their publics and must manage their relationships with these publics to ensure their survival in a crisis (Ledingham, 2003; Coombs, 2017). Ethics of care can help to respond to a crisis more effectively in a way that accounts for the situational elements, encourages positive communication, and acknowledges the unique elements of the audience. Lastly, an ethics-of-care framework also provides a theoretical connection as to how the ethical culture of an organization can contribute to a shared sense of ethics at the societal level (Schauster, 2015). By incorporating this ethical paradigm purposefully, public relations can return to its role as the ethical leader of corporations and can contribute to human flourishing through its socially responsible actions.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Within this chapter, a summary of relevant CSA research will be presented. Important theoretical applications and key outcomes will be identified to orient the current position of CSA in public relations literature; this includes how CSA has been defined and measured and important aspects of CSA communication that need to be expanded upon, acknowledged, or improved. Secondly, a review of crisis communication models will be conducted to justify the exploration of negative responses to CSA in a crisis framework; this will include unpacking SCCT, which will be applied in this study. The following section of this chapter will focus more specifically on how and when stakeholders engage in backlash to CSA, how and when this backlash becomes a crisis, and the explored crisis responses. The contributions of these inquiries to CSA literature will be outlined, and the benefit of considering backlash to CSA within a crisis context will be posited. The last section will explore ethics of care—from central philosophical claims to application in public relations—in an effort to demonstrate how applying the framework within the SCCT model will encourage ethically informed crisis management.

Corporate Social Advocacy

Public relations practitioners are currently experiencing the rise of a major trend in which businesses are engaging in civil discourse in a new way by publicly advocating for a perspective on a variety of polarizing social issues. The rise of this trend is the result of newfound societal expectations of corporations, whom stakeholders now believe should take a stand on issues

impacting the society they are profiting from (Dodd, 2018). Many corporations have risen to the occasion, aligning themselves with a variety of issues to varying degrees.

In 2022, Yelp announced that it would assist its employees who were seeking abortions after the overturn of Roe v. Wade (Gupta & Hirsch, 2022), Target pledged its support of LGBTQ rights by implementing gender-neutral bathrooms (Yim, 2021), and Nike released its 30th anniversary "Just Do It" campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, who became the face of the fight for racial justice in the United States by kneeling in protest at professional football games during the national anthem (Kittelstrom, 2018). Nike's Kaepernick campaign is a widely cited example of what has come to be known within public relations research as corporate social advocacy (CSA) (Kim et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022).

Not all brands have enjoyed the positive reception of CSA attempts. Pepsi's 2017 "Jump In" advertisement, which tried to capitalize on the Black Lives Matter movement, garnered instantaneous criticism for co-opting a social issue and was called the "fail of the year" (Victor, 2017; Adams, 2017). In 2019, Gillette released a new campaign based on its decades-old tagline "The Best a Man Can Get" in support of the #MeToo movement; the campaign content was centered on challenging toxic masculinity. However, backlash quickly erupted from multiple stakeholder groups. Those who opposed the issue or took offense to the company's stance vowed to stop purchasing Gillette products (Smith, 2019). The campaign also faced criticism from stakeholders in support of #MeToo, who claimed the campaign was not effective enough to combat misogyny and, therefore, performative (Matthews et al., 2019). As evidenced by this example, CSA initiatives can have unexpected consequences for corporations. This, in combination with the polarizing nature of the social-political issues in question, puts corporations at risk (Dodd & Supa, 2015).

Definitions and Distinctions

The idea of a corporation as an advocate has been explored in business ethics, mass communication, and organizational psychology research, among other areas of study (Ham & Kim, 2019; Kim & Park, 2011; Chang et al., 2021). As a result, what constitutes corporate advocacy across disciplines remains unclear. Within communication research, multiple conceptualizations have been presented. Scholars have described the act of a corporation advocating for a social issue as "corporate political advocacy" (Wettstein & Baur, 2016), "corporate social advocacy" (Dodd & Supa, 2014), "social issues management" (Coombs & Holladay, 2018), "cause-marketing" (Chang et al., 2021), and "corporate activism" (Gilkerson, 2017), among other descriptions. Certain scholars have drawn the distinction between corporate political advocacy and corporate social advocacy based on the inclusion of profit-related goals or political actions, such as lobbying (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Hydock et al., 2019), while others avow this delineation and group social and political issues and actions together (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). While this is a valuable conversation, it is beyond the scope of this study to operationalize corporate social advocacy versus corporate political advocacy.

Arguably, the most widely used definition and term is "corporate social advocacy," which was first conceptualized as a corporation's public stance on a controversial social-political issue with the intention to persuade others to take up the same position. Corporate social advocacy can take many forms, from CEO statements to advertising campaigns. It often involves the alienation of certain stakeholder groups, and relevance to the company's values is not necessary (Dodd & Supa, 2014; 2015). Dodd (2018) further operationalizes the concept termed "corporate social-political advocacy" (also abbreviated CSA) as intentional and unintentional corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues outside of the entity's normal sphere of interest. Dodd (2018) also links "corporate social-political advocacy" to public interest

communications, which is in line with the goals of this study. As evidenced, the nomenclature of the concept is still debated. However, the more widely used term remains corporate social advocacy; therefore, CSA will refer to "corporate social advocacy" throughout this study.

This study utilizes the term CSA with the understanding that it represents the notion of corporate social-political advocacy, given that the nature of many issues studied at the center of CSA (e.g., gun control) can become politically charged social issues. Issues will change and move in and out of the political sphere, and the parameters of CSA need to be concretely defined based on aspects of corporate engagement. Thus, I operationalize CSA as a corporation taking a public stance on a controversial social-political issue. CSA is identifiable by companies 1) responding to stakeholder expectations to engage in social-political issues and 2) expending resources and engaging in risk by taking public stances on issues that may transcend their interests and alienate or attract stakeholders.

Communication scholars initially examined CSA in relation to corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Den Hond et al., 2014). CSR represents a conscious effort to unite against a more one-sided issue (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). However, as CSA has developed, the tenets of CSR have become insufficient for evaluating and capturing all aspects of the concept. According to Dodd and Supa (2015), "Corporate social advocacy (CSA) materializes as an important communication, public relations function when organizations (whether intentionally or not) align themselves with a controversial social-political issue outside their normal sphere of CSR interest" (p. 288). Corporate social responsibility theory posits that corporations should dedicate efforts to improve their community to effectively nurture positive stakeholder relationships (Kim & Park, 2011). By dedicating resources to philanthropic or community needs, the relationship between the organization and its public is strengthened (Bortree, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). This is considered to be a long-term investment that is most often defined by its low risk and high benefits (Gautier et al., 2015).

An important distinction to make between CSA and CSR is the extremity of the issue at hand and the actions taken. Various definitions of corporate social advocacy reflect this extremity. In descriptions of corporate advocacy, the issue at hand is often positioned diametrically within society, the established stance is more direct and finite, and the goal at hand is to influence the majority of a divided audience to join the corporation's agenda (Dodd, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Most notably, scholars consider CSA to be riskier than traditional CSR (Kim et al., 2020). It is this association of corporate social advocacy with risk and controversy that distances corporate advocacy from CSR. This study seeks to understand how corporations advocate for controversial socio-political issues within the established systems that are usually home to CSR initiatives.

Applied Theoretical Arguments

Being that the construct of CSA is relatively young, different theoretical applications are still being explored. Public relations theories centered on explaining the various elements of an organization's relationships with stakeholders are at the forefront of scholarly investigations of CSA. According to Li et al.'s (2020) application of stakeholder theory and consumer-involvement theory, CSA can be used to segment stakeholder groups based on how their values align with the organization's values. CSA has also been investigated through the lens of legitimacy theory (Yim, 2021), relationship management theory (Browning et al., 2020), and the theory of planned behavior (Overton et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2015). Lim and Young (2021) sought to explore the relationship between CSA and corporate reputation by applying issue-ownership theory, determining that both perceived CSA-brand fit, and perceived authenticity impacted Ben & Jerry's issue-specific corporate reputation. Lim and Young (2021) represent one of the few instances of scholars exploring outcomes of CSA that benefit society or the issue itself using

issue-ownership theory. This is an identified gap in the literature that I aim to address in my study.

Being that CSA is controversial in nature, scholars have also sought to apply theories that will account for the polarization of stakeholder groups. For example, Xu et al. (2021) used construal-level theory to examine the polarizing and depolarizing effects on the expectations and evaluations of corporate social advocacy from stakeholders with differing political ideologies. Similarly, Rim et al. (2020) used the situational theory of publics to identify the characters and networks of boycotters of CSA. Hong and Li (2020) applied cognitive dissonance theory to establish a segmentation method for the various publics affected by CSA.

Similar to studies of crisis in communication, scholars have applied attribution theory to examine the influence of perceived motives of a company's CSA efforts on individuals' attitudes and subsequent supportive intentions (Kim et al., 2020). Most notably, Coombs and Holladay (2015) used relationship-management theory to argue that CSR, an important predictor of corporate reputation and often an asset in a crisis, can become a CSR-based crisis risk if stakeholders claim a corporation is acting socially irresponsibly. It is critical to note that studies examining CSA often draw on prior CSR research to justify the use of certain theories or variables, despite their conceptual differences.

Key Variables

According to Dodd (2018) and Wilcox (2019), consumers and employees now expect corporations to address political and social issues beyond the minimum standards of CSR. In fact, 81% of Americans believe that companies should address important societal issues, 42% of millennials actively seek out information about company positions on important issues, and 52% of Americans would feel embarrassed if the company for which they worked did not weigh in on

an issue (Global Strategy Group, 2018). Similarly, a report by Edelman suggests that stakeholders believe brands/corporations are more powerful than the government in solving the country's problems and bringing societal change ("Two-thirds of Consumers," 2018). These expectations are driving the practice and study of CSA, and evaluating stakeholder responses is critical to understanding how and if companies are effectively managing relationships with their stakeholders.

A growing body of empirical research on CSA supports these industry reports and contributes to previous research concerning stakeholders' reactions to corporations' social initiatives. Positive purchase intention has been proven to be indicative of a positive relationship between a company and its stakeholders and a result of supportive attitudes and behaviors toward the company (Ledingham, 2003). Specific to CSA, Dodd and Supa (2014; 2015) found that stakeholders reported greater intentions to purchase a company's product when they agreed with the company's stance on an issue. Other supportive intentions that are often used to assess organizational-public relationships, such as positive word-of-mouth intentions (Kim et al., 2020), brand trust, and loyalty (Park, 2021), have also been applied in CSA studies. Most critically for my study, effective corporate advocacy campaigns can improve corporate reputation in certain circumstances (Dodd, 2018). Lim and Young (2021) similarly found that perceived authenticity and perceived company-issue fit were positive predictors for corporate reputation in a CSA context. Scholars have established several other variables that can influence stakeholders' evaluations of the company and the issue, including, but not limited to, perceived sincerity (Martin Cárdaba et al., 2016; Den Hond et al., 2014), issue involvement (Li et al., 2022), the perceived fit between the company and the cause (Overton et al. 2021; Hong & Li, 2020), and attitude toward the CSA itself (Kim et al., 2023).

For stakeholders who disagree with a company's stance, the benefits of the company engaging in CSA often outweigh the costs, as evidenced in Apple's support of same-sex marriage

(Chatterji & Toffel, 2019). Overton et al. (2020) found that Nike's ads with Colin Kaepernick, addressing racial oppression, produced positive emotions and high-issue involvement that increased sales and brand engagement, and these effects outweighed any negative emotions or intended brand boycotts. Similarly, Hong and Li (2020) established the negative impact of consumer-company congruence and company-cause fit on boycott intention and the positive impact of these variables on purchase intention. In creating a network analysis of both boycotters and advocators, Rim et al. (2020) identified the potential for boycott intention and negative word of mouth (WOM) as other potential negative outcomes of CSA.

Limitations of Current CSA Literature

There are currently several areas of CSA research that need to be augmented, inconsistencies that need to be addressed, and critical voids that need to be filled. The primary challenge to understanding the utility and impact of CSA is the ambiguous nature of its conceptualization within both scholarship and practice. Currently, one critical consensus is that corporate advocacy involves a corporation publicly taking a stand on a controversial issue (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Dodd, 2018; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). But what does this look like exactly? Is "taking a stand" simply theming your logo during pride month, or is it advertising a concrete, declarative stance on LGBTA rights? According to Lim and Young (2021), CSA is often not distinguished clearly from and often used interchangeably with corporate political advocacy and corporate political CSR, among other concepts. Other limitations of the current body of CSA research include the limited comprehensive understanding of effective message features, a limited understanding of the impact of CSA exposure on different audiences, and limited generalizability of research findings due to the variety of different issues and different companies used, all with shifting salience within society (Overton et al., 2021; Rim et al., 2020).

Finally, the way in which many variables are applied in CSA studies lacks theoretical consensus. For example, the perceived fit between company and cause is operationalized differently across studies (Overton et al., 2021; Hong & Li, 2020; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020).

These limitations raise an important consideration for the ethical practice of public relations. According to some scholars, despite its affiliation with societal change, CSA cannot be ethical as its purpose serves both prosocial and profit-driven goals for the company (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Hydock et al., 2019). Scholars have also noted that studies on CSA have primarily focused on outcomes related to supportive intentions or behaviors toward the company rather than outcomes that benefit society or shift the position of the issue within society (Hong & Li, 2020; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). Gaither et al. (2018) recommended that scholars investigate beyond the impact of a company's social efforts "on consumer purchasing patterns into studies that explore the social and environmental impacts of businesses" (p. 377.) This limitation to the body of CSA research is particularly detrimental as it distances CSA from the initial purpose of public relations to seek "long-term efficacy and strives to build relationships with publics and stakeholders" through participation in social issues (Bowen, 2008, p. 272). As the theory and practice of CSA are relatively new, contributing to the ethical development of the concept is paramount.

Crises in Public Relations

In this section, one of the most popular crisis management theories in public relations, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), will be explored in greater detail to justify the use of this crisis framework in CSA contexts. Significant independent and dependent variables, as well as notable findings from studies that apply crisis management theories in public relations, will also be considered.

Dominant Theories of Crisis Management

The first studies of crisis communication appear in the management literature, with works appearing in the 1980s. While the study of apologia theory pre-dates the 1980s, its application to crisis communication did not occur until the later 1980s. Mowen (1980) was among the first to broach the idea of a crisis response within a more concrete framework and proposed the idea of attribution theory. Wiener (1985) first formally presented attribution theory on the premise that people need to assign responsibility for events. Attribution theory posits that people look for the causes of events in order to process them, especially when the events are unexpected or negative. Stakeholders will assess a crisis situation or the threat of a crisis and attribute blame accordingly (Wiener, 1985). Initial studies using attribution theory advised that organizations use highly accommodative strategies. However, this led to greater legal and financial implications for the organizations (Benoit, 1995; Sellnow et al., 1998).

Around the turn of the 21st century, crisis literature began to experience a rapid evolution. This advancement is reflective of the evolving role of public relations in society, advancing understanding of the value of managing relationships between stakeholders and organizations, and of technological innovations that improved dialogic communication while also expanding the opportunity for crisis (Kim et al., 2009). Two primary streams of research have accounted for the majority of communication studies on crisis management public relations from the early 1990s up until the first quarter of the 21st century (Avery et al., 2010): first, the theory of image restoration (Benoit, 1995; Benoit, 1997) and, second, the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995). Benoit (1997) developed image repair theory (IRT) in the mid-1990s based on elements of apologia and attribution theory. IRT claims that image is an asset that an organization must try to protect and repair during a crisis using general or specific crisis responses.

Benson (1988) first proposed a situational approach to crisis response as an extension of attribution theory. This first expansion was derived from a perceived need to understand how the crisis situation influenced the selection of crisis response. SCCT was formally presented by Coombs (1995) and is centered on predicting the severity of potential reputational harm. SCCT posits that variables such as crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation can determine which crisis responses to employ and how an organization's public will perceive the crisis and attribute crisis responsibility.

Since its' inception, there have been various iterations and expansions of this core theory. Schwarz (2008) suggested extending SCCT by applying the covariation principle from attribution theory to informational dimensions that may influence stakeholders' attributions. Choi and Lin (2009) incorporated two types of emotion into the SCCT model, and Cheng and Cameron (2017) used an extension of SCCT known as the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model to investigate crisis management in an online context and account for different information modalities. This study similarly seeks to augment crisis communication literature by applying SCCT to the emerging concept of CSA.

Key Variables and Findings

According to Jaques (2009), crises have been defined as both an event and interactive processes. An organizational crisis is defined as "a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution" (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60). According to a meta-analysis of crisis communication studies applying SCCT, completed by Kim et al. (2009), denial was the most often used crisis response strategy, despite being the least effective in producing positive outcomes. Crises in the preventable cluster type were the most often analyzed in this body of

crisis research, followed by the accident and victim crisis types. Within this metanalysis, Kim et al. (2009) cautioned scholars and practitioners to consider contextual moderators and the potential positive outcomes from the combinations of different crisis response strategies. The varied results represented in this meta-analysis reflect the malleable nature of SCCT as a situational theory. Within this section, key variables applied to SCCT are identified.

Dependent Variables and Findings

Within SCCT, reputation is the main concept that must be evaluated to determine which, if any, of the applied crisis response strategies were effective (De Carvalho, 2004). Reputation "is a product of an organization's relationships with its stakeholders, differing to image in the sense that it is achieved through dialogue and not persuasion" (De Carvalho, 2004, p. 2). Scholars have established that organizational reputations are critical to an organization's achievement of its goals, and crises threaten organizational reputations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Claeys et al., 2010b). Reputations are built upon the information stakeholders receive about the organization (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Fombrun et al., 2000). The stakeholders' evaluation of the information they receive about an organization often drives their perception of the organization's reputation. During this evaluation process, stakeholders determine whether an organization's actions and communication practices are meeting their expectations; an expectation gap is problematic for organizations' reputations (Reichart, 2003). In SCCT, a crucial action for public relations practitioners during crises is to assess stakeholder expectations based on the organization's perceived responsibility for the crisis and what crisis responses will best ensure that the organization's reputation is protected (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Numerous studies have determined that crisis response strategies relate to reputation preservation and repair (Coombs, 2006), restore stakeholders' positive assessment of the

organization (Utz et al., 2013), and increase supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization, such as purchase intention (DiStaso et al., 2015). The relationship between crisis response and an organization's reputation is intertwined, highlighting the critical role crisis management can play in an organization's overall success (Coombs, 2007b).

Independent Variables and Findings

Personal control, or "the degree to which an event is controllable or uncontrollable by the organization" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 175), was originally a critical antecedent for SCCT. Coombs (2013) established that personal control and intention (blame) overlapped and thus were combined to form crisis responsibility in a later iteration of the theoretical model. Common independent variables of the SCCT model include the crisis type, crisis history, performance history, prior reputation, and crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs, 2013). According to Coombs (2007a), crisis history and prior reputation can have "both a direct and an indirect effect on the reputation threat posed by the crisis" (p. 167), and the initial assessments of crisis responsibility based on crisis type should be adjusted upward or downward depending on severity and/or performance history. Performance history refers to the past actions or conduct of an organization, including its history of other crises and relationships history, which refers to how well or poorly it has treated stakeholders; previous research has found that as performance history worsens, publics will attribute greater crisis responsibility to the organization (Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; 2001).

Distinctions of SCCT

   SCCT differs from the other identified crisis management theories in several crucial ways: First, it focuses on a situational approach to crisis response. Second, it is centered around protecting the organization's reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Third, it focuses on stakeholders' perceptions of crisis situations, which is in line with arguments of previous scholars that crisis management concerns perception more so than reality (Benoit, 1995). Four, it introduces and relies upon a three-phase model of crises: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages. SCCT offers a contextual approach, making it very attractive from a practical perspective and justifying the applicability of SCCT in crisis research (Avery et al., 2010).

   Crises, from an SCCT perspective, are identifiable according to two key attributes: they are, first, unexpected and, second, negative for the organization (Coombs, 2007b). According to Coombs (2007a), SCCT is an evidence-based framework that "identifies how key facets of the crisis situation influence attributions about the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders" (p. 163). In other words, SCCT provides guidelines for matching crisis response strategies to crisis types to restore organizational reputations in times of crisis. Coombs and Holladay's (2002) presentation of SCCT was born out of the need for communications theory to be flexible enough to respond to the individual circumstances offered by every crisis situation. Most often, there are factors unique to the situation, necessitating a theory to determine how each crisis and response must be approached. SCCT organizes the crisis typologies to fit with responses to understand how stakeholders will respond to the crisis and to inform how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

   SCCT has undergone several theoretical revisions. In 2017, the victim, accidental, and intentional crisis types were rebranded as minimal, low, and high crisis responsibility levels (Coombs, 2017). Coombs and Holladay (2012) also introduced the concept of a paracrisis, or

risks of crisis, and Coombs and Holladay (2015) explored the idea of CSR as a crisis risk that utilized six broad strategic response options: refusal, refutation, repression, recognition/reception, revision, and reform. Crisis responses have undergone several iterations as well and now include four postures: the primary crisis response types of denial, diminish, rebuild, and the secondary response of bolstering (Coombs, 2007a; 2007b; 2017). The deny category aims to remove the connection between the crisis and the organization and includes scapegoating, denying the crisis, and attacking the accuser. Within the diminish category, the crisis response is centered on the argument that a crisis is not as bad as people think or that the organization lacked control over the crisis; this is highly sensitive to how media continue to portray the crisis. Lastly, the rebuild category is focused on trying to provide for the victims of a crisis through compensation or apology for such actions (Coombs, 2007a). Scholars prescribe certain responses based on variables such as attribution of blame, crisis type or prior reputation, etc. (Kim et al., 2009), but they also have established the importance of context in navigating responses (Coombs, 2016).

Despite numerous changes, three primary knowledge claims have remained at the core of SCCT. First, a crisis response strategy selection must be appropriate for the amount of reputational damage a crisis may inflict. The second knowledge claim states that the stronger the potential reputational damage, the more the crisis response strategy must try to accommodate those adversely affected by the crisis. Lastly, a combination of responses is traditionally the most effective (Coombs, 2007a; Avery et al., 2010). However, some combinations produce potential negative effects, and occasionally, the strategies are combined ineffectively in research designs (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Kim et al., 2009).

SCCT has established relevance within mass communications, with numerous studies incorporating the theory into their crisis evaluations. The theory, by nature of its core relationship, influences organizational reputation conceptualizations and builds upon theoretical knowledge regarding how to study relationships in crisis. SCCT has been explored in relation to

other persuasion models, such as the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Vafeiadis et al., 2019), and has been studied in relation to other theories, such as CSR and news framing (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Ham & Kim, 2019; Kim & Cameron, 2011). Studies utilizing SCCT have been found to incorporate emotional valence, encourage emotional expressions, and promote information sharing—all of which are variables that have been studied in relation to CSA (Overton et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Stieglitz & Krüger, 2011). As a situational-based theory, a plethora of other potential variables could be considered when testing SCCT, such as issue involvement (Vafeiadis et al., 2019), source credibility (Claeys et al., 2010b), and thunder stealing (Claeys et al., 2010a), which would contribute to the understanding of SCCT and CSA alike.

As a part of its theoretical development, SCCT has received criticism from the scholarly community. According to Avery et al. (2010), the underlying processes related to the constructs of SCCT have received limited attention and testing. For example, discerning the difference between diminishing and rebuilding a crisis has been challenging (Sisco, 2012), and Coombs and Holladay (2010) and Coombs (2013) have identified conceptual overlaps. Within meta-analyses establishing that SCCT is part of the main paradigm for crises literature, some arguments have been raised about the overuse of the theory and limitations of authorship (Avery et al., 2010; Kriyantono, 2012). This argument can be considered subjective; however, it is worth contrasting this claim with the varying versions of the theory presented by Coombs over the years and the lack of sufficient testing of each iteration.

These scholarly critiques suggest that reconsiderations of SCCT in its current form are necessary. These criticisms are reflective of inherent flaws associated with the theory and highlight opportunities for theoretical contributions. At the same time, these criticisms also represent the communication research community's efforts to build upon and test SCCT, suggesting that the theory's utility is recognized and valued. Establishing more concrete

conceptual definitions of the categorical variables, and diversifying the authors and designs of SCCT studies, will help to clarify SCCT. By expanding to accommodate rapidly changing mediums for crises and responses, SCCT could maintain its situational theoretical approach while accounting for new important aspects of crisis management. Further theoretical revisions will be required for the theory to be more effectively used in mass communication research, which is a gap this study aims to address in applying SCCT to a CSA context.

Backlash to Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA)

CSA is primarily identifiable by its association with controversial social-political issues and, therefore, heightened risk. This raises several questions as to how this risk manifests and when it becomes a threat to the organization. Backlash is a colloquial term that has been used in both CSA and crisis communication without stringent operationalization. In order to explore how to respond to backlash, the parameters of backlash to CSA must be identified.

The company Gillette took a risk in early 2019 by launching a new campaign that tackled such timely issues as toxic masculinity, the #MeToo movement, and sexual harassment. The initial commercial went viral, and the campaign received backlash from groups of stakeholders who felt it was emasculating men, as well as from stakeholders who believed it was trivializing the issue of gender inequality. Despite an initial loss in sales, Gillette stood by its message (Baggs, 2019). Gillette's experimentation with CSA was met with backlash that arguably constituted a crisis in that it represented unforeseen harm to the company's reputation (Coombs, 2007a). This instance demonstrates the need for strategic responses to the expected and unexpected responses that will inevitably arise from engaging with controversial issues.

In this example, stakeholders' negative responses to the CSA manifested in a backlash taking numerous forms, including petitions, public statements from competing companies, media

coverage of the event, and individual and collective boycotts—all of which represented a reputational threat to Gillette. Backlash is arguably an anticipated risk when engaging in CSA, especially from those on the opposing side of the issue. However, when expected *and* unexpected stakeholder groups are engaging in combative actions, such as boycotts, which are then covered by mainstream media, the backlash becomes a crisis for the organization. Numerous factors can influence how CSA is received, such as perceived authenticity, legitimacy, prior reputation, and company issue-fit (Lim & Young, 2021; Yim, 2021), but navigating the backlash is equally important in shaping the perception of CSA, especially if it becomes a crisis.

Backlash as a Crisis

The shift from engaging in non-controversial social efforts, like implementing recycling programs or donating funds (Dodd, 2018), to supporting controversial issues publicly, like gay marriage, emergency contraception, gender equality, or gun control, represents an increased risk for corporations compared to CSR (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Lim & Young, 2021). According to Sohn and Lariscy (2012), applying CSR in response to a crisis can buffer the corporation from harm and serve to bolster the corporation's reputation. Similarly, if CSA is strategically managed, and accounts for changes in public opinion and issue polarization, corporations' taking a stance on a salient social issue has been found to be well-received and beneficial to the company's reputation (Vasquez, 2022, Gilkerson, 2017; Dodd & Supa, 2014). Both CSR and CSA are established public relations functions for maintaining positive organization-public relationships, which involve ongoing maintenance of needs, expectations, and fulfillment (Ledingham, 2003).

However, CSR can also become the impetus of a crisis rather than an asset used to protect a reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). For example, if a brand aligns itself with an issue in a way that violates stakeholders' expectations of the corporation, their evaluations of the

brand can be affected and, therefore, their support (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). According to Coombs and Holladay (2015), when CSR is ill-received by stakeholders, it represents a crisis risk, not a crisis.

Broadly, a crisis is defined as an unforeseen event that negatively impacts the organization (St. John & Pearson, 2016). When backlash to CSA from unexpected stakeholder groups spreads widely through social and mainstream media, this arguably constitutes a crisis. According to Coombs and Holladay (2015), within the accidental cluster, there exists the crisis type of challenge. For Coombs and Holladay (2015), "challenge crises are an example of private politics/social issues management when stakeholders seek to create changes in corporate behavior by engaging the organization directly rather than through public policy efforts" (p. 144). This direct engagement with the organization often takes the form of petitions, boycotts, etc. According to Coombs et al. (2016), a "backlash effect found in the individual-level trust violation research also appears for organizations in crisis" (p. 385). Scholars have cited that backlash requires negative vitriol, such as lambasting or mocking, from stakeholders that are found in both mainstream and social media.

The outrage felt by stakeholder groups is often represented by attacks on the individual or organization and by efforts to denounce the incident in question (Yim & Park, 2019; Jensen et al., 2017). This often takes the form of viral media discourse or boycott campaigns that spread widely online (O'Kane, 2023) and indicates the organization has loss control of the stakeholder focus and their social responsibility narrative (Klein et al, 2004). This definition of backlash is in line with challenge crises, which are highly visible, attractive to a range of stakeholders, involve direct engagement with the organization, and attract public attention through media advocacy (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Ryan, 1991). It is important to note that engaging in CSA becomes a crisis for a corporation not only when the backlash is coming from the stakeholder group on the opposing side of the issue but also when it involves unexpected stakeholder groups, such as

supporters of the cause who anticipated that their expectations would be fulfilled by the CSA efforts.

This operationalization of backlash as a crisis builds upon previous literature that has employed SCCT using various theories and public relations functions. Ham and Kim (2019) applied the persuasion knowledge model in the context of crisis communication and SCCT to explore the efficacy of CSR-based crisis response messages. Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) similarly found that overly persuasive CSR promotional communication caused harm to the organization-stakeholder relationship. More specifically to SCCT and backlash in public relations, Coombs and Holladay (2012) proposed that CSR had the potential to become a crisis if backlash resulted from promoting the CSR efforts. Oh et al. (2021) applied SCCT to examine the role of person-centered messages (PCMs) in crisis communication on social media, claiming that "every organization should be prepared for social media backlash" (p. 118). Scholars acknowledge the possibility of social media backlash occurring at the same time as a crisis, which further supports the importance of managing backlash as a crisis (Oh et al., 2021; Coombs, 2017). These studies support the claim that although CSA comes with anticipated risk, a crisis is occurring and must be managed strategically when backlash takes the form of unexpected actions against the corporation in a public setting that is covered in mainstream media.

The Contributions of Examining CSA and Crisis

According to Avery et al. (2010), "crisis communication research in public relations may benefit both theoretically and pragmatically through more diverse contextual and methodological applications" (p. 192). This study will advance scholarship centered on CSA, SCCT, and ethics in public relations by exploring backlash to CSA as a crisis and determining the efficacy of different ethically informed crisis responses. The major theoretical contributions of examining backlash to

CSA as a crisis will be determining whether SCCT can be applied to manage a CSA backlash crisis and positively influence subsequent evaluations of reputation and other supportive and non-supportive behavioral outcomes, such as advocating behaviors or boycott intentions (Overton et al., 2020; Hong & Li, 2020).

In a similar vein, Kim et al. (2009) suggests that there is a divide between crisis communication theory and practice, citing the "prevalence of organizations failing to choose and combine response strategies appropriately in these cases," which "suggests that the bridge between theory and practice may not be as solid as it should be after 18 years of crisis research" (p. 448). In applying this theory to the popular public relations practice of CSA and utilizing both original and new elements of SCCT, these concerns can begin to be addressed.

As outlined above, backlash to CSA can become a crisis for organizations when there are unexpected public actions from stakeholder groups against a corporation that are covered by mainstream media. As such, backlash to CSA in this study could theoretically be categorized as a challenge crisis as it is based on the accusation that the corporation is being socially irresponsible (Coombs, 2017). However, being that the crisis responsibility attribution in a CSA context is still unclear, a variety of different responses should be considered, especially as this form of crisis represents a reputational threat to the corporation that can negatively impact stakeholders' attitudes and supportive intentions toward the corporation or advocacy itself.

Based on the variables at play and the occurrence of public backlash to CSA based on accusations of socially irresponsible behaviors, looking at CSA within an SCCT framework offers a stronger theoretical connection compared to other crisis management theories. SCCT serves as a prime example of how a scholar may begin to engage in theoretical problem solving to address a nuanced issue within the communication. While there are theoretical gaps and potential expansions that provide the opportunity to refine the theory, the dominant use of the theory across the communication discipline demonstrates its utility. SCCT can serve as a useful theory for

testing CSA in that it has contributed to the study of reputation and crisis response in ways that other crisis theories have not.

From a practical perspective, this theory offers practitioners a valuable framework for examining CSA. It assists with initial assessments of crises and informs how practitioners should respond to crises based on a variety of variables that capture the past behaviors of the company, the issue at hand, and the perspectives of stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). It allows for a multitude of different crisis situations to be addressed succinctly (Sisco, 2012), and its contextual nature enables both scholars and practitioners to incorporate the use of new media to address crises (Coombs, 2015; Utz et al., 2013). In short, SCCT provides a flexible and easy-to-use framework for practitioners and scholars to navigate CSA backlash.

Overall, the current body of research suggests that CSA is a positive strategy for corporations in the long run. But considering some of the negative stakeholder reactions, both anecdotally and tested, practitioners and scholars must consider how to mitigate effectively the reputational risks that CSA poses. Crises need to be part of the conversation about CSA if companies are going to operate strategically. In applying a crisis framework that incorporates ethically-sound crisis responses in a CSA context, backlash can be addressed and the role of public relations as advocates for the public interest can be fulfilled.

State of the Art: Ethics of Care

Within this section, ethics of care will be established as a state of the art. Central philosophical claims will be identified, and theoretical foundations and critiques will be reviewed. In addition, future applications of ethics of care will be posited. One such application will be the use of ethics of care in public relations research—specifically, the application of ethics of care to corporations' responses to crises that emerge when they attempt to take a public stand on

controversial social-political issues (Dodd & Supa, 2014; 2015). Brief overviews of how ethics of care have already been utilized in two main areas of public relations—crisis management and corporate social advocacy/responsibility—will be provided, as well as the proposed application of ethics of care as a crisis response. A case will be made for the ethics-of-care approach as a justified and effective frame for guiding crisis communication in public relations research and practice.

Central Philosophical Claims

There are four core tenets to the ethics-of-care philosophy. Firstly, ethics of care conceptualize human beings as distinct, unfinished entities that are involved in a myriad of relationships with those around them; each of these relationships has varying degrees of interdependence. In claiming this, care ethics reject the claim that humans are autonomous actors that will make identical choices and dismisses the notion that they have always been able to act as fully developed, skilled decision-makers and communications (Sander-Staudt, 2018). According to this first tenant of care ethics, individuals are dependent on the care of others to develop their abilities and identities, and they do so symbiotically (Gilligan, 1982).

Secondly, the ethics-of-care philosophy emphasizes the importance of two elements: partiality and particularity (Sander-Staudt, 2018; Pettersen, 2008). Individuals are unique in the eyes of others and have impactful, distinct relationships with those around them. Furthermore, their experiences are situational, and ethics of care put forth the benefit of exploring ethics with actual rather than hypothetical situations to pay homage to the particularity of human beings and their experiences (Pettersen, 2008). Although care ethics allows for applying impartiality, it cautions against absolutist evaluations or ignoring contextual details of a situation or an individual (Sander-Staudt, 2018). In short, care ethics promotes the claims that ethics should be

explored while accounting for the context of actual circumstances, and the application of care to others should come from personal concern for their specific circumstances.

The third tenant of care ethics is centered on the value of fulfilling one's needs holistically. According to this tenant, rationality is informed by physical, mental, and emotional needs, and these needs must be met in order to care for oneself and others. According to Hamington (2004), under this tenet, bodies both serve as indicators of caring needs and as sources of valuable knowledge for how to care for others. This tenet of care ethics, therefore, rejects situations in which humans are tasked with operating in the world or caring for others or society without entirely caring for oneself (Pettersen, 2008). Instead, care ethics endorses the basic right of each person to have their needs met (Simola, 2003).

The final tenet of ethics of care argues that the "main moral injunction is to maintain care relations in a way that is responsive to all within one's web of relations, including oneself" (Sander-Staudt, 2018, p. 194). This becomes most evident when considering how moral dilemmas are addressed within care ethics. The element of sacrifice that is present in other ethical frameworks is nonexistent in care ethics. Instead, ethics of care focus on a solution that addresses the well-being of everyone involved. In this way, ethics of care recognize the needs of each individual within a situation and respond accordingly, without the risk of uneven contribution by one particular party (Sander-Staudt, 2018). These four tenets of ethics of care shape how this philosophy is applied in communication and media relations.

Theoretical Foundations

The concept of ethics of care first emerged within psychology as a criticism of the bias toward a male perspective that was evident across academia (Gilligan, 1982). Until the later part of the 20th century, moral theorizing and scholarship had been dominated primarily by Western

male scholars. Being that the experiences of men, women, and nonbinary persons differ greatly, the gaze in which the study of morality was developed had thus far lacked valuable perspectives (Simola, 2003). In her book *In a Different Voice,* Gilligan (1982) put forth the idea that applying a female voice would better serve in navigating ethical decision-making.

Gilligan challenged the positioning of her mentor Kolhberg (1973), who expanded upon the work of Rawls (1971). According to Kohlberg, the most effective moral reasoning encompasses rational detachment and the ability to substitute features of situations with universal principles. Under this ethical framework, individuals would need to progress through levels of moral reasoning ability and be able to remain impartial (Simola, 2003). Feminist approaches have criticized this assertion that universal rules, developmental criteria, and applications of moral law and justice are necessary for moral reasoning (Place, 2021). Despite critiques of her gendered application and questionable descriptions of the female perspectives (Jones, 2021), Gilligan's ethics-of-care approach instead offers a more dynamic approach to moral reasoning that acknowledges the complexities of human relationships and experiences and places value on maintaining care for all (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, 1986; Place, 2021).

Since its introduction, ethics of care have undergone several scholarly reviews, expansions, and critiques. Noddings (1984), also a founder of ethics of care, argued that care cannot be applied equally to all persons but is a finite resource that should be extended to every present interpersonal relationship. Noddings (1984) also established the importance of opening oneself up to care and addressed the idea of abstract care, which could otherwise be oversimplified (Place, 2021; Sander-Staudt, 2018). Another philosopher, Manning (1992), proposed extending ethics of care into the public realm. While she still grounded her care ethics in relationships, she proposed that humans have a responsibility to engage in the relational interdependence and caring that occurs at the collective level when individual efforts are not

sufficient (Jones, 2021). For example, applying care to social issues, such as racial injustice, requires the application of care at a broader level.

Some scholars have argued that ethics of care represent less distinction from other ethical philosophies, specifically ethics of justice. Among the positions held by scholars of moral philosophy, some consider care and justice to be distinct approaches that are incompatible with one another (Porter, 1999). Others consider justice and care to be complementary perspectives (Clement, 1996), or even mutually interdependent (Held, 1998). Mendus (1993) encouraged scholars not to consider "'the ethics of justice' and 'the ethics of care' as distinct and alternative ethical systems, but rather as complementary facets of any realistic account of morality" (p. 18). Similarly, Moore (1999) claimed that care ethicists have recognized where the language of care tends to be ignored or misunderstood by justice theorists, but they, too, mistakenly identify justice and care as two separate moral frameworks. Moore (1999) also proposes that liberal justice theory should incorporate 'ethics of care' and work toward a singular conception that considers justice and care as reciprocal and intertwined.

Ethics of Care in Public Relations

Other ethical frameworks, such as deontology and utilitarianism, have been considered in public relations with varying degrees of success. Deontology has been useful for public relations scholars due to its strong rational decision-making component (Bowen & Heath, 2005) and value on mutual respect, which makes it ideal for strategic responses or relationship building between organizations and their publics (Waters & Bortree, 2012). Utilitarianism has been applied broadly to the development of CSR. Specifically, companies are encouraged to pursue such endeavors, since CSR serves both a moral obligation and is (usually) profitable, resulting in the maximization of well-being (Frederiksen & Nielsen, 2013). However, there is still relatively

limited application of ethics of care to communication. Within communication studies, the

outcomes and intentions of public relations practitioners are often evaluated within ethical

frameworks (Place, 2021). Further, the effects of ethical leadership and ethical climate are

explored (Choi et al., 2015; Victor & Cullen, 1988), and public relations professionals' moral

development in the workplace has been carefully reviewed (Plaisance, 2014b). Still, scholars

have identified a void in the current application of ethically based reasoning within public

relations (Place, 2021; Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Research by Schauster and Neill (2017) supports

this claim by establishing that while practitioners' sense of personal responsibility to act morally

is present, providing guidelines and training rooted in ethical principles would also be beneficial.

Care ethics can accurately represent intersections between gendered aspects of

communication and the intersection between communication and the practice of care itself

(Sander-Staudt, 2018). In other words, care can become a feature of communication and be

incorporated into the practice of communication itself. Compared to other frameworks, ethics of

care offer a situational, multilevel approach to communication that acknowledges the importance

of communicating differently with different groups of people. This study aims to demonstrate the

utility of this ethical philosophy by applying ethics of care in a scenario where there is a need for

effective crisis responses to CSA backlash, circumstances that include polarizing positions, and

nuanced stakeholder-organization relationships.

Ethics of Care in Crisis Management

Several scholars have considered ethical frameworks in crisis communication. Some have

applied ethics of care primarily to compare the approach to the efficacy of justice and care ethics

(Sandin, 2009; Simola, 2003), while others have applied other ethical frameworks, such as

deontology (Bowen & Coombs, 2020). However, applying ethical frameworks in crisis

communication is being challenged by the increasingly complex nature of crises and the misaligned application and understanding of ethical philosophies (Bowen & Coombs, 2020). According to St. John and Pearson (2016), the concept of public relations as the 'corporate conscience' in a crisis is unable to manifest as public relations professionals are challenged by narrow conceptions of moral agency within an organization facing a crisis, failures to define the parameters of the role of organizations in ethical decision-making, and insufficient ethical reasoning among the many actors involved in the crisis.

However, there has also been limited research considering feminist-informed responses to crises. Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) proposed the applied model of care considerations (AMCC) for public relations and crisis communication to explore different landscapes of care (physical, cultural, political/economic, human) and place value on "(a) broadly cultivating and respecting *relationships*; (b) assessing *interdependence* among those relationships, with recognition of and adjustments for power disparities; (c) determining related *vulnerabilities* and treating them with care, and (d) integrating understanding of capabilities for *reciprocity*" (p. 25). Madden and Alt (2021) use this framework to explore the existence of collective crises when multiple organizations are at fault. Tronto (2010) outlined four ethical elements of care: a) attentiveness, or acknowledging that care requires recognition of others' needs in order to respond to them, b) responsibility to care for others, c) competence in giving care, and d) responsiveness from the receiver to guide the caregivers. As crises have become more nuanced in scope and form, and crisis dialogue continues to change, corporations must manage their relationships with their stakeholders with care (Coombs, 2017; Sander-Staudt, 2018).

Ethics of Care and Corporate Social Advocacy

CSA arguably returns to foundational elements of public relations in that it compels corporations to align themselves with a just cause (Xu et al., 2021). Identifiable by its high risk and engagement with controversial issues, CSA provides a compelling context for a crisis; its situational nature and proximity to marginalized groups support the application of ethics of care.

According to Martinson (1999), as reviewed in Plaisance (2014a), public relations as a practice has an "ethical obligation to strive to open the channels of communication to the traditionally underrepresented" (p. 23). Similarly, Plaisance (2014a) presents the role of "'stakeholder' in its broadest sense, where a company's stakeholders are not just investors, customers, or markets, but the environment, the disadvantaged, and even the well-being of all living things" (p. 114). The concept of CSA admits that not all stakeholders will agree with the values and ideologies for which an organization takes a stand (Ciszek & Logan, 2018), which suggests that the audiences would be more limited. However, based on the salient and controversial nature of the social-political issues at the center of CSA (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Lim & Young, 2021), I argue that it instead invites broader conversation. In applying ethics of care, marginalized groups are included in debates about an issue of which they are at the center. Scholars have posited that firms engage in CSA as a way of standing up for diverse stakeholders such as employees, customers, partners, the community, and their environment (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Rim et al., 2020). Contrary to previous studies that dismiss stakeholders with opposing views from the corporation (Gaither et al. 2018), the application of care ethics to CSA communication could help prevent the ostracization of any stakeholders, no matter their stance on the social-political issue. By implementing the fourth tenet of ethics of care that places value on being responsive to all, CSA can be better communicated with vastly different stakeholders. CSA

returns public relations to its roots by virtue of its engagement with social-political issues, and incorporating ethics of care would strengthen this public relations function.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The presented study design seeks to explore crises in the form of backlash to CSA, which will in turn help scholars and practitioners to better understand CSA and effectively respond to such crises. This design seeks to apply the situational crisis communication theory to this CSA context, which will also explore which type of crisis responses are the most effective for responding to a backlash as a crisis. In applying the ethical framework of ethics of care to the crisis response types, this study will contribute to the application of ethical practices in public relations scholarship.

Broadly speaking, crisis response strategies are understood to restore stakeholders' positive assessments (Utz et al., 2013) and increase supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization (DiStaso et al., 2015). Outcome variables that have been identified as indicative of positive relationship management in crisis communication *and* CSA, such as corporate reputation and purchase intention, are therefore included as well (Doss & Supa, 2015; Lim & Young, 2021). At the same time, CSA is recognized as a polarizing practice that has generated positive and negative responses from stakeholders (Hong & Li, 2021; Kim et al., 2020). In exploring the conceptualization of backlash as a crisis, more extreme behavioral intentions will be included as outcomes, such as boycotting, positive or negative word of mouth, and advocating on behalf of the organization. Scholars are beginning to explore if the goals of CSA go beyond profit, corporate reputation, etc., and can include societal-level outcomes (Rim et al., 2020). Therefore, activism intentions will be included as an outcome variable, as well, to evaluate which crisis response best protects the issue at large. Based on the previous SCCT research, prior corporate

reputation will act as a control for all the research questions and hypotheses (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Claeys et al., 2010b). Previously identified CSA-related variables that may influence the perception of the company's ethics of care or response—namely, purchase frequency (Dodd & Supa, 2014), issue involvement (Browning et al., 2020; Li et al, 2022 Overton et al., 2021), and attitude toward CSA (Kim et al., 2023)—will also be controlled for all the hypotheses and research questions.

To determine which crisis response is best in the case of backlash to CSA, two crisis response strategies will be explored, representing the three categories of primary crisis responses, as crisis responses do not always match with the prescribed crisis type (Coombs et al., 2016). The denial crisis types (denial, scapegoating, and attack the accuser) will not be included in this study. The subcategory of denial cannot be applied as the backlash and the company's CSA initiative is undeniable and public. Scapegoating and attacking the accuser conflict with the core tenets of ethics of care in that they do not take into account care for everyone involved. The diminish crisis response will be represented in excuse, which can be represented in the company's explanation that they did not intend to do harm and were responding to the expectations of their stakeholders. The rebuild crisis response type will be represented in the form of an apology wherein the corporation takes responsibility, asks for forgiveness, and apologizes for its actions (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Foundational research suggests that the rebuild-apology crisis response is the most effective at protecting reputation and repairing relationships (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs 2007b). However, conflict results suggest that this will need to be further explored (Yuan et al., 2021). The following question and hypothesis seek to explore which of the two crisis types best suits backlash to CSA.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How, if at all, does crisis response type affect purchase intention, boycott intention, positive/negative WOM, advocating behaviors, and activism

intentions when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation?

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Compared to participants exposed to the diminish-excuse crisis response, participants exposed to a rebuild-apology crisis response will report higher corporate reputation.

Incorporating ethics of care into the crisis response should theoretically provide a more effective response to a CSA crisis based on central philosophical claims. The ethical content of the crisis responses will be based on past literature that explores ethical responses in crisis situations or ethics of care (Place, 2021; Sandin, 2009; Simola, 2003). In including this ethical framework within these crisis responses, this study aims to highlight the core tenets of public relations that hold corporations responsible for the ethical management of organization-stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, by including activism behaviors as an outcome, this study aims to challenge corporations to benefit the public by advancing the issue through their engagement with CSA (Dodd, 2018). Based on this knowledge, the second research question and hypotheses are proposed.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How, if at all, does ethics of care affect purchase intention, boycott intention, positive/negative WOM, advocating behaviors, and activism intentions when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation?

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Compared to participants exposed to crisis responses with low ethics of care, participants exposed to crisis responses with high ethics of care will report higher corporate reputation.

Based on prior SCCT research, different combinations of crisis responses and other variables often yield different results (Kim & Sung, 2014; Kim et al., 2009). This study will therefore explore the effects of the relationship between crisis response type and ethics of care.

Based on the core tenets of ethics of care (Sander-Staudt, 2018), and the purpose of the crisis response to prioritize stakeholders' well-being (Coombs, 2007a), I seek to explore if and how the interaction between the two independent variables affects the supportive and non-supportive behavioral outcomes toward the company and the cause.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): How, if at all, does the interaction between crisis response type and ethics of care affect purchase intention, boycott intention, positive/negative WOM, advocating behaviors, and activism intentions when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation?

Similarly, based on prior research concerning crisis responses and the core tenets of ethics of care in relation to corporate reputation (Madden & Alt, 2021; Grunig & Hung, 2002), I seek to explore if and how the interaction between the two independent variables affects corporate reputation.

Research Question 4 (RQ4): How, if at all, does the interaction between crisis response type and ethics of care affect corporate reputation?

In applying SCCT, the critical variable of corporate reputation will be applied as a mediator between the independent variables (crisis response type and the exploratory ethics of care variable) and the outcome variables, which are drawn from CSA and SCCT literature (Kim & Yang, 2009).

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Corporate reputation will mediate the effects of crisis response type, high/low ethics of care, and their interaction on a) purchase intentions, b) boycott intentions, c) positive/negative WOM, d) advocating behaviors, and e) activism intentions when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation.

To strengthen the internal validity of the study, a control condition is included in the experiment. Drawing on prior crisis literature (Choi & Lin, 2009), a control condition of no response will be integrated into the questionnaire. As such, the following hypothesis is proposed

to address the effect of the manipulations. For a full conceptual map of the variables, see Figure 1-1 below.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Including any form of crisis response will result in higher a) corporate reputation, b) purchase intentions, c) positive word of mouth, d) advocating behaviors, and e) activism intentions as well as lower f) boycott intentions and g) negative word of mouth than the control condition.
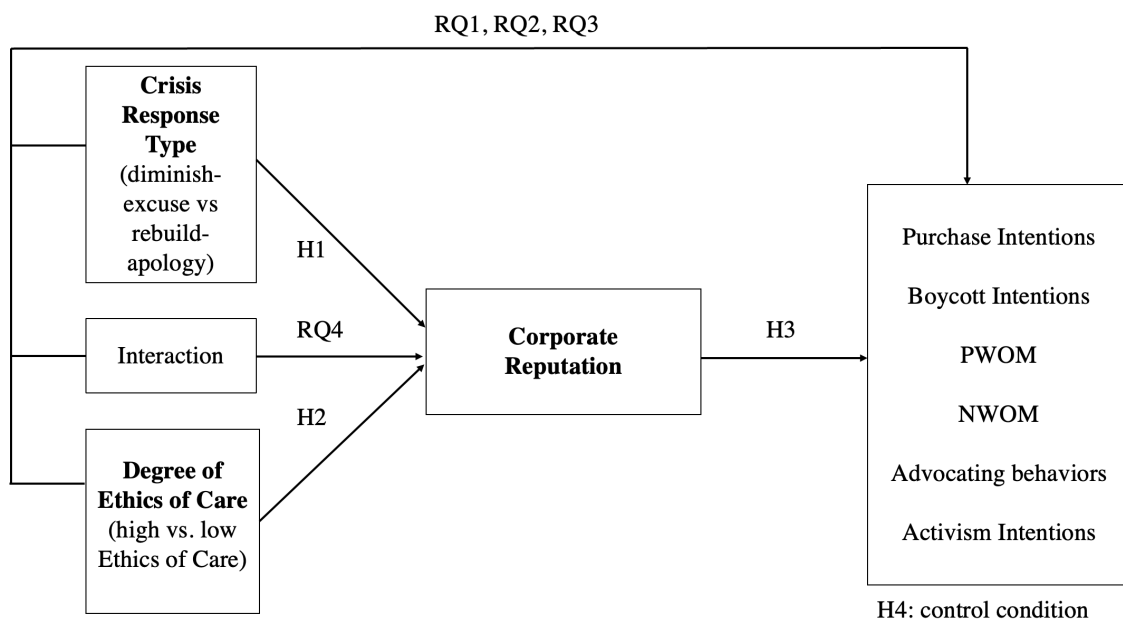
Figure **1-1**: Conceptual Map of Variables.

Chapter 3

Method

This between-subjects online experiment employed a 2 (diminish-excuse vs. rebuild-apology) X 2 (ethics of care: low vs. high) factorial design to determine the effects of crisis response type and degree of ethics of care on purchase intentions, positive and negative word of mouth, boycott intentions, advocating behaviors, and activism intentions, with corporate reputation acting as a potential mediator. Several pretests and pilot tests were conducted using CloudResearch Connect and Qualtrics to develop the stimuli and manipulation checks before launching the full data collection using Qualtrics.

Stimuli Development

The stimuli were developed based on real-world examples of traditional media coverage of corporations' crisis responses to a backlash to CSA. The article format was selected over a social media format, which is where corporations often publicly communicate with stakeholders, for several reasons. First, this format has ecological validity based on real-world situations. For example, media coverage of Disney's response (or lack thereof) in the wake of the Florida legislature's passage of the "Don't Say Gay" bill has become increasingly critical (The Associated Press, 2023; Smith, 2022). In this case, Disney's initial and more neutral response to the legislation generated backlash from both supporters and opponents of the bill. Second, it supports the operationalization of backlash as a crisis by demonstrating that the crisis is being covered by mainstream media. Third, it also provides a way in which to summarize the context of the crisis and "report" on the crisis response statement in a storytelling fashion that removes the

confounds present on social media platforms where the attention economy influences the likes, comments, etc., of a corporation's post (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021).

The stimulus design mimics the mobile layout of a real article published by Reuters, including how it lists the time it takes to read the article and its font, coloring, and date format. Prior SCCT literature has utilized methodologies that apply the theory by considering crises covered in traditional media outlets (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2015). To prevent other variables from influencing the participants, the ads that are often seen on the sides of Reuter's articles are omitted from the design. There is also no author or menu with additional information that could distract the participants or confound the results, although the design indicates that the article is seemingly listed under a real category on Reuters, "World at Work." Reuters was selected as the publication according to Ad Fontes Media's Interactive Media Bias Chart® (2023), which scores Reuters as a neutral or balanced bias media outlet. Based on previous CSA research (Lim & Young, 2021), a real company was used for the stimuli. To control for the crisis history role in SCCT, the company selected, Panera Bread, does not have a history of CSA-related crises.

All five conditions, including the control, feature contextual information about corporations engaging with controversial social issues and provide an overview of the fictitious crisis scenario. In the scenario, Panera Bread has released its "Together United" initiative to combat racial inequality on its social media channels, which has since been on the receiving end of unexpected social media outrage that has cumulated in the form of an organized boycott and the widespread use of #BoycottPanera. To prevent participants from dismissing the reported dissent, the perspective of the boycotters is kept vague. In other words, participants are not told if the boycotters are supporters or opponents of efforts to fight racial inequality, but the scale and unexpected nature of the backlash are outlined to communicate that it is a crisis, with the article mentioning "many consumers [who are] indicating they are upset that Panera is incorporating this

initiative into their marketing calendar." The control condition includes the same text that contextualizes the backlash as a crisis, then states that Panera Bread has not yet responded to the boycott and coverage of the backlash. The rest of the control article provides basic information about the amount of money provided by corporations to fight racial inequality and provides a definition and scope of the issue of racial inequality in America.

In the experimental conditions, the article then states that a spokesperson from Panera Bread has released a statement. The statement features slightly different font, so it appears to be quoted text. Within this crisis response, both crisis response type and ethics of care are manipulated. The crisis response manipulation appears first, and the ethics of care manipulation appears second. However, it is critical to note that the participants may perceive elements of the different crisis responses as care or lack thereof. The diminish-excuse condition is captured by claims within the statement that Panera Bread never intended to harm its customers with its CSA initiative (Coombs, 2006) and that the company was only trying to meet customers' expectations of engagement in social justice work (Coombs, 2006; Yu et al., 2022). The diminish-excuse condition also cites the lack of control the company has over how its efforts are received and likens this occurrence to what other companies experience when engaging with controversial issues (Coombs, 2006; Hunag, 2008). The text for this condition is based on real-world responses. For example, in response to backlash to partnering with a transgender celebrity, Dylan Mulvaney, Anheuser-Busch's CEO Brendan Whitworth stated in a press release, "We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people. We are in the business of bringing people together over a beer" (O'Kane, 2023).

For the rebuild-apology condition, the statement from Panera Bread begins with a sincere apology and continues with the organization admitting they made a mistake, taking full accountability for the initiative, and asking for forgiveness (Claeys et al., 2010b; Coombs, 2006). The apology condition is also drawn from real-world examples, such as Walmart's response to

backlash to its Juneteenth campaign, which states, "Juneteenth holiday marks a celebration of freedom and independence. However, we received feedback that a few items caused concern for some of our customers, and we sincerely apologize. We are reviewing our assortment and will remove items as appropriate" (Kiner, 2022). As with Disney, Walmart received backlash from both opponents of the holiday and those angry that it was capitalizing on a culture movement.

To manipulate ethics of care, the crisis response emphasizes the four elements of Tronto's (2010) taxonomy of ethics of care to varying degrees. For example, in the high ethics of care condition, the statement from Panera Bread includes two paragraphs stating its assumed responsibility to care for others in its community, especially those who have been unfairly silenced, its recognition of the needs of the community, and its efforts to engage in a responsive exchange with members of its community to learn how to care for them (Coombs, 2017; Sander-Staudt, 2018; Tronto, 2010). The high ethics of care condition also highlights how Panera Bread aims to use its expertise as a café to facilitate conversations about controversial issues and invites the audience to be a part of the dialogue with it. The low ethics of care condition, in order to maintain ecological validity as a crisis response, demonstrates some degree of care but does not highlight Tronto's (2010) four main values of competence, responsiveness, responsibility, and attentiveness. In addition, the low care statement signals an end to the discussion and emphasizes the need for the company to pursue profit-oriented, rather than people-oriented, goals to recover from the crisis. For example, in the low care condition, Panera Bread declares its limited responsibility for others, claims to already know what is needed in terms of care, highlights its fealty to investors as well as to customers, and invites the audience to learn more about racial inequality on their own. It is important to note the values that comprise the ethical framework of ethics of care were reflected within the message text rather than described as a corporate action.

To finalize the study materials, a series of pretests and pilot tests were conducted to confirm the manipulations of crisis response type and degree of ethics of care within the stimuli

that were perceived by the participants. Based on the novel nature of empirically exploring ethics of care in tandem with different crisis response types, several manipulation checks were developed and applied to this study.

Pretests and Pilot Tests

Participants in the pilot tests (N=189) were collected through Qualtrics, as well. Participants for the pretests (N=120) were recruited through CloudResearch Connect using a questionnaire that was hosted on Qualtrics. For each of the pretests and pilot tests, an independent sample t-test was used to test the manipulation of the high/low ethics of care, and a series of chi-square difference tests were used to test the manipulation of the crisis response types of diminish-excuse and rebuild-apology.

Pilot Test 1

After input from the dissertation committee concerning the content of the stimuli, a soft launch (N=70) of the full study questionnaire occurred on March 2, 2023. A series of independent sample t-tests and chi-squares revealed that there was no significant difference between either the crisis response type or ethics of care conditions according to the two manipulation checks, one for each IV.

Pretest 1

After extensive changes to the stimuli to strengthen the manipulations, and the construction of additional manipulation check questions, a pretest questionnaire was prepared on

Qualtrics, and participants (*N*=70) were recruited through CloudResearch Connect, an online

panel company, with an incentive of $0.70 for each participant. Both of the crisis response

manipulation checks were significant, and all four of the ethics of care manipulation checks were

significant, with the exception of one item, "In their statement, Panera Bread demonstrated that

they....use their business to care for others."

Pilot Test 2

With these results indicating that the manipulations were being correctly perceived,

another soft launch of the full study was initiated through Qualtrics. Per the best practices advised

by Qualtrics, the response collection was paused again (*N*=69) in order to confirm that the data

collection and manipulations were performing as intended. One of the two manipulation checks

for the crisis response type reported a significant difference, and all the ethics of care

manipulations reported significant differences with the exception of one item, which asked

participants to indicate the degree to which they disagree/agree with the statement, "In their

statement, Panera Bread demonstrated that they....are responsible for caring for their community"

(p=.055).

Pretest 2

Due to the limited resources and time constraints of the data collection contract through

Qualtrics, a second pretest was conducted using CloudResearch Connect. The crisis response

portion of the statement from Panera Bread was heavily revised, drawing on examples from

previous literature (Xiao et al., 2018). For example, for the rebuild-apology condition, asking for

forgiveness and accepting responsibility were added to the apology. Within the diminish-excuse

condition, a statement was added comparing Panera Bread's actions to other companies who experience backlash to their CSA initiatives and the lack of control companies have when dealing with such controversial and nuanced issues (Coombs, 2006). The two manipulation checks for the crisis response type were revised, and an additional check was added to account for the expansion of the condition. The ethics of care conditions remained the same.

The results of this pretest (N=50) reported that all the crisis response manipulation checks reported significant differences. All the ethics of care manipulations reported significant differences with the exception of one item, which asked participants to identify the degree to which Panera Bread's response demonstrated that they were incompetent to competent, using a semantic differential scale.

Pilot Test 3

Per the best practices advised by Qualtrics, the third soft launch of the full study was initiated through Qualtrics (N=50). Two of the three manipulation checks for the crisis response type reported a significant difference, and five of the ten items measuring ethics of care manipulations (two full measures) reported significant differences. Based on the comprehensive nature of the crisis response portion of the stimuli, according to previous literature and the consistent prior performance of the ethics of care manipulations across survey platforms, the full study was then launched with the only change to the stimuli being to update the date of the article to March 7th, 2023.

Manipulation Checks

The final set of manipulation checks administered for the full data collection featured three crisis response type manipulation checks that asked participants to indicate what Panera Bread said in its statement, which was cited within the article. The diminish-excuse condition was identifiable by Panera Bread's statements that it 1) it was never its intention to harm anyone with its initiative, 2) used its customers' high standards as an excuse for its initiative, and 3) can't control how its efforts are received. The rebuild-apology condition was identifiable by Panera Bread's statements that it 1) said it was deeply sorry and apologized for its initiative, 2) admitted it made a mistake and took full accountability for its initiative, and 3) asked for forgiveness. These manipulation checks followed the sequence of the text within the statement shown to participants; crisis response text followed by ethics of care text. A series of chi-square tests were run (N=409) to confirm the significant difference between the two crisis response types for manipulation check questions one ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 101.77, p < .001$) two ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 134.72, p < .001$), and three ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 119.43, p < .001$).

For the ethics of care variable, four manipulation check measures were included and were structured as both semantic differential and Likert scales to discourage participants from guessing answers and to explore the degree to which participants interpreted ethics of care. Drawing from Tronto (2010) and other literature pertaining to ethics of care, several ethics of care manipulation checks were constructed. The first two single-item measures were both semantic differential scales. The first evaluated whether Panera Bread was perceived to care very little about others to very much about others. The second evaluated whether Panera Bread was perceived to care more about people and relationships or investors and reputation (Madden & Alt, 2021). This measure was focused on care ethics' emphasis on prioritizing value-driven elements, such as deeper, care-informed relationships, over profit-driven outcomes. The third and fourth measures both drew

upon Tronto's (2010) taxonomy, which emphasizes a) attentiveness by recognizing others' needs in order to respond to them, b) responsibility to care for others, c) competence by using skills to give care, and d) responsiveness by seeking guidance from the care recipient as to what care is needed. Participants were asked to identify the degree to which Panera Bread demonstrated in its statement that it 1) recognizes others' needs, 2) is responsible for caring for its community, 3) uses its business to care for others, and 4) wants to learn how to care for others. The fourth measure similarly asked the degree to which Panera Bread demonstrated in its statement that it was 1) inattentive or attentive, 2) not responsible or responsible, 3) incompetent or competent, and 4) apathetic or responsive. The terminology used by Tronto (2010) was adapted to fit the context in which the manipulations were being applied. An independent sample t-test for the ethics of care manipulation checks demonstrated that participants perceived the high versus low ethics of care differently for only manipulation check question two: questions one ($t(407) = -.657$, $p = .512$ Cohen's d = -.065) two ($t(407) = -3.286$, p = .001 Cohen's d = -.325) three (($t(407) = -.909$, p =.364 Cohen's d = -.090), and four ($t(407) = .55$, p = .484, Cohen's d = .048).

Experimental Procedures

Participants for the main study data (N=509) were recruited and administered through Qualtrics. To ensure the sample was representative of the demographics of the United States, several quotas were applied to the questionnaire design and incorporated into the initial batch of demographic questions. After these demographic questions, questions capturing three of the four control variables, prior corporate reputation, attitude toward CSA, and issue involvement were presented. Participants were then provided with an overview of the impeding stimuli exposure and instructed to read the presented article carefully. Participants viewed the stimuli for a minimum of 40 seconds before being able to proceed with the rest of the questionnaire. After

answering questions pertaining to their familiarity with the featured brand, Panera Bread, and their purchase frequency at Panera Bread, they responded to a series of manipulation check questions established in the pretests and pilot tests.

Participants were then prompted to report their perceptions of the mediating variable, corporate reputation. Before asking participants to report on their evaluations of the supportive/non-supportive corporate-centric outcomes, such as purchase or boycott intentions, an open-ended question was posed to participants asking is they wished to share any thoughts about the stimuli or their experience thus far. The last outcome measured was activism intentions, which asked participants to report on their supportive intentions toward the cause. Participants then answered two final demographic questions that were not a part of the quotas and were debriefed on the fictitious nature of the stimuli that they viewed.

Attention Checks

The full data collection included several attention check items to increase the quality and validity of the data set. To ensure a representative sample, there were also several quota questions that applied the two requirements to participate in the study: 1) residing in the United States and 2) being 18 years of age or older. People who did not pass the attention check questions or indicated that they did not meet the requirements to participate had their responses automatically terminated and removed by Qualtrics. Survey settings administered by Qualtrics also filtered out those that did not consent to participate, and if the participant misidentified the company, Panera Bread, that was the subject of the news article. There were also two common types of attention check items included in the survey, one prior to the stimuli exposure and one after. For these items, participants were asked to select a certain response (e.g., "Please select 'disagree' for this question"), and participants were able to continue if they answered the question correctly.

Participants in the control condition were able to utilize the same attention check questions as those in the experimental conditions.

Participants

A power analysis was conducted for 2 x 2 MANCOVA, plus a control condition, using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) with $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80. The results suggest that the analysis should detect an effect size of $f = .25$, which is a medium effect size, according to Cohen (1988).

Initially, 709 participants were recruited through Qualtrics, 189 of which were collected as part of the three pilot tests. Each subject received compensation for participating in the study; the amounts differed based on the panels from which Qualtrics recruited them. Within Qualtrics, participants could only participate in the pilot tests or the main study. There was no way to omit those who had participated in any of the pretests (Pretest 1 and Pretest 2) on CloudResearch Connect from the Qualtrics recruitment. However, being that the tests were administered on different platforms, previous studies have established consistency across platforms (Waddell et al., 2022) and the use of both platforms for data collection (Alharbi et al., 2022; Rim et al., 2022). Sixteen significant outliers were detected based on the Mahalanobis distance, and these individuals were removed from the sample of 709. Qualtrics refielded for several hours on March 22nd, 2023, to replace these outliers with a final sample of 712. Twenty-one significant outliers were then detected based on the Mahalanobis distance, and these individuals were removed from the final sample. Upon review of the data, three additional participants did not answer the entire questionnaire, and their incomplete responses were also omitted. As a result, 509 people were retained for further data analysis.

The final sample included 250 (48.8%) males, 259 (50.6%) females, and 4 (0.6%) non-binary individuals. Of these individuals ($N=509$), 150 (29.5%) were between 18–34 years old,

167 (32.8%) were between 35–54 years old, and 192 (37.7%) were older than 55 years old; ages ranged from 18 to 88. In terms of race, the majority of the participants, 390 were White/Caucasian (76.6%), 64 (12.6%) were Black or African American, 24 (4.7%) were Asian or Pacific Islander, 11 (2.2%) were American Indian/Native American/Alaskan Native/Other, and 20 (3.9%) reported that they identified with another race and were provided with the opportunity to specify. In terms of ethnicity, 101 (19.8%) identified as Hispanic, and 408 (80.2%) did not.

Most participants (N=130, 25.5%) had four-year degrees, with 54 (10.4%) reporting that they held an associate or technical degree. Of the remaining participants, 105 (20.6%) had some college education but no degree, 20 (3.9%) had completed some graduate work, 68 (13.4%) had completed a master's or other professional degree, 19 (3.7%) had completed a doctoral degree or advanced graduate work, 102 (20%) had high school diplomas or a GED, and 12 (2.4%) had some high school education but did not finish. Regarding income, 51 (10.0%) participants reported household income less than $25,000, 81 (15.8%) were between $25,000–$39,999, 34 (6.6%) reported $40,000–$49,999, 111 (21.7%) reported that that they made $50,000–$74,999, 72 (14.1%) reported $75,000–$99,999, 57 (11.1%) made between $100,000–$124,999, 45 (8.8%) made between $125,000–$149,999, 33 (6.4%) said they made $150,000–$199,999, and 28 (5.5%) reported an income of $200,000 or more.

Participants were also asked about their political views ranging from 1 being extremely liberal to 7 being extremely conservative (mean=4.04, SD=1.719). At the end of the survey, they also reported the political party they most identified with 183 (36%) identified as Democrat, 172 (33.8%) identified as Republican, 20 (3.9%) identified as Libertarian, 4 (0.8%) identified as Green Party, and 130 (25.5%) identified as Independent.

Measurement

Unless otherwise indicated, all variables were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). As shown, the internal consistency of the measures was acceptable for all the measures with each demonstrating a Cronbach's α greater than .80. Within the study design, random sampling was employed to prevent systematic differences between participants, and a control condition was included to identify the potential of confounding unexpected factors, thus improving the internal validity.

Control Variables

Prior Corporate Reputation

Adapted from Ponzi et al. (2011), prior corporate reputation was measured using one item, which asked participants the extent of their agreement with the statement, "Panera Bread has a good overall reputation" (M=5.4; SD=1.14). While the use of single-item measures is not generally advisable in terms of construct validity, prior research has supported to the predictive validity of single-item measures (Bergkvist, & Rossiter, 2007) and scholars have employed a single-item measure for prior corporate reputation (Ponzi et al., 2011). There is also precedence in crisis communication literature to employ prior corporate reputation as a control, as it can either protect or harm the organization in crisis (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2015; Claeys et al., 2010b; Kim & Cameron, 2011). In a similar vein, employing different measures for prior corporate reputation and post-crisis corporate reputation is supported by prior literature (Kiambi & Shafer, 2015; Kim, 2019; Walker, 2010). This study sought to control more broadly for any effects of stakeholders' perceptions of how the company had acted in previous situations (Kriyantono, 2012).

CSA Attitudes

Adapted from Austin et al. (2019), six items were used to measure attitude toward CSA. The measure asked participants about their level of agreement with statements about companies in general. Sample items include, "Companies should...work to better society" and "Companies should…advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus" (α=0.723; M=4.54; SD=1.04).

Issue Involvement

Adapted from previous CSA research by Overton et al. (2020), three items were used to measure participants' involvement with the issue of racial inequality. Two of the items were reverse coded to avoid straight-lining by participants. *Issue involvement* was measured using a semantic differential scale that instructed participants to respond to the statement, "To me, addressing the issue of racial inequality is…" 9 items were used: Unimportant/Important, Of no concern to me/Of concern to me, Means nothing to me/Means a lot to me, Valuable/Worthless, Trivial/ Fundamental, Insignificant/Significant, Not beneficial to society/Beneficial to society, Does not matter to me/Matters to me, and Essential/ Nonessential (α=0.939; M=5.17; SD=1.62).

Purchase Frequency

To measure *purchase frequency*, participants were asked to indicate how often they buy from Panera Bread using a semantic differential scale that consisted of one item: Very Infrequently/Very Frequently (M=3.32; SD=1.89).

Mediating Variable

Corporate Reputation

Adapted from Vasquez (2022), which specifically considers corporate reputation in the context of CSA, six items were used to measure corporate reputation. The measure asked participants about their level of agreement with statements about Panera Bread after viewing the stimuli. Sample items include, "I admire and respect Panera Bread" and "Panera Bread is socially responsible" (α=0.935; *M*=5.05; *SD*=1.21).

Outcome Variables

Purchase Intentions

Adapted from previous CSA research by Alharbi et al. (2022), three items were used to measure *purchase intentions*. Sample items included asking participants the extent to which they agreed with statements such as, "It is highly likely that I will buy from Panera Bread in the near future" and "I plan to buy from Panera Bread on a regular basis" (α=0.897; *M*=4.53; *SD*=1.61).

Boycott Intentions

Adapted from previous CSA research by Hong and Li (2021), three items were used to measure *boycott intentions*. One of the items was reverse coded. Sample items include asking participants the extent to which they agreed with statements such as, "I will stop purchasing from Panera Bread" and "I will be tempted to boycott Panera Bread" (α=0.783; *M*=2.54; *SD*=1.47).

Positive/Negative Word of Mouth (WOM)

Adapted from previous CSA research by Overton et al. (2020), a total of six items, three each, were used to measure positive and negative word of mouth (P/NWOM) about the company. Sample items include asking participants the extent to which they agreed with statements such as, "I would say positive things about Panera Bread" for PWOM ($\alpha=0.944$, $M=4.89$, $SD=1.49$) and "I would say negative things about Panera Bread to others" for NWOM ($\alpha=0.863$; $M=2.69$; $SD=1.581$).

Advocating Behaviors

Four items were used to measure *advocating behaviors* toward Panera Bread (Lee & Tao, 2021; Walden & Westerman, 2018). Sample items include asking participants how likely it would be that they would engage in actions such as, "I would speak favorably about Panera Bread actions in public" and "I would say positive things about the Panera Bread actions to other people" ($\alpha=0.946$, $M=4.62$, $SD=1.56$).

Activism Intentions

Adapted from Hart and Feldman (2016), five items were used to measure *activism intentions* concerning the issue of racial equality. Sample items include asking participants how likely they would be to "sign a petition in support of taking action on racial inequality" or "join or volunteer with an organization working to" ($\alpha=0.937$, $M=3.75$, $SD=1.83$).

Chapter 4

Results

Initial Data Analysis

Upon completion of the final data collection, the data was reviewed and cleaned. After any identifying data was removed from the data file (e.g., IP address), required items were reversed coded, and scales were created. In advance of testing the research questions and hypotheses, a means table and a bivariate correlation matrix were created to show outcomes and relationships amongst all the variables of interest (See Table 1-1 and Table 2-1).

Table **1-1**: Descriptive Statistics by Experimental Condition

	diminish-excuse		rebuild-apology		Overall Mean/(*SD*)
	low	high	low	high	
	Mean Values	Mean Values	Mean Values	Mean Values	
1 Corporate Reputation	5.17	4.89	5.10	5.14	5.07 (1.22)
2 Purchase Intentions	4.80	4.18	4.69	4.65	4.58 (1.58)
3 Boycott Intentions	2.31	2.54	2.63	2.37	2.47 (1.43)
4 PWOM	5.14	4.60	4.94	5.00	4.92 (1.48)
5 NWOM	2.78	2.62	2.78	2.45	2.65 (1.56)
6 Advocating Behaviors	4.78	4.37	4.69	4.67	4.62 (1.54)
7 Activism Intentions	4.02	3.44	3.91	3.50	3.72 (1.83)

Note: N=409, control condition omitted

Table **2-1**: Zero-order Correlations Between All Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Prior Corporate Reputation	1.00										
CSA Attitudes	.272**	1.00									
Issue Involvement	.158**	.346**	1.00								
Purchase Frequency	.397**	.266**	.121**	1.00							
Corporate Reputation	.503**	.390**	.346**	.367**	1.00						
Purchase Intentions	.397**	.306**	.261**	.524**	.703**	1.00					
Boycott Intentions	-.164**	.015	-.210**	-.031	-.410**	-.377**	1.00				
PWOM	.446**	.311**	.300**	.371**	.811**	.793**	-.495**	1.00			
NWOM	-.100*	.133**	-.136**	.111**	-.229**	-.150**	.698**	-.292**	1.00		
Advocating Behaviors	.392**	.342**	.329**	.389**	.772**	.712**	-.416**	.854**	-.212**	1.00	
Activism Intentions	.169**	.434**	.475**	.328**	.308**	.375**	.036	.343**	.166**	.433**	1.00

*Note: N=509, *p<.05; **p<.01*

Creation of Group Variables

In this experiment, participants were randomly exposed to one of the five different conditions: four experimental crisis response conditions and one control condition. Based on the condition that an individual was in, three nominal grouping variables were created in a post hoc manner: diminish-excuse/rebuild-apology crisis response type, low/high ethics of care, and control/experiment exposure. The distribution of crisis response type (diminish-excuse vs. rebuild-apology), ethics of care (high vs. low), and condition (control vs. experimental) is described in Table 3-1.

Table **3-1**: Distribution of Crisis Response Type, Ethics of Care, and Condition

		Ethics of Care		Total
		low	high	
Experiment	diminish-excuse	101	102	203
	rebuild-apology	108	98	206
	Total	209	200	
Control	no response	-	-	100
				509

Research Question and Hypothesis Testing

A variety of statistical tests were administered using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) to identify the relationships between the independent, mediating, and dependent variables. Crisis response type and degree of ethics of care were applied as the independent variables; corporate reputation as the mediator; and purchase intentions, positive and negative word of mouth, boycott intentions, advocating behaviors, and activism intentions as the dependent variables. Control variables included attitude toward CSA, issue involvement, purchasing frequency from Panera Bread, and prior corporate reputation. When necessary to answer RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, H1, H2, and H3, participants in the control condition were omitted (*N*=409).

To test RQ1 and RQ2, which asked if the two independent variables, crisis response type and ethics of care, respectively, affect purchase intention, boycott intention, positive/negative WOM, advocating behaviors, and activism intentions, a two-way MANCOVA was conducted. There was no statistically significant difference between the crisis response type groups (diminish-excuse vs. rebuild-apology) on the combined dependent variables after controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation, $F(7,395)=.68$, $p=.69$, Wilks' $\Lambda=.99$, partial $\eta^2=.012$.

There was no statistically significant difference between the ethics of care groups (high vs. low) on the combined dependent variables after controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation, $F(7,395)=1.43$, $p=.19$, Wilks' $\Lambda=.98$, partial $\eta^2=.03$. However, when looking at the dependent variables separately, there was an effect of ethics of care on activism intentions ($p=.026$). To address the potential difference between the two treatment groups (low vs. high) for activism intentions, an ad hoc analysis, using a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), was conducted, controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation. This demonstrated that lower ethics of care elicited greater activism intentions. The adjusted means and standard errors, as well as a summary of the one-way ANCOVA, for activism intentions by ethics of care (low vs. high) can be seen in Table 4-1 and Table 4-2 respectively.

Table **4-1**: Adjusted Means and Standard Errors for Activism Intentions by Ethics of Care (low vs. high)

		M (SE)	n
Ethics of Care	low	3.88 (.103)	209
	high	3.55 (.106)	200

Table **4-2**: One-way ANCOVA Summary for Activism Intentions by Function of Ethics of Care (low vs. high)

	SS	df	MS	F	p
(Intercept)	8.19	1	8.20	3.70	.055
Purchase Frequency	50.28	1	50.28	22.70	< .001
Prior Corporate Reputation	.11	1	.11	.05	.826
Attitude toward CSA	67.13	1	67.13	30.31	< .001
Issue Involvement	147.15	1	147.15	66.43	< .001
Ethics of Care	11.00	1	11.00	4.97	< .026
Error	892.67	403	2.22		

RQ3, which asked if the interaction between crisis response type and ethics of care would affect purchase intention, boycott intention, positive/negative WOM, advocating behaviors, and activism intentions when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation, was also *not supported*. The results of the two-way MANOVCA showed no significant interaction effect between the independent variables of interest on the combined dependent variables, $F(7,395)=.75$, $p=.63$, Wilks' $\Lambda=.99$, partial $\eta^2=.01$. However, when removing the control variables (purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation), and instead running a two-way MANOVA, the interaction between ethics of care and crisis response type affected positive word of mouth ($p < .040$), suggesting that the effects of the controls outweighed the manipulations.

To test H1, which proposed that participants exposed to a rebuild-apology crisis response would report higher corporate reputation compared to participants exposed to the diminish-excuse crisis response, a one-way ANCOVA was performed. When controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation, there were no statistically significant differences found in corporate reputation between crisis response types ($p < .722$). Therefore, H1 was *not supported.*

To answer H2, which predicted that participants exposed to crisis responses with high ethics of care would report higher corporate reputation compared to participants exposed to crisis responses with low ethics of care, a one-way ANCOVA was performed. No statistically significant differences were found in corporate reputation between high versus low ethics of care ($p < .766$) when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation. Therefore, H2 was *not supported.*

To answer RQ4, which asked to what degree the interaction of ethics of care and crisis type impacts corporate reputation, a one-way ANCOVA was performed. The results showed no significant interaction effect between the independent variables on corporate reputation ($p <$

.516), when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation.

H3 would have been tested using the Process macro model 4 in SPSS (Hayes, 2018), which conducts a simple parallel mediation, including the control variables (purchase frequency, prior corporate reputation, CSA attitude, and issue involvement). However, H3 was not tested as there was no identified relationship between crisis response type, ethics of care, or their interaction, and the mediator, corporate reputation.

H4, which represents the control condition, predicted that the experimental conditions would result in higher a) corporate reputation, b) purchase intentions, c) PWOM, d) advocating behaviors, and e) activism intentions as well as lower f) boycott intentions and g) NWOM than the control condition when controlling for purchase frequency, CSA attitudes, issue involvement, and prior corporate reputation. An independent sample t-test revealed that the experimental conditions did not result in higher a) corporate reputation, b) purchase intentions, c) PWOM, d) advocating behaviors, and e) activism intentions as well as lower f) NWOM. However, there was a statistically significant difference in g) boycott intentions between the experimental (M=2.45, SD=1.43) and control (M=2.80, SD=1.55): $t(507)$=-2.06, p=.029, Cohen's d=-.230. To identify any potential role of the control variables (purchase frequency, issue involvement, attitude toward CSA, and prior corporate reputation), a one-way ANCOVA was run for boycott intentions, confirming that H4 was *partially supported.* Table 5-1 shows the adjusted means, standard errors, and sample sizes for the outcome variables by condition (control vs. experiment). Table 5-2 shows the result of the one-way ANCOVA.

Table **5-1**: Adjusted Means, Standard Errors, and Sample Sizes for Outcome Variables by Condition (control vs. experiment)

Variable		Adj. Mean (SE)	*n***n**
Corporate Reputation	experiment	5.07 (1.58)	409
	control	5.00 (1.68)	100
Purchase Intentions	experiment	4.58 (1.43)	409
	control	4.35 (1.55)	100
Boycott Intentions	experiment	2.45 (1.43)	409
	control	2.80 (1.55)	100
PWOM	experiment	4.92 (1.48)	409
	control	4.80 (1.53)	100
NWOM	experiment	2.65 (1.55)	409
	control	2.83 (1.65)	100
Advocating Behaviors	experiment	4.62 (1.54)	409
	control	4.61 (1.63)	100
Activism Intentions	experiment	3.72 (1.83)	409
	control	3.81 (1.83)	100

Table **5-2**: One-way ANCOVA Summary for Boycott Intentions by Function of Condition (Experiment vs. Control)

	SS	df	MS	F	p
(Intercept)	218.30	1	218.30	111.63	< .001
Purchase Frequency	1.51	1	1.51	.771	.380
Prior Corporate Reputation	26.45	1	26.45	13.63	< .001
Attitude toward CSA	14.64	1	14.64	7.49	.006
Issue Involvement	51.55	1	51.55	26.31	< .001
Control	8.17	1	8.17	4.18	.041
Error	983.66	503	1.96		

Chapter 5

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to apply ethics of care within crisis responses and explore the empirical effects. The secondary purpose of this study was to determine the most effective response to backlash to CSA as a crisis. As such, exploratory questions examining if and how crisis response types and the degree of ethics of care affects supportive and non-supportive outcomes were proposed. In addition, I sought to establish if and how the interaction between the two variables affects corporate reputation, a key variable in relationship building and crisis management (Coombs 2007a; Grunig & Hung, 2022).

Following the predictions in SCCT, it was expected that the type of crisis response would affect corporate reputation and the subsequent supportive and non-supportive intentions toward the company. Specifically, it was predicted that the rebuild-apology condition would be the most effective at protecting the corporate reputation, thus bettering the relationship between the corporation and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Based on prior CSA and ethics of care research, it was expected that a higher degree of ethics of care would strengthen both types of crisis response in that it would better signal the values of the company and strengthen its relationship with stakeholders, which would be reflected in the corporate reputation (Madden & Alt, 2021). It was also hypothesized that corporate reputation would mediate the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables. The results revealed several limited but compelling findings.

Interpretation of Findings

There are three main takeaways from the reviewed results. First, based on prior CSA and SCCT literature, prior corporate reputation (Claeys et al., 2010b; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2015), purchase frequency (Dodd & Supa, 2014), issue involvement (Browning et al., 2020; Li et al, 2022; Overton et al., 2021), and attitude toward CSA (Kim et al., 2023) were applied as control variables. The lack of significant findings, with or without the controls, suggests that the controls, in addition to other unknown variables, may have had a stronger impact on the outcome variables than the manipulations. Second, the results show that the low care diminish-excuse condition elicited the highest activism intentions. This suggests that when a lack of care is being perceived, stakeholders may be more motivated to act on behalf of the issue themselves. Contrary to prior literature (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs 2007b), the apology condition did not perform well, compared to the diminish-excuse condition, which suggests that the way in which a corporation asks for forgiveness in the context of CSA must be strategic so as to avoid appearing inauthentic (Yim, 2021). This finding reflects theories pertaining to defensive reactions (Dillard et al., 2018) or the theory of planned behavior (Dodd & Supa, 2015), wherein a perceived lack of control, or specific emotions, can motivate individuals to act. Third, the partial significance of the control hypothesis confirms that no response in the face of backlash to CSA as a crisis could potentially elicit boycott intentions that could further exacerbate the crisis.

Theoretical Implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions. First, the results suggest that certain contextual CSA variables, such as issue involvement, attitude toward CSA, etc., may have a

greater impact on how such initiatives are perceived by stakeholders than previously understood. For example, the attitude toward CSA measure reported an acceptable, but low, Cronbach's α (α=0.723, suggesting that the measures for CSA variables may be in need of further refinement. The lack of definitive results suggests that the central concept of this study, backlash to CSA as a crisis, should be further extrapolated, especially when it can impact stakeholders' actions toward the issue itself.

In applying SCCT to a CSA context, this study provides an operationalization of a very specific form of backlash. Parsing out when an occurrence of backlash becomes a crisis advances the current understanding of backlash to CSA and the parameters that move a situation into a crisis—namely, that it is a) unexpected in that the backlash extends beyond the anticipated alienation expected with CSA and 2) the backlash is occurring publicly and is being covered by traditional media as well as social media. The application of an established crisis management framework and the provided operationalization explores *beyond* previously presented concepts of crisis threats or online paracrisis (Roh, 2017) and proposes that these occurrences represent full crises (Cheng & Shen, 2020), wherein there is a significant reputational threat. This in turn supports prior research that when dealing with controversial issues (Lim & Young, 2021), reputation management is paramount key for maintaining positive relationships (Grunig & Hung, 2002).

In terms of ethics of care, this study offers several valuable takeaways. First, the development and testing of manipulation checks and stimuli incorporating ethics of care will hopefully inform future research and encourage the applied study of ethics of care. Second, the finding that the low care diminish-excuse condition was the most effective at motivating individuals to become activists for the issues supports prior crisis research on consumers' ethical judgments. For example, Cheng and Shen (2020), found that distrust, as an outcome of stakeholders' negative ethical judgment, had a bigger impact on stakeholders' behavioral

intentions, such as information seeking, mobilizing, and consulting than trust. In other words, stakeholders recognize and react when they don't perceive the handling of a crisis to be ethically sound. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the perceived "performance" of ethics of care in the written form of a message, rather than a reported action, may be perceived differently. The limits of these unexpected findings surrounding ethics of care also suggest that there is more to explore when it comes to the ethical management of controversial issues, especially in terms of emotion, responsibility, and the responsive nature of the care.

Practical Implications

The finite findings and exploratory nature of the ethics of care element limit the practical utility of this study. However, the delicate nature of responding to backlash to CSA as a crisis is made abundantly clear. The identified relationship between the control condition and boycott intentions cautions practitioners to respond in a timely manner to backlash to CSA as a crisis. The powerful role of issues involvement, attitude towards CSA, and purchase frequency suggest that these dynamic elements should inform the way in which practitioners select and craft campaigns that are beneficial for their organization. Keeping tabs on social media discourse and coverage in mainstream media will be essential in partaking in CSA campaigns, as all the affecting variables and strategic management choices have not been concretely identified.

The "If you don't do it, no one will" mentality suggested in the unexpected relationship between low ethics of care diminish-excuse condition and activism intentions also reflects what is being observed by practitioners. In the current climate, corporations are expected to advance controversial social issues, and trust in government and nonprofit entities is decreasing globally ("Two-thirds of Consumers," 2023). When corporations fail in these expectations, stakeholders may feel that there are no other options but to take on the advancement of the issue themselves.

This suggests that while practitioners must be strategic in how they engage in CSA to support their corporate-centric outcomes, engaging in any form of CSA has the potential to motivate supporters to contribute to the cause. In other words, corporate engagement in CSA promotes visibility and invites discourse on controversial social-political issues, which is valuable for addressing the issue itself, thus providing a public good.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any social science research, this study is subject to limitations. First, this study sought to explore the impact and relationship between ethics of care and crisis response. The findings suggest that there is a conceptual overlap between crisis responses and ethics of care that makes parsing out individual differences especially challenging. Specifically, within ethics of care, accepting responsibility to care for others is a core tenant that could conceptually overlap with the acceptance of responsibility associated with the rebuild-apology crisis response type. The overlaps could have impacted the results of this study, and parsing out the distinctions between the two will be a challenge for future research.

The selected theoretical constructs for this study may have also posed limitations. Scholars have applied construal-level theory (Xu et al., 2021), the theory of planned behavior (Kim et al., 2022), and balance theory (Rim et al, 2022), among others, to CSA. While other scholars have explored CSA in the context of a crisis (Ji & Wan, 2023) and applied ethics of care to crisis communication (Madden & Alt, 2021), the application of ethics of care to CSA, as in this study, is novel. Ethics of care perhaps does not suit the divisive elements of CSA, especially when examined as a crisis. A different ethical framework, such as moral foundations theory which is grounded in nativism, cultural adaptations, and prioritizing intuition, may be better equipped to explore CSA. Moral foundations theory accounts for the duality of harm and care,

fairness and cheating, loyalty and betrayal, authority and subversion, and purity and degradation within moral evaluations; this ethical perspective is on a spectrum that emulates the controversial issues at the heart of CSA (Graham et al., 2018).

While the manipulated crisis responses showed limited results, this study still effectively applied the SCCT model to the context of backlash to CSA, thus contributing to the theoretical integration of CSA into crisis scholarship. In publicly dealing with controversial social-political issues, CSA will undoubtedly continue to attract negative responses that can threaten the reputation of corporations and the well-being of stakeholders (Coombs, 2006; Dodd & Supa, 2014). The lack of identified relationships between crisis response and the previously associated outcome variables suggests that the stimuli perhaps did not provide enough information for the participants to fully understand the backlash to CSA scenario and the crisis response. Determining the most effective crisis response will require additional empirical exploration, especially including other variables, such as emotions, that may be particularly salient in a CSA context (Overton et al., 2021). Additionally, although prior crisis research has also utilized non-response as a control (Choi & Lin, 2009), the emerging practice of strategically staying silent (Yim, 2021; Le et al., 2018) provides an opportunity to explore new forms of crisis responses in the context of CSA.

In addition, it should be acknowledged that this study included a fixed crisis situation in which the crisis responsibility was not identified. Crisis responsibility is a foundational variable of SCCT that has guided crisis response in past literature (Coombs, 2007a). However, I opted not to include crisis responsibility for two main reasons. First, prior research has revealed mixed results matching crisis clusters (victim, accidental, preventable) with crisis response types (rebuild, diminish, denial, etc.) (Xiao et al., 2018). Second, there is a question of whether backlash to CSA falls within the preventable or accidental crisis cluster. With stakeholder expectations rapidly shifting toward corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues

("Two-thirds of Consumers," 2023), the line becomes more blurred. Are corporations solely responsible for a preventable mishap, or does the shifting nature of controversial issues and public opinion within society render this form of crisis as accidental? Identifying the role of crisis responsibility, while not the purpose of this study, will be a critical avenue in future studies.

The recruitment process of the participants also poses several limitations. The main issue was raised by the difference in the manipulation check results between the pretests, which were conducted on CloudResearch Connect, and the pilot tests, which were conducted on Qualtrics. While the pretests' results indicated strongly significant findings, multiple iterations of the stimuli had to be revised to achieve acceptable results in the pilot test. Several factors could have contributed to this disparity. CloudResearch Connect is the rebranded version of the widely used Amazon Turk (MTurk), whose workers may be more familiar with the wording of academic surveys. In addition, prior research has found MTurk participants to be more liberal than population-based samples (Levay, et al., 2016), and the administrated survey on CloudResearch Connect, being a pretest, included only the stimuli, manipulation checks, and demographic questions. Comparatively, the Qualtrics survey used for the pilot tests included the full survey and implemented demographic quotas to ensure a representative sample for the full data collection. As a result, the length of the survey could have prompted participants to review the stimuli more critically, survey fatigue could have impacted their responses, and the demographic differences may have played a role in the differing results between the two platforms. For example, the average age of participants for both pretests on CloudResearch Connect was 36, while the average age of participants for the pilot tests in Qualtrics was 49, 46, and 43 respectively. Current research suggests that certain demographics, particularly age, influence perceptions of CSA (Atanga & Mattila, 2023; Comen et al., 2022). Thus, the demographic and survey differences between the pretest and pilot tests may also have caused the differences in manipulation perceptions.

In addition, Qualtrics could not provide concrete information on where participants are recruited from or how much they were paid, only that they were recruited from different panels and paid differently. Although unlikely, it cannot be assured that participants were not working for more than one platform and took the survey in different places. Finally, I must acknowledge that as a cisgender, white female who was raised in the U.S., my perspective on the issue selected for the study, racial inequality, is informed by my limited experiences. Though the stimuli were based on real-world examples, they were framed through this limited perspective, which may not resonate clearly with the representative sample provided by Qualtrics. This, in turn, may have influenced the differing results of the manipulation checks between platforms.

This study presents several compelling avenues for future CSA research. The unanticipated results of this study, as well as the varied conceptualizations of CSA (Vasquez, 2022; Overton et al., 2021), point toward a need for qualitative research that inductively explores stakeholders' social reality, attitudes and behaviors concerning CSA. This could be particularly beneficial for understanding stakeholders' attitudes toward CSA itself, which the results of this study suggest may be an influential variable in how CSA is perceived. Furthermore, as public opinion and political attention shift, so, too, will the degree of controversy and salience of issues within society. This study focused on a specific controversial issue, racial inequality, which is a highly controversial, politicized issue in the U.S. The results of this study might not be applicable to other CSA causes in other areas or in other cultures. It is also worth noting that over the time of the data collection for this study in 2023, there were several instances of brutality toward unarmed African Americans in the U.S. that may have influenced participants' responses (Marks, 2023). However, this does contribute to the ecological validity of the study.

Identifying issues, and how to strategically communicate with stakeholder groups on different sides of these issues is another critical direction for future CSA research. Exploring the segmentation of publics or messages to match different, and sometimes opposing, stakeholder

expectations will be paramount to strategically managing CSA (Hong & Li, 2020). Future studies also should continue to explore identified CSA-related variables, such as issue involvement, as well as other potential factors. For example, although issue involvement was controlled for in this study, exploratory regression analysis suggests that race may play a role in CSA engagement centered around racial inequality.

In order to align CSA with ethical public relations practices, future research should continue to explore variables and outcomes that are in line with the public interest. For example, in this study, prior activism behaviors and specific emotions, such as anger or frustration, may have influenced participants' responses to the low care condition and should be explored. The activation of activism intentions within this study, in tandem with previous CSA research (Overton et al., 2021; Austin et al., 2019; Gaither et al., 2018), suggests that CSA has the potential to represent the public interest. The follow-up to this study will further investigate the motivating effects of low ethics of care, which will hopefully determine the potential applicability of ethics of care in public relations broadly (Madden & Alt, 2021), and the management of CSA as a crisis specifically.

Appendix A

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Appendix B

Questionnaire

You are being invited to volunteer to participate in a research study. This summary explains information about this research. This study, if you choose to participate, will ask you to answer survey questions about your demographics and opinions about social issues.

It is expected that the study will take most people between 5–10 minutes to complete. There are no anticipated risks of participating in this study nor are there any direct benefits for participating. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. Your data will not be connected with any identifying information. The risk of danger or harm from this study is minimal and no greater than that associated with viewing social media in your everyday life. There is a minimal risk that security of any online data may be breached, but our survey host (Qualtrics) uses strong encryption and other data security methods to protect your information. Only the researchers will have access to your information on the Qualtrics server. No identifying information will be collected or connected with your responses, which will be anonymous.

If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you should contact Christen Buckley at clb5344@psu.edu or 814-777-3728. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject or concerns regarding your privacy, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 814-865-1775. Your participation is voluntary and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. By continuing, you agree that you are 18 years of age or older, reside in the United States, and want to participate in this research study.

1. Yes, I agree to participate.
2. No, I do not agree to participate.

<u>Age</u>
How old are you?
1. Under 18
2. 18-34
3. 35-54
4. 55+

<u>Gender</u>
Please indicate your gender
1. Male
2. Female
3. Nonbinary

<u>Race</u>
What do you consider your primary race?
1. Black / African American

2. Asian or Pacific Islander
3. White / Caucasian
4. American Ind./Alaskan Native or Other
5. Other, please specify.

Ethnicity
Are you Hispanic?
1. Yes
2. No

State
In which state do you currently reside?

Listed Alphabetically
Included an option for: I do not reside in the United States which terminated the data collection for that participant.

Income
What is your annual household income from all sources before taxes?
1. Under $25,000
2. $25,000-$39,999
3. $40,000-$49,999
4. $50,000-$74,999
5. $75,000-$99,999
6. $100,000-$124,999
7. $125,000-$149,999
8. $150,000-$199,999
9. $200,000 or more

Political Views
What best describes your political views?
1. Extremely liberal
2. Liberal
3. Somewhat liberal
4. Moderate, middle of the road
5. Somewhat conservative
6. Conservative
7. Extremely conservative

CSA Attitude

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements **about companies in general**. Companies should...
1. ...work to better society.
2. ...advocate for social issues.
3. ...only advocate for issues related to their business or products.
4. ...advocate on issues that align with their values, regardless of the fit with their products or services.
5. ...advocate on political issues that align with their values.

6. Please select "Disagree" here.
7. ...advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus.

Issue Involvement

To me, addressing the **issue of racial inequality** is...

1. Unimportant …….Important
2. Of no concern to me ……. Of concern to me
3. Means nothing to me ……. Means a lot to me
4. Valuable ……. Worthless
5. Trivial ……. Fundamental
6. Insignificant ……. Significant
7. Not beneficial to society ……. Beneficial to society
8. Does not matter to me ……. Matters to me
9. Essential ……. Nonessential

Familiarity
How familiar are you with the brand, **Panera Bread**?

Very unfamiliar ……. Very familiar

Frequency of purchase
How often do you buy from **Panera Bread**?

Not frequently at all……. Very frequently

Prior Corporate Reputation (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7)
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement about **Panera Bread.**

1. **Panera Bread** has a good overall reputation.

Transition

Please read the following news article as you would if you came across it in your regular media use. The "next button" will appear after **40 seconds** before you are able to move to the next page.

Please read carefully at your normal speed. **You will then answer questions about what you read and your opinions.**

Attention Check 2

As best you can recall, the news article you just read was about the company...
1. Einstein Bros. Bagels
2. Panera Bread
3. Au Bon Pain
4. Corner Bakery Cafe

Control Condition Manipulation Check

As best you can recall, the news article you just read _____
1. **included a statement** from Panera Bread.
2. **did NOT include a statement** from Panera Bread.

Crisis Response Type Manipulation Check 1 ***

In **Panera Bread's** statement, they _____
1. said it was never their intention to harm anyone with their initiative.
2. said they were deeply sorry and apologized for their initiative.

Crisis Response Type Manipulation Check 2 ***

In **Panera Bread's** statement, they _____
1. used their customers' high standards as an excuse for their initiative.
2. admitted they made a mistake and took full accountability for their initiative.

Crisis Response Type Manipulation Check 3 ***

In **Panera Bread's** statement, they _____
1. said they can't control how their efforts are received.
2. asked for forgiveness.

Ethics of Care Manipulation Check 1
In their statement, **Panera Bread** demonstrated that they...

CARE VERY LITTLE about others ……. **CARE VERY MUCH** about others

Ethics of Care Manipulation Check 2***
In their statement, Panera Bread demonstrated...

They care more about their investors and their business ……. They care more about people and their relationships.

Ethics of Care Manipulation Check 3 (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7)
In their statement, **Panera Bread** demonstrated that they....
1. recognize others' needs.
2. are responsible for caring for their community
3. use their business to care for others.
4. want to learn how to care for others.

Ethics of Care Manipulation Check 4

In their statement, **Panera Bread** demonstrated that they are...

Inattentive ……. Attentive
Not Responsible ……. Responsible
Incompetent ……. Incompetent
Apathetic ……. Responsive

Corporate Reputation (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7)

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements about **Panera Bread.**
1. I admire and respect Panera Bread.
2. Panera Bread offers high quality products and services.
3. Panera Bread has excellent leadership.
4. Panera Bread looks like a good place to work.
5. Panera Bread is socially responsible.
6. Panera Bread appears to have strong prospects for future growth.

Open Ended Question

Are there any thoughts you would like to share about the news article you read, or your experience taking this survey thus far? If so, please fill in the text box below.

When you are finished, or if you don't have anything you would like to share, please continue with the rest of the survey.

Purchase Intentions (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7)

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. It is highly likely that I will buy Panera Bread products in the near future.
2. I plan to buy Panera Bread products on a regular basis.
3. I am enthusiastic about the possibility of buying Panera Bread products.

Boycott Intention

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.
1. I will stop purchasing from Panera Bread.
2. I will be tempted to boycott Panera Bread.
3. I will NOT boycott Panera Bread.

Positive/Negative Word of Mouth (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7)

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

After reading this news article I would...
1. say positive things about Panera Bread.
2. recommend Panera Bread to others.
3. recommend Panera Bread to someone who seeks my advice.

4. advise my friends and relatives not to buy from Panera Bread.
5. complain to my friends and relatives about Panera Bread.
6. say negative things about Panera Bread to others.

Advocating Behaviors (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7)

Please indicate how likely you would be to engage in the following actions.
1. I would speak favorably about Panera Bread's actions in public.
2. I would say positive things about the Panera Bread actions to other people.
3. I would defend Panera Bread's actions when someone says something negative about it.
4. I would positively tell others about Panera Bread's actions to show them why this matters.

Activism Intentions (Very unlikely = 1, Very Likely = 7)

Please indicate how likely you would be to engage in the following actions.
1. Contact government officials to urge them to take action on resolving racial inequality.
2. Participate in a rally or protest in support of resolving racial inequality.
3. Sign a petition in support of taking action on resolving racial inequality.
4. Join or volunteer with an organization working on resolving racial inequality.
5. Donate money to an organization working on resolving racial inequality.

Demographics

The survey is almost complete. Please answer the following questions, which will be used for statistical purposes.

Age
What is your exact age? (Please use numbers. Ex: 31.)

Education
What is the highest level of education you have completed?
1. Some high school but did not finish
2. Completed high school
3. Some college, but did not finish
4. Two-year college degree/A.A./A.S.
5. Four-year college degree/B.A./B.S.
6. Some graduate work
7. Completed Masters or professional degree
8. Doctoral degree or advanced graduate work

Political Party
If you had to choose, which major political party do you most identify with?
1. Democrat
2. Republican
3. Libertarian
4. Green Party
5. Independent

Debrief

Thank you for your time completing this survey.

Before you go, we'd like to tell you that the news article you viewed was created by the researchers for the purposes of this study. Any news that you read about Panera Bread is NOT

real. As such, any of Panera Bread's described initiatives concerning the issue of racial inequality are also NOT real.

Please click the arrow to complete the survey.

Appendix C

Stimuli

High Care, Diminish-Excuse

REUTERS®

(World at Work)

3 minute read - March 7, 20233:13 PM EST

Panera Bread Under Fire

ST. LOUIS, MO, March 7 (Reuters) - A recent announcement by Panera Bread has sparked a discussion about how corporations should engage with social issues. After announcing their "Together United" initiative to combat racial inequality on social media this week, Panera Bread has been at the receiving end of unexpected social media outrage.

#BoycottPanera is trending on social media across the country, with many consumers indicating they are upset that Panera is incorporating this initiative into their marketing calendar.

A Panera Bread spokesperson released the **following statement** in response to the backlash.

> "It was never our intention to harm our customers, or the cause, with our 'Together United' initiative. We were only trying to meet our customers' high standards for social justice work. Like other companies that champion social causes, we can't control how our efforts are received.

> We believe we have a responsibility to care for others in our community; especially those who have been unfairly silenced. We recognize the needs of our community and we want to learn how to care for them.

> That's why we believe it is important to confront our discomfort in the best way we know how - by sharing a meal and starting a conversation. Visit panerabread.com/togetherunited to have a voice in our efforts."

Low Care, Diminish-Excuse

REUTERS®

3 minute read - March 7, 20233:13 PM EST

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> We trust that this statement will address the current discussion. We know what our community needs, and unfortunately we can't be responsible for everyone. As a corporation, we must prioritize the interests of our investors, as well as our customers.

> Our reputation, and our future, is important to us - let us show you. Join us for a meal at Panera Bread today. To learn more about racial inequality, visit panerabread.com/togetherunited."

High Care, Rebuild-Apology

REUTERS®

(World at Work)

3 minute read - March 7, 20233:13 PM EST

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> "We sincerely apologize to anyone who felt our 'Together United' initiative negatively affected them, or the cause. We can admit when we make a mistake and take full accountability for our initiative. To our customers, and the American public, we are deeply sorry. We hope you will forgive us.
>
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>
> That's why we believe it is important to confront our discomfort in the best way we know how - by sharing a meal and starting a conversation. Visit panerabread.com/togetherunited to have a voice in our efforts."

Low Care, Rebuild–Apology

World at Work

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Control Condition

3 minute read - March 7, 20233:13 PM EST

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#BoycottPanera is trending on social media across the country, with many consumers indicating they are upset that Panera is incorporating this initiative into their marketing calendar.

Panera Bread has **not yet responded** to the boycott and coverage of the backlash.

Since May 2020, corporations have committed approximately 320 billion to fighting racial inequality.

Racial inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, power, and economic opportunity across race in a society.

While the discussion of racial inequality in the United States is often focused on economic inequality, racial inequality also manifests itself in a multitude of ways that impact the well-being of all Americans. This includes racial disparities in wealth, education, employment, housing, mobility, health, rates of incarceration, and more.

VITA

Christen L. Buckley

Education:
Pennsylvania State University, University Park
- Ph.D. Mass Communications, Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, (Aug. 2019 – Aug. 2023, expected)
- M.A. Media Studies, Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, (Aug 2017-2019)
- B.A. International Politics, Schreyer Honors College | College of the Liberal Arts
  B.A. Theatre, College of Arts and Architecture, (Sept 2008 – May 2012)

Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

Harrison, V., Bober, J., **Buckley, C.,** & Vallos, V., (2023). "Save Our Spikes": Social Media Advocacy and Fan Reaction to the End of Minor League Baseball (MiLB). *Communication & Sport*. https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795231151916

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DiRusso, C., **Buckley, C.,** Diddi, P., Dardis, F. E., Vafeiadis, M., & Eng, N. (2022). Designing effective corporate social advocacy campaigns using valence, arousal, and issue salience. *Public Relations Review*, *48*(3), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102207

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