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The Power of Style: Sincerity's influence on Reputation

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication scholars have suggested that sincerity is critical to an effective crisis response, and a robust body of research suggests that certain mannerisms and communication styles can make a spokesperson appear more sincere. But what impact do perceptions of a crisis communicator's nonverbal sincerity and verbal honesty have in impacting the organization's reputation and also consumer behavior? Grounded on the revised model of reputation repair (REMREP) which emphasizes an organization's perceived virtuousness and a crisis's perceived offensiveness, this paper reports a study in which participants (N = 785) watch an interview of a spokesperson representing a scandalized company. The results indicate that a spokesperson's perceived sincerity has a small, structural effect on reputation and behavioral intentions. However, the effects largely result from increasing perceived honesty of the spokesperson's response.
This research has been conducted in compliance with the guidelines of the APA and under supervision of an IRB.

KEYWORDS: sincerity, REMREP, crisis communication, virtuousness, offensiveness

The power of style: Sincerity's influence on reputation

During the coronavirus pandemic, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo became a celebrated hero of crisis communication (Ferre-Sarduni, & Goodman, 2021). He held 111 press briefings that were so popular he won an Emmy for them (Dwyer, 2020). His approval ratings soared (Crockett, 2021), he received some buzz

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about running for president (Wiersema et al., 2020), and a group of celebrities identified themselves as "Cuomosexuals" (Carras, 2020, para. 2). But there was a problem. Substantively, the governor made disastrous decisions in the early days of the pandemic (Berman, 2020). Most notably, he ordered nursing homes to house people with COVID-19, and more than 15,000 New York nursing home residents died of the virus (Berman, 2020; Zurcher, 2021). The governor's team knew the revelations were so bad that they deliberately hid this information from the public and state legislators (Goodman & Hakin, 2021; Hogan et al., 2021).

This situation poses a difficult question for crisis communication scholars who generally assume that telling the truth and protecting people improve reputation. Why was the governor's crisis response praised despite his failings and the resulting cover-up? A running theme in glowing coverage of the governor provides a possible answer: his sincere demeanor. Writers described Cuomo as "emphatic" (Wiersema et al., 2020, para 1) and "calm, composed, polite, and authoritative" (Campbell, 2020, para. 7). In short, he exuded "sincerity" (Smith, 2020, para. 8). Cuomo himself explained the popularity of the press briefings among the public: "There was a *sincerity* and authenticity and a credibility that they discerned from the briefings. And they believed it" (Wallace-Wells, 2020, para. 49; italics added for emphasis). Cuomo's moment of astute clarity in recognizing that perceived sincerity causes people to believe his crisis messaging is precisely in line with decades of deception research (Levine, 2020), and exemplifies the thrust of the present paper. This research seeks to understand how communication style, specifically perceived sincerity that conveys honesty, can influence perceptions of a crisis using the revised model of reputation repair (REMREP; Page, 2022). REMREP hypothesizes that perceptions of crisis offensiveness and organizational virtuousness in responding to a crisis effectively explain reputation.

Longstanding research has documented how specific nonverbal behavioral impressions can make a speaker appear sincere to audiences (Goffman, 1956; Levine et al., 2011). This perception of sincerity can give the impression of honesty. And crisis communicators have been known to try to use their message content

to convey sincerity (e.g., saying "I sincerely apologize") and, conversely, to attempt to use nonverbal demeanor cues to convey honesty. Further, REMREP has shown that crisis response messages can influence post-crisis reputation through mediating variables of perceived offensiveness of a crisis and organizational virtuousness (Page, 2022). This research asks how perceptions of a spokesperson's sincerity and honesty influence each of these variables and also tests how each will influence behavioral intentions toward an organization in crisis.

We begin by examining the existing literature on how crisis situations influence reputation and behavioral intentions toward an organization. In this opening section we also review the literature on sincerity applied to crisis communication.

Reputation Repair Through REMREP

Since at least the Tylenol recalls in the 1980s when an organization's virtuous conduct protected its reputation from harm, organizations have sought to understand how they can repair their reputation in the aftermath of a crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995, 1997; Benson, 1988; Coombs, 1995). Benoit (1995, 1997) conceived of a crisis as the combination of attributed responsibility for some negative event and the perceived offensiveness of that event. He created a series of crisis response strategies meant to influence perceived responsibility for a crisis or offensiveness of a crisis that could be used by organizations in order to repair their post-crisis reputation. These resulting strategies became image repair theory (Benoit, 2015).

Building upon research from Benoit (1995, 1997) and others (e.g., Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Weiner, 1985), Coombs (1995) began to develop guidelines for which strategies an organization should use in responding to a crisis. This eventually developed into situational crisis communication theory (SCCT, Coombs, 2006, 2007, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). SCCT's conception of crisis differed from image repair's conception of crisis. While image repair conceived of a crisis as the intersection between attributed responsibility and offensiveness, SCCT dropped the offensiveness and only focused on attributed responsibility. SCCT prescribes crisis

response strategies that organizations should use to repair their reputation (Coombs, 2007, 2015). Coombs (2006) proposed a matching construct that paired crisis response strategies according to crisis type, later expanded into a more sophisticated set of 13 rules (Coombs, 2015).

Reputation. Coombs suggested that following the matching construct would result in an improvement in an organization's post-crisis reputation compared with the result of a mismatched response, along with a decrease in attributed responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2006, 2007, 2015). These effects have been tested repeatedly with mixed results (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Kim & Sung, 2014). A meta-analysis (Ma & Zhan, 2016) found that the matching construct had a small effect on reputation and attributed responsibility, $r = .23$ (95% CI [.17, .29]). This finding led Coombs (2016) to concede that crisis response strategies would not have a large effect on reputation.

The meta-analysis also found that SCCT's matching construct had larger effects when reputation was measured with a scale developed by Coombs and Holladay (2002) that measured organizational reputation (Coombs, 2016; Ma & Zhan, 2016). The scale focuses on the trust dimension of reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Originally a 10-item scale, it was reduced to five items and has been used extensively in crisis communication research (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2016; Ma & Zhan, 2016).

As SCCT developed it became clear that there were many variables (crisis response strategies, attributed responsibility, reputation) interrelating in some way. To explain how these different variables relate, Coombs (2007, 2010) proposed that attributed responsibility may partially mediate the relationship between crisis response strategies and reputation, suggesting that theorists should assess additional variables refining SCCT's model.

REMREP. While SCCT's matching construct made intuitive sense, the apparent shortcomings that surfaced in meta-analysis (Ma & Zhan, 2016) suggested that factors other than response strategies

were influencing reputation (Page, 2019). This suggestion inspired innovation in the variables of the model proposed by Coombs (2007, 2010). Page (2019) reviewed the model of crisis proposed by Coombs (2015) and proposed that offensiveness was a missing construct based on the conception of crisis from image repair (Benoit, 1995, 1997).

Page (2019) used moral foundations theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2004) as a guide to create measures of the moral dimensions of crisis. Moral foundations theory suggests that morality breaks down into at least five foundations, each of which is a continuum from positive to negative (Graham et al., 2009). The first five foundations are care / harm, fairness / cheating, authority / subversion, loyalty / betrayal, and sanctity / degradation (Graham et al., 2013). In the abstract, these five dimensions are distinct; however, Page (2019) found that in an applied crisis context, they operate as two distinct variables. Offensiveness of a crisis situation generally represents the negative aspects that come from crisis. It includes harm, cheating, subversion, betrayal, and degradation. In contrast, virtuousness of an organization in crisis reflects the positive things that an organization does during a crisis. It includes care, fairness, authority, loyalty, and sanctity. These two factors were found to be very useful in explaining post-crisis reputation.

In a test of SCCT broadened to include offensiveness as having a role in the process, attributed responsibility explained a relatively meager 24.8% of post-crisis reputation. Meanwhile, offensiveness and virtuousness explained 73.7% of post-crisis reputation (Page, 2019). Further, a hierarchical regression found that adding attributed responsibility to offensiveness and virtuousness did not significantly impact post-crisis reputation. The results appeared to indicate that offensiveness and virtuousness could replace attributed responsibility in the model of reputation repair.

Page (2022) replicated these findings and formally proposed REMREP, a model which suggested virtuousness and offensiveness serve as mediating variables between crisis response messages and reputation. Further, virtuousness was proposed to have a negative effect on offensiveness as well. In an initial test of the effects of instructing information, adjusting information, and SCCT's

prescribed responses on reputation, the model was effective at predicting reputation with message effects largely going through perceived organizational virtuousness.

While Page (2022) found REMREP effectively predicts reputation, good science is built upon replication in different situations. Therefore, the present research will seek to test these relationships and test an additional factor of behavioral intentions to assess whether the factors in REMREP can predict behavior as well as reputation.

Behavioral intentions. Reputation is not the only potential outcome of a crisis that concerns organizations. Rather, reputation is generally a means to receiving the support or patronage of key stakeholders. For this reason, Coombs (2007, 2010) suggested behavioral intentions toward the organization are also a potential outcome of crisis. Reputation repair experiments have included behavioral intentions as a potential outcome of crisis and crisis communication (e.g., Kim & Sung, 2014). Therefore, this research examines behavioral intentions toward an organization as an outcome of crisis communication and specifically the previously studied elements of REMREP.

We begin by replicating REMREP and extending it so that each variable predicts behavioral intentions before proposing an overarching empirical question comparing the impact of the two variables, offensiveness and virtuousness, on reputation and behavioral intentions.

> **H1:** Virtuousness will have direct, positive effects on (a) reputation and (b) behavioral intentions and (c) a direct, negative effect on offensiveness. Offensiveness will have direct, negative effects on (d) reputation and (e) behavioral intentions. Reputation will have (f) a direct, positive effect on behavioral intentions.
>
> **RQ1:** What are the unique effects of crisis offensiveness and organizational virtuousness on reputation and on behavioral intentions?

Perceived Sincerity's Influence on Perceived Honesty

Public speakers have long been exhorted to exude sincerity in order for an audience to respond favorably to their messages

(Benson, 1988). Cicero speculated that speakers will not be perceived as moral and trustworthy without seeming sincere in their oratory (Kapust & Schwarze, 2016). This guidance has extended to crisis communication. "If we believe the apology is sincere," Benoit (2015) states, "we may choose to pardon the wrongful act" (p. 27). In order for a crisis communicator to reduce offensiveness, the public must perceive that the expressed message is sincere (Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018). This implies that people may use sincerity as a proxy for honesty when appraising crisis communication messages, and yet empirical research has yet to test the linkage of a crisis communicator's perceived sincerity impacting perceptions of honesty.

Across communication research, perceived sincerity makes apologies and other expressions of a transgressor's contrition more successful (Schumann, 2012). In relational communication settings (e.g., married couples), sincerity has an effect above and beyond message content. For example, the extent to which a statement of apology is perceived as being comprehensive can hinge on the speaker's perceived sincerity (Schumann, 2012). Similarly, spokespeople are encouraged to emote sincerity (Benson, 1988; Stephens et al., 2019). Claeys and Cauberghe (2014) found that perceived sincerity of a spokesperson mediated the relationship between nonverbal communication and reputation in the aftermath of a crisis. They even found sincerity had a larger effect on reputation than competency (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014).[1]

A way forward in how crisis communication research can inspect perceived sincerity can be drawn from deception research. The deception literature places tremendous emphasis on the role of demeanor in affecting people's appraisals of a speaker's veracity (Levine, 2020). Also known as behavioral impressions of sincerity,

[1] The experiment reported in Claeys and Cauberghe (2014) treated perceived honesty and sincerity as part of the same construct. In the study the construct of sincerity was conceptualized as powerless nonverbal behavior, and operationalized in a 3-item measure combining "honest," "sincere," and "genuine." In other words, sincerity was considered undistinguished from speaker credibility and honest messaging. This research seeks to take the next step and distinguish them from one another.

demeanor cues of believability can impact judgments of whether a speaker's message content is honest or dishonest, independent of actual honesty (Levine et al., 2011). The present study applies this series of theoretical and practical underpinnings to our understanding of crisis communication in the advancement of REMREP modeling.

Goffman (1956) is credited with explicating demeanor in social scientific research. He said demeanor includes displaying sincerity, "command of speech and physical movements," and "poise under pressure" (p. 489). "Rightly or wrongly, others tend to use such qualities diagnostically, as evidence of what the actor is generally like," Goffman wrote (p. 489). In other words, people use demeanor cues of behavioral impressions to determine whether or not to believe a speaker.

Levine et al. (2011) reports five experiments to create an index of sincere and insincere demeanor cues that affect perceived believability. According to this work, a spokesperson desiring to exude *sincerity* should convey (1) confidence, (2) composure, (3) a pleasant and friendly interaction style, (4) an engaged and involved interaction style, and (5) plausible explanations. And the spokesperson must avoid cues of *insincerity*, which are (1) avoiding eye contact, (2) appearing hesitant and slow in providing answers, (3) conveying uncertainty in tone of voice, (4) fidgeting excessively with hands or foot movements, (5) appearing tense, (6) appearing nervous, (7) appearing anxious, (8) portraying an inconsistent demeanor over the course of an interaction, and (9) conveying uncertainty with words.

Although communication literature in general, and crisis communication literature specifically, exhort spokespeople to exude sincerity, and the index detailed above focuses on nonverbal components of sincerity, honesty of a spokesperson may also be conveyed through the content of the speaker's message. That is, a spokesperson may seem believable in sincere demeanor while expressing messaging that lacks veracity. Perceptions of a crisis communicator can be unpacked in terms of sincerity and also honesty—the former being conveyed through the nonverbal components detailed above, and the latter being conveyed by

impressions of what the spokesperson is saying. After all, some crisis communication research conflates "sincerity"—a nonverbal impression of behavior and other nonverbal cues—with message content that may impute honesty upon a speaker but is related to message content. Thus, in order to test and expand upon REMREP, we propose assessing how people react to perceived variations in what a spokesperson has said (the honesty of the message) and how it is said (the sincerity of the messenger).

Given the suggestion that perceived sincerity will influence perceptions of a message (Levine et al., 2011) and specifically a crisis response (Benoit, 2015), we propose that perceived sincerity will influence perceived honesty of a crisis response and that both sincerity and honesty will each influence the proposed factors of REMREP previously hypothesized: offensiveness, virtuousness, reputation, and behavioral intentions. Therefore, we pose the following hypotheses and research question (see Figure 1).

First, we pose a series of predictions concerning how perceived honesty (H2) and sincerity (H3) will each predict each element of

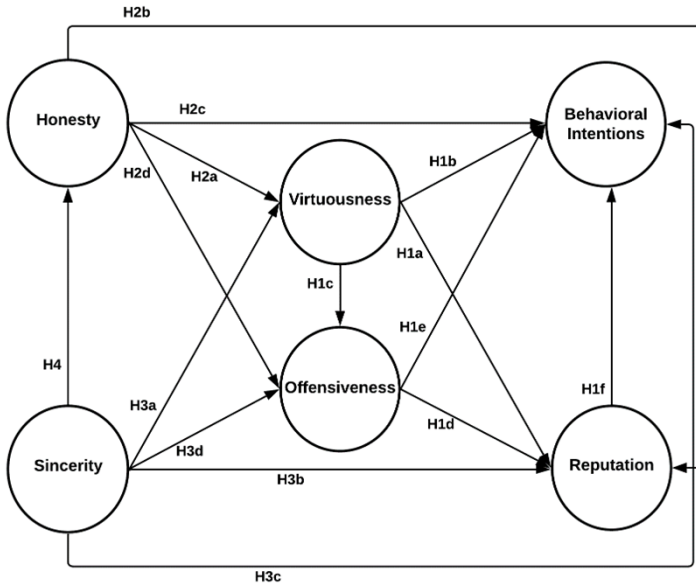

FIGURE 1 **Hypothesized Model**

REMREP and that (H4) sincerity will influence perceived honesty consistent with Levine et al. (2011).

> **H2:** Perceived honesty will have direct, positive effects on (a) virtuousness, (b), reputation, and (c) behavioral intentions, while having (d) a direct, negative effect on offensiveness.
>
> **H3:** Perceived sincerity will have direct, positive effects on (a) virtuousness, (b), reputation, and (c) behavioral intentions, while having (d) a direct, negative effect on offensiveness.
>
> **H4:** Perceived sincerity will have a direct, positive effect on perceived honesty.

Finally, we pose an empirical question that ties together the overarching model's variables impacting the outcome variables.

> **RQ2:** What are the unique effects of perceived sincerity and perceived honesty on organizational reputation and consumer behavioral intentions?

Method

Participants ($N = 1{,}378$) were recruited from mTurk and were compensated $1.00 for their participation. Rigorous data quality assurance tools were employed (as described below) which reduced the total number of participants analyzed in our dataset to 785.

Sample

Participant ages ranged from 18 to 100 ($M = 39.72$, $SD = 12.79$). A majority (56.7%) identified as men. The majority (66.4%, $n = 521$) identified as White/Caucasian, followed by Asian or Pacific Islander (16.4%, $n = 129$), African-American or Black (7.8%, $n = 61$), Latino or Hispanic (4.7%, $n = 37$), Multiracial (2.4%, $n = 19$), and Native American/Indigenous (0.5%, $n = 4$). Most (78.2%, $n = 614$) were employed. Participants resided in 47 different states in the U.S., plus Washington, DC. The most were in California ($n = 77$), Florida ($n = 67$), and Texas ($n = 49$).

Although no data collection platform is perfect, mTurk participants tend to reflect generalizable population characteristics better than college samples (and other non-mTurk pools), and when researchers employ data screening and cleaning such

as ours, mTurk offers a particularly meritorious crowdsourcing tool (Keith et al., 2023; Sheehan, 2018) and has been embraced for studies across our field (e.g., Lachlan et al., 2021; Rainear & Lachlan, 2022).

Protocol

Participants watched a news interview of a company's spokesperson regarding a crisis. The interview was filmed and edited by a professional videographer team at a real TV news studio with high-definition technology. All participants saw the spokesperson for the organization field the same series of questions. The fictional organization was a U.S.-based restaurant chain. In the interview's scenario, the company faced a scandal because servers at restaurants left racist notes on customers' receipts. The journalist told viewers that the scandal went "viral" with images of the receipts being shared online.

Each video was just over two minutes in length and included the same two people, a female spokesperson for the fictional restaurant company and a male news anchor. Three question-answer blocks were in the interview, with the spokesperson answering questions related to the company's response to the crisis and the scandal going viral. Respondents were randomly assigned to watch one of four slight variations in the spokesperson's responses and demeanor. After viewing, participants answered several questions including dependent variable measures, attention checks, and demographic items.

Measures

Participants assessed statement prompts with response options on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The order of presentation for all dependent variable measures was randomized to control for any effects due to order of presentation. Descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and correlations between variables are reported in Table 1.

Organizational Reputation. Participants assessed the company's reputation on a five-item scale (e.g., "The company is concerned

with the well-being of its publics.") from Coombs and Holladay (2002).

Behavioral intentions. Participants assessed behavioral intentions on a four-item scale from Zeithaml et al.'s (1996) behavioral intentions scale (e.g., "If I had the opportunity to go to the restaurant I would go").

Sincerity. Participants assessed sincerity of the spokesperson on an 11-item scale from Levine et al. (2011). The measure features behaviors and impressions linked to sincere demeanor cues (e.g., "confidence and composure," "pleasant and friendly interaction style") and insincere demeanor cues (e.g., "avoids eye contact," "appears tense, nervous, and anxious," "appears hesitant and slow in providing answers"). The 7 insincere items are reverse coded.

Honesty. Participants assessed honesty in the responses of the spokesperson on a four-item scale from McCornack et al. (1992), which asked participants to rate the extent to which the spokesperson's answers were accurate, authentic, genuine, and truthful.

Offensiveness. Participants assessed offensiveness on a 10-item scale (e.g., "The company caused someone to suffer emotionally") from Page (2019).

Virtuousness. Participants assessed virtuousness on a nine-item scale (e.g., "The company took advantage of someone") from Page (2019).

TABLE 1 Variable Details

Variable	α	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sincerity	.881	54.36 (13.21)	-				
2. Honesty	.968	14.75 (7.68)	.338	-			
3. Virtuousness	.952	29.13 (14.03)	.225	.770	-		
4. Offensiveness	.914	37.81 (14.44)	-.332	-.436	-.532	-	
5. Reputation	.946	18.47 (9.15)	.363	.834	.777	-.594	-
6. Behavioral Intention	.974	12.27 (7.08)	.224	.762	.805	-.434	.762

Note: All correlations significant $p < .001$.

Data Quality Assurance

In order to ensure data quality, several tools were employed. Participants were required to have completed 500 HITs in mTurk with a 95% success rate and pass a reCaptcha verification to prove they were not bots (google.com, n.d.). Qualtrics did not allow survey participants to advance past the video for 120 seconds, ensuring that participants spent the requisite time exposed to the video. Participants were shown five attention check questions that directed them to answer a question in a specific way (e.g., "Select strongly disagree to prove you are reading"). This screened out 275 participants. Participants were asked a comprehension check question at the end of the experiment. Specifically, it asked what the company in the story was accused of doing. Participants were given five options. This filtered out an additional 200 participants. Any participant who failed the reCaptcha verification, missed any attention check, or failed the comprehension check had their HIT rejected and their work was not included. These checks reduced the total number of participants from 1,378 to 903.

Finally, answers comparing reverse coded items were used to identify participants who did not read questions closely. Two reputation questions were identical except for the word NOT (e.g., "The company is NOT concerned with the well-being of its publics"). After reverse coding the item with NOT in it, the difference between the two answers was calculated for each participant, $M = 0.025$, $SD = 1.393$. Participants whose disparity was greater than two standard deviations from the mean were removed from the sample. As a result, the total number of responses was reduced from 903 to 822. Finally, participants who skipped any question had their answers removed to create the structural equation model. As a result, the total number of participants was reduced from 822 to 785.

Results

Analysis of the experiment established a model that was used to test the hypotheses and establish size of total effects on reputation and behavioral intentions.

Model Fit

In order to test the model, we used the two-step method proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and used effectively by Meng and Berger (2019) as well as Lee and Kim (2020). In this method, a measurement model, essentially a confirmatory factor analysis with all the measures at once, allowing all latent variables to freely correlate, is tested. During this first step, modification indices may be used to revise the model and correct for any fit problems resulting from the measurement of several latent variables together. Once the measurement model is satisfactory, then the structural model with the predicted relationships between latent variables is tested. In a successful model, fit indices from the measurement model will be similar to the structural model. This method allows researchers to assess any fit issues with measurement before research questions or hypotheses are assessed.

The initial measurement model had inadequate model fit indices, *SRMR* = .125, *RMSEA* = .066, 90% CI [.064, .068], *CFI* = .895, so modification indices were consulted and used to make adjustments where the proposed adjustments made theoretical sense. Adjustments were made one by one. Modification indices suggested one item (Sincerity 4, "The spokesperson gave plausible explanations") should cross load on every variable in the model. As a result, it was dropped from the model, improving fit indices considerably, *SRMR* = .084, *RMSEA* = .059, 90% CI [.057, .062], *CFI* = .917. These fit indices were still inadequate so modification indices were consulted.

Several adjustments were made to properly represent the relationships between latent variables. Virtuousness 6 ("The company was trustworthy") was allowed to cross-load on reputation because of their similarity to the trust-focused reputation scale. Reputation 5 ("Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what this company says") was allowed to cross-load on behavioral intentions because believing what an organization says would reasonably be associated with a desire to interact with the organization (e.g., Coombs, 2007). Reputation 1 ("The company is concerned with the well-being of its publics") was allowed to cross-load on virtuousness because concern with the well-being of others is consistent with virtuousness (Page, 2019). Virtuousness 2

("The company was honest") was allowed to cross-load on honesty because of the similarity in concepts.

In addition, several indicators were allowed to covary. Reputation 1 (see above) and 2 ("The company is NOT concerned with the well-being of its publics") were allowed to covary because their wording suggested a likely correlation above and beyond the other variables in the latent variable. For this same reason, Sincerity 2 ("The spokesperson had a pleasant and friendly interaction style") and Sincerity 3 ("The spokesperson had an engaged and involved interaction style") were allowed to covary as were Sincerity 7 ("The spokesperson had vocal uncertainty [conveying uncertainty in tone of voice]") and Sincerity 11 ("The spokesperson had verbal uncertainty [conveying uncertainty with words]"). Honesty 2 ("Authentic") and Honesty 3 ("Genuine") were also allowed to covary for the same reason. Offensiveness 4 ("The company took advantage of someone") and Offensiveness 5 ("The company cheated someone") were allowed to correlate because they were both derived from the same moral foundation (Page, 2019). Offensiveness 2 ("The company hurt someone's health") was also allowed to correlate with Offensiveness 5 (see above) and Offensiveness 9 ("The company broke the law") because hurting someone's health could be construed as cheating someone and is usually against the law (Page, 2019). Once these revisions were made, the final measurement model had acceptable fit, *SRMR* = .080, *RMSEA* = .043, 90% CI [.041, .046], *CFI* = .956, and so it was accepted. We then proceeded to fit the structural model that tested the hypotheses by assessing the relationships between the latent variables.

The structural model had an identical fit to the measurement model, *SRMR* = .080, *RMSEA* = .043, 90% CI [.041, .046], *CFI* = .956, and so it was accepted. All effects reported are standardized. (See Figure 2 for full model.)

REMREP

H1 predicted a replication of REMREP and extension of each variable predicting behavioral intentions. Specifically, we expected virtuousness to have direct, positive effects on (a) reputation and

(b) behavioral intentions and (c) a direct, negative effect on offensiveness; offensiveness to have direct, negative effects on (d) reputation and (e) behavioral intentions; and reputation to have (f) a direct, positive effect on behavioral intentions. Results indicated that virtuousness had no significant, direct effect on reputation, but it did have a significant, direct, positive effect on behavioral intentions (β = .556). Further, it had a significant, direct, negative effect on offensiveness (β = -.692). Offensiveness had significant, direct, negative effects on reputation (β = -.308), but it had a small, significant, positive effect on behavioral intentions (β = .094). Finally, reputation, had a significant direct, positive effect on behavioral intentions. Therefore, H1a and H1e were not supported, but H1b, H1c, H1d, and H1f were supported.

Some of these hypothesized direct effects were not as expected, but it is important to remember that the bigger story is the total effects requested in the research questions. RQ1 examines the total effects of virtuousness and offensiveness on post-crisis reputation and behavioral intentions. This includes both direct effects (as noted in the hypotheses) and indirect effects. For instance, the hypotheses found that the direct effect of virtuousness on reputation was not significant, but the indirect effect through offensiveness demonstrates that virtuousness has a significant total effect on reputation through offensiveness (β = .213). Virtuousness further had a large total structural effect on behavioral intentions (β = .538). As expected, offensiveness also had significant, negative total effects on reputation (β = -.308) and behavioral intentions (β = -.026).

Honesty & Sincerity

H2 predicted perceived honesty would have direct, positive effects on (a) virtuousness, (b), reputation, and (c) behavioral intentions, while having (d) a direct, negative effect on offensiveness. Results indicated that honesty had significant, direct, positive effects on virtuousness (β = .800), reputation (β = .654), and behavioral intentions (β = .208), while it had no significant, direct effect on offensiveness. Therefore, H2a, H2b, and H2c were supported while H2d was not supported.

TABLE 2 Total Standardized Significant Structural Effects

		Independent Variables			
		Sincerity	Honesty	Virtuousness	Offensiveness
Dependent Variables	Honesty	.172	-	-	-
	Virtuousness	.072	.800	-	-
	Offensiveness	-.264	-.554	-.692	-
	Reputation	.249	.825	.213	-.308
	Behavioral Intentions	.106	.836	.538	-.026

H3 predicted perceived sincerity would have direct, positive effects on (a) virtuousness, (b), reputation, and (c) behavioral intentions, while having (d) a direct, negative effect on offensiveness. Results indicated that sincerity had a significant, direct, negative effect on virtuousness (β = -.066), a significant, direct, positive effect on reputation (β = .055), and no significant effect on behavioral intentions. Further, sincerity had a significant, direct, negative effect on offensiveness (β = -.215). Therefore, H3a and H3c were not supported while H3b and H3d were supported.

The lack of support for a few of the hypotheses makes more sense in light of total structural effects explained by RQ2, which sought to determine the total effects of sincerity and honesty on reputation and behavioral intentions. Sincerity had small, significant, total structural effects on reputation (β = .249) and behavioral intentions (β = .106). Further, honesty had very large total structural effects on reputation (β = .825) and behavioral intentions (β = .835). Given the design of the model, it appears that perceived honesty is the key to improved post-crisis reputation and behavioral intentions and that sincerity has a small but significant effect that mostly comes through perceived honesty. Table 2 presents the full results.

Discussion

This research sought to explore the effect of mannerisms that convey sincerity on perceptions of a reputational crisis. To do so, this study replicated REMREP and tested how perceived sincerity and honesty influence its factors in the context of a moral outrage caused by racism.

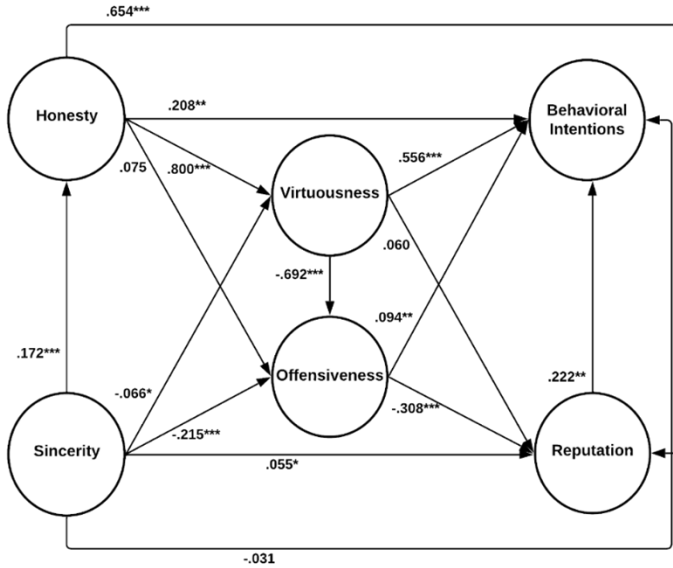

FIGURE 2 Standardized Model Results

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

REMREP

REMREP proposes that perceived organizational virtuousness during a crisis (caring for others, acting fairly, respecting authority, staying loyal, and exuding sanctity) and offensiveness of a crisis (harming or cheating others, subverting authority, betraying friends, or exuding degradation) mediate the relationship between attributes of crisis response and post-crisis reputation (Page, 2019, 2022). Virtuousness is also proposed to reduce perceived offensiveness of a crisis. REMREP represents an open-model into which scholars can add additional antecedents or consequents in order to study how many different factors influence perceptions of crisis.

This research replicated REMREP, confirming that it is a useful tool for understanding the effects of crisis and crisis responses on post-crisis reputation. Further, we added factors (in this case perceived honesty and sincerity) as antecedents in the model, with behavioral intentions also added as a consequent. These factors provide additional information as to how people respond to crisis situations.

Sincerity & Honesty

Based upon literature that argues perceived sincerity influences perceptions of crisis (Benoit, 2015) and literature that explains how specific mannerisms can convey sincerity (Levine et al., 2011), we conducted an experiment to test these effects in a crisis situation specifically involving allegations of racism. Using measures of perceived organizational virtuousness, crisis offensiveness, sincere demeanor, and perceived honesty (Levine et al., 2011; Page, 2019), we were able to identify the effects of perceived sincerity on known factors of a crisis situation (Page, 2022). We found that perceived sincerity has small but significant effects on post-crisis reputation and behavioral intentions toward an organization. These effects largely come through influencing perceived honesty of a crisis response, which has very large effects on reputation and behavioral intentions. The context of this study highlights why this is important.

In a polarizing crisis situation, such as the allegations of racism described in this study, facts are rarely universally known or agreed upon. Instead, stakeholders view partial information through their preferred media outlets and interpret that information within their own personal worldview. An organization in such a situation has limited ability to reach its audience because their preconceived expectations about the broader issue are frequently firmly grounded in life experience and other similar situations. Given that context, it is not surprising that perceived honesty of the spokesperson will be a key driver in explaining how audiences react to such a crisis. However, the key finding of this study is that the empirically documented mannerisms that convey sincerity (Levine et al., 2011) can break through polarization and have a significant effect on perceptions of honesty.

This experiment confirms the suggestion from Benoit (2015) that perceived sincerity influences perceptions of a crisis. We found a total standardized effect of perceived sincerity on reputation (β = .249) similar to the effect found in a meta-analysis for SCCT's matching construct, r = .23 (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Some might contend this is a relatively small effect, but this study examined a deeply polarizing issue and the effort necessary to exude sincerity

has a meaningful impact on both reputation and behavioral intentions. Responding in a sincere manner can reduce the perceived offensiveness of a crisis significantly and ultimately improve reputation and behavioral intentions in an efficient way.

This research has confirmed specific nonverbal and verbal impressions and behavioral demeanor cues that convey sincerity should be adopted in response to a crisis situation. Following these guidelines can significantly improve reputation following a crisis situation.

While behaving in a sincere manner can help an organization's reputation, the wisest course of action for an organization is to speak in an honest manner.

Returning to our opening example, just one year after he was pop culture's hero, Andrew Cuomo was forced to resign as Governor of New York. He was forced out after dishonest (Goodman & Hakin, 2021; Hogan et al., 2021) and unethical behavior (Bredderman, 2021; Ferre-Sarduni, & Goodman, 2021) caught up to him. Sincerity can boost a speaker's prospects, but the studied model details how much of that effect comes through perceived honesty in the speaker's message content. When honesty is doubted, sincerity will be little help.

Limitations

This research contains several limitations that should be noted. It is one study examining a single crisis context in an experimental setting. Therefore, its findings should be replicated in other crisis contexts with different populations. Further, this research was conducted in the United States and so results may not reflect how these stimuli would be perceived in other countries. Though there is strong evidence that sincerity cues are similar across cultures (Global Deception Research Team, 2006), this research should be replicated in other cultures to confirm its findings.

Conclusion

Our experiment reveals how a crisis communicator's perceived sincerity can influence reputation and behavioral intentions in the aftermath of a crisis. As George Orwell (1956) stated, "The

great enemy of clear language is insincerity" (p. 363). Our findings certainly affirm that insincerity works to inflame the public's umbrage toward a scandalized organization and how dishonesty enflames the process. Using empirically documented mannerisms (Levine et al., 2011) can help spokespeople convey sincerity to their stakeholders.

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