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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Moroccan Hospitality Sector in Crisis: Studying Crisis Response Strategies and Stakeholders' Perceptions Amid Covid-19 Pandemic

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| ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of organisations' positions in previous crisis(es) on crisis response strategies (CRSs) opted for in the present crisis. Specifically, this study targeted respondents working in the tourism sector in Morocco (n=31) when the whole sector was shut down due to the outbreak of covid-19 pandemic. To understand crisis communication in the tourism industry, this study was guided by Coomb's situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Data obtained from stakeholders working for tourism and hospitality organisations were obtained to determine which effect has the organisation position on crisis response strategies opted for the same organisations during the covid-19 pandemic. The results of this study indicate that most of the organisations favoured a diminish approach towards this crisis. Not only that, but a strong correlation was found between previous organisation position and crisis response strategies. This study provides insights into how organisations within tourism sector dealt with the covid-19 crisis. The results also inform the importance of psychological support and communication in determining the stakeholders' perceptions during crisis communication.

1. Introduction

Since the coronavirus outbreak in China in late December 2019, the world has witnessed some dramatic changes on many levels. On March 11th, World Health Organisation characterised covid-19 as a global pandemic. This has brought serious concerns about the global economy with restrictions on travel nationwide. Inevitably, the travel and tourism industry has a significant role in developing countries. According to United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), tourism can make a significant contribution to addressing economic climate and poverty imperatives. This vivid sector represents up to 45% of the exports of services of developing countries and it is often one of the few entry possibilities in the job market (2010). Thusly, tourism can inevitably promote the economies of many developing countries.

Crisis communication in the sector of hospitality has matured to become a legit form of literature, with many titles and issues winning academic interest. This paper derives its theoretical insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by W. Timothy Coombs.

In the light of recent events in the tourism sector, there is now considerable concern about the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the sector of tourism and hospitality in Morocco. Concerns have been raised which call into question the validity of practices availed by governments along with the stakeholders in the sector of hospitability in Morocco. Despite the scholarly vested interests on the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the sector of tourism, some scholars, like Ramkissoon (2020), emphasised the need for more research on crisis management among hotels during time of crisis.

In very recent times much debate has been stirred regarding the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the sector of hospitality as total restrictions were applied on international travel. Tourism experienced periodic downturns during covid-19 on an ongoing basis. The sector of hospitality in Morocco was severely slashed after the government suspended all international flights from and to Morocco in March 2020 (Morocco World News, 2020). Restaurants and hotels were severely hit by a drop of at least 25% (OECD, 2020). Circumstances continue to worsen as travel worldwide continues to be curtailed. A further loss of tourism revenue in the coming months, likely up to the end of 2021 and possibly beyond, is expected (UNWTO, 2020). Motivated by the continued impact of covid-19 pandemic and how hotels act during such crisis times, the main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between crisis response strategies (CRSs) and stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis in the Moroccan tourism sector. In answering the main aim of our study, two main sub-objectives ought to be considered:

1. To investigate the previous organisations' position's impact on the type of crisis response strategies opted by these organisations in the present crisis.
2. The role of CRS and OP in determining the stakeholders' perceptions of crisis.

In accordance with SCCT, we hypothesize that organizational position has a direct impact on the strategy taken by organizations in the Moroccan hospitality sector amid the covid-19 pandemic. In addition, we argue that psychological support and communication within crisis determine the stakeholders' perceptions.

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1. *Defining Crisis*
It is essential to mention that there is no widely accepted definition of a crisis. However, one of the most prominent definitions is that of Coombs (2007), where he defines a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes"; this definition highlights the main characteristics of a crisis. Firstly, the perceptual aspect of the crisis where the way stakeholders view an event eventually has a role in it becoming a crisis or not. Secondly, the impactful aspect of the crisis where an incident must have a noticeable impact on the organization for the management to handle it as a crisis. Finally, the abnormal aspect of a crisis where many studies stress the fact that crises are unusual occurrences that defy stakeholders' expectations. As aforementioned, there has been an extensive body of research attempting to define a crisis with different emphases. For instance, many definitions argue that the outcome of a crisis is not necessarily negative (Friedman, 2002; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Fink, 1986), whereas other scholars have argued that crises' outcomes, either positive or negative, are to be discussed in function of crisis management (Coombs and Holladay, 2010).

In addition to its definition, the concept of crisis has also seen a large body of multidisciplinary studies proposing different typologies. A typology of crises is necessary to this study considering how it simplifies the complex nature of crises, and provides diagnostic insights on it (Burnett, 1998). In order to provide a suitable crisis response, it is essential to have an initial understanding of its nature. Coombs (2015) argues that there are three types of crises, (1) victim crises where the organization is part of a bigger crisis (e.g., Natural disasters) or rumours; (2) accident crises are ones where the organisation have made actions that have unintentionally resulted in crises; (3) intentional crises are ones where the organization has intentionally taken inappropriate actions. Drawing from Attribution theory (Heider, 1958), Coombs (2007) argues that each type of crises has a level of responsibility attribution; victim crises have a low reputational threat and a low crisis responsibility, accident crises pose a medium reputational threat and a medium crisis responsibility, finally, intentional crises pose a high reputational threat and require a high level of crisis responsibility.

2.2. *Crisis Communication*
Crisis communication is defined as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs and Holladay, 2010). Coombs (2009) also delingates two basic types of crisis communication, crisis knowledge management and stakeholder reaction management. Crisis knowledge management involves collection, analysis, and dissemination of crisis-related information, as well as decision-making. Stakeholder-reaction management revolves around the influence of stakeholders' perception of a crisis event, through either words or actions. Following the aforementioned stages of crisis management, crisis communication follow the following stages, (1) pre-crisis, involving the collection of information about the risks of crises and the training of stakeholders, that is crisis team members, crisis spokespersons, and any individuals who will

help with the response; (2) crisis communication involves collecting and processing of information necessary for the crisis team's decision making; (3) post-crisis communication involves the dissemination of any necessary follow-up messages (e.g. changes) to stakeholders.

2.3. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Preliminary studies considered SCCT as one of the predominant theories in crisis communication (Coombs, 2007, 2018; Avery et al., 2010). SCCT belongs to the ring of formal research that is designed to establish relationships between variables and to develop the far-sighted ability of crisis communication theory. Coombs and Holladay's co-work aims at finding the relationships between variables that ought to be considered in selecting crisis response strategies to protect an organisation's reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This formal stream of research shifted focus form sender to audience (Lee, 2005; Coombs and Holladay, 2010). That is, formal crisis communication research is more audience acclimated. In this case, the audience is at the centre of efforts vested to understand how people perceive crisis situations.

In the literature, crisis is not a mild occurrence (Fearn-banks, 1996). Fearn-banks' idea is fully justified because a crisis can result in an organisation going into liquidation. Since SCCT is audience-oriented, Coombs posits that stakeholders are likely to make attributions about crisis responsibility, and those attributions are likely to affect how stakeholders view the organisation in crisis (1995). The idea of audience centredness in situational crisis communication theory is legitimate by dint of the fact that it seeks "to illuminate how people perceive crises, their reactions to crisis response strategies, and audience reactions to the organisations in crisis" (Coombs and Holladay, 2010). As mentioned above in the crisis clusters, SCCT holds that the type of the crisis situation determines audience perceptions.

Crisis responsibility has been considered as the most central concept of situational crisis communication theory. Coombs and Holladay (2010) suggested that "attributions of crisis responsibility have a significant effect on how people perceive the reputation of an organisation in crisis and their affective and behavioural responses to that organisation following a crisis" (p.38). More specifically, an organisation should communicate in order to protect its reputation after a crisis (Benoit, 1995). Several authors have attempted to define the term of reputation, yet there is still no accepted universal definition of organisation reputation. Coombs defined an organization's reputation in terms of situational history, which is related to stakeholders' expectations (2000). Sims believes that people's perceptions of an organization based on their prior experiences are what shape its reputation (2009).

Given that SCCT evaluates the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation, Coombs and Holladay argue that crisis responsibility is a major factor in determining the threat posed by a crisis (2002). To this end, SCCT suggested a twofold process for evaluating the crisis threat. The first step is to identify the type of crisis that an organization is facing. SCCT operates on the basis of the three aforementioned types of crises. It is believed that "the three categories represent increasing levels of attributions of crisis responsibility and threat posed by the crisis" (Coombs and Holladay, 2010, p.39).

A recent review of the literature found that crisis history and prior reputation, or what is termed in Kelley's principle of covariance (1972) as consistency and distinctiveness, are the two main intensifying factors (Coombs and Holladays, 2010). Crisis history (whether or not an organization has had similar crises previously) and prior reputation (was the organization perceived unfavourably before the crisis) are proven intensifying factors (Coombs, 2007, Elliot, 2010). In other words, the way an organisation dealt with a threatening event in the past and the prior stakeholders' perceptions towards it are still count in terms of the level of crisis responsibility attributed by the public, and the level of threat posed by a crisis. Coombs points out that intensifying factors matter most with crises that involve low levels of crisis responsibility (2018). For example, an intensifying factor would cause a significant shift in the appropriate crisis response strategy from a crisis with a low level of crisis responsibility to a crisis with a high level of crisis responsibility. Of note, Coombs and Holladay went so far on this matter to state that organisations with negative prior reputations are attributed greater crisis responsibility for the same crisis than an organisation that is unknown or has a positive prior reputation (2002). Unsurprisingly, it just takes the presence of one of these intensifiers to change the threat level posed by a crisis.

In addition to delineating a set of Crisis Response Strategies, Coombs has also set a number of guidelines in order to help managers better understand the crisis outcomes of their communicative choices (i.e., CRS), such as their organizational reputation (Coombs, 2015).

2.4. Attribution theory

Harvey and Martinko (2009) have defined attribution as a causal explanation for an event or behaviour. That is, on a daily basis, individuals are likely to assign or form attributions or attributional explanations for events taking place in their surroundings. Rightly called the grandfather of attribution theory in naïve-psychology, Fritz Heider has been in the background of much of the present theory. Heider believed that in common-sense psychology the result of an action is felt to depend on two sets of

conditions, namely, factors within the person and factors within the environment (1958). Weiner (1985) believed that attributions for these behaviours and outcomes ultimately help to shape emotional and behavioural responses (1985).

In research devoted to public relations issues, researchers have found that attribution theory can be linked to crises (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995). Since crises are negative and unexpected, stakeholders are likely to make attributions about an ongoing crisis, then, assign the crisis responsibility to a certain organisation. While using attribution theory, Coombs (2007) posits that the threat of a crisis is largely a function of crisis responsibility or blame. Of note, most of the work done around attribution theory has helped in shaping the main concepts of situational crisis communication.

2.5. Crisis response strategies

The shift to formal research resulted in focusing on crisis response strategies that are more audience centred. This section will touch on the main crisis response strategies provided by SCCT. The term crisis response strategy is understood to mean what the organisation says and does during a time of crisis (Coombs, 2004). The importance of an appropriate response relies on protecting an organisation from reputational damage. Sturges (1994) and Holladay (2009) have grouped crisis response strategies into: a) instructing information, b) adjusting information, and c) reputation repair.

Instructing information has come to be used to refer to how an organisation copes up physically with a crisis. Coombs and Holladay hold that public safety should be a high priority in an ongoing crisis (2010). Adjusting information dictates how an organisation should cope up psychologically with a crisis. In this concern, the same authorities recommended organisations to express sympathy and to explain their efforts to prevent a repeat of the crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2010). Whereas reputation repair can be described as the journey to the normal after a damage was inflicted by a crisis to an organisation.

Table 1 Crisis Response Strategies (Coombs, 2007)

Crisis Response Strategy		Explanation of Strategy
Denial	Denial	Management claims there is no crisis.
	Scapegoat	Management blames some outside entity for the crisis.
	Attack the Accuser	Management confronts the group or person claiming that something is wrong.
Diminish	Excuse	Management attempts to minimize crisis responsibility by claiming a lack of control over the event or lack of intent to do harm.
	Justification	Management attempts to minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
Rebuild	Apology	Management accepts full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.
	Compensation	Management offers money or other gifts to victims.
Bolstering	Concern	Management expresses concern for victims.
	Ingratiation	Management praises other stakeholders and/ or reminds people of past good works by the organisation.
	Regret	Management indicates they feel badly about the crisis.

One of the central premises of SCCT is the conceptualisation of crisis response strategies. Coombs (2007) suggested 10 crisis response strategies with their specific executions as presented in *Table 1*. These response strategies suggested by Coombs are determined based on crisis responsibility and focused on avoidance of blame and resulting reputational damage. As a result, according to Coombs, each crisis situation can be assessed, and crisis managers may then choose the best crisis response strategy based on the SCCT model's elements.

3. Methodology
A total of 31 respondents have participated in an online questionnaire of 16 questions. In order to enhance the accuracy of the data collected from the questionnaire, the respondents, who are stakeholders in the hospitality sector from the high Atlas region, were contacted for approval to take part in the questionnaire before they were sent the link to the google form. Apart from the

initial demographic questions, the questionnaire is implicitly divided into three sections: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. In addition, Likert scale questions are used throughout the questionnaire in order to gauge stakeholders' satisfaction with CRS throughout the pandemic.

The research studies crisis response strategies taken during the covid-19 pandemic by the hospitality businesses and their influence on stakeholder satisfaction. In order to do so, the first section of the questionnaire investigates the presence of any prior crises. The second part of the questionnaire studies the CRS taken by the organization from the perspective of the stakeholders. Finally, the questionnaire investigates the stakeholder's perception of the course of actions taken by organizations. By the time the questionnaire has been disabled, it has gathered 31 respondents, 20 of whom are males and 11 are females. In this study, we have employed IBM SPSS statistics (version 20) in order to carry out its statistical analyses.

4. Data Analysis

Table 2 CRS employed during covid-19 crisis

Crisis Response Strategies	Excuse	Justification	Ingratiation	Concern	Compensation	Regret	Apology
Responses rate	26.2%	14.8%	8.2%	16.4%	13.1%	13.1%	8.2%

According to *Table* 2, the strategy which was predominantly taken by the organizations during Covid-19 is excuse by a percentage of 26%, it was followed by justification, concern, Compensation, and regret, then apology and ingratiation being the least used strategies. The findings of this table corroborate SCCT, as the excuse and justification strategies (diminish crisis response strategies) are the most reasonable ones during victim-type crises.

As for the impression on the organization's CRSs (*Table* 3), the stakeholders have agreed considerably with Justification, Compensation. Furthermore, they have disagreed with the strategy of Apology; this can be justified by the fact that it is nonsensical for an organization to apologize for a crisis in which it situates itself as a victim.

Table 3 Stakeholders' attitude towards CRS taken during COVID-19

	Justification	Ingratiation	Concern	Compensation	Regret	Apology	Excuse
Agree	88.9%	60.0%	60.0%	75.0%	50.0%	20.0%	62.5%
Disagree	11.1%	40.0%	40.0%	25.0%	50.0%	80.0%	37.5%

Table 4 highlights a clear trend toward adaptability in business models, with 73.8% of respondents' organizations implementing changes to navigate challenges. Remote work (31.6%) stands out as the primary adjustment, reflecting a significant shift toward digital and flexible work arrangements. This shift signals a broader transition in operational practices that prioritize continuity and resilience. Moreover, decreasing work hours (21.1%) and changing communication channels (21.1%) indicate efforts to manage both internal processes and external engagement. These changes suggest that organizations are rethinking how they balance productivity with employee well-being and effective communication.

On the other hand, 26.3% of organizations made no changes, potentially reflecting stability or resistance to change. However, this lack of adaptation could pose future risks if disruptions persist. Overall, the data indicates that businesses are prioritizing flexibility and digital transformation to sustain operations in uncertain environments.

Table 4 The measures taken by organisations post-crisis

Organisation Position		Crisis Response Strategies							Total
		Excuse	Justification	Ingratiation	Concern	Compensation	Regret	Apology	
Victim	Count	8	5	3	5	3	3	4	15
	% Within Organisation position	53.30%	33.30%	20.00%	33.30%	20.00%	20.00%	26.70%	
Accidental	Count	4	1	1	3	3	0	1	5
	% Within Organisation position	80.00%	20.00%	20.00%	60.00%	60.00%	0.00%	20.00%	
Intentional	Count	4	1	3	3	4	1	2	5
	% Within Organisation position	80.00%	20.00%	60.00%	60.00%	80.00%	20.00%	40.00%	
Total	Count	14	7	5	8	7	4	5	22

Business Model	Remote work	Decrease in work hour	Changing communication channel	None of the above
Number	12	8	8	10
Percentage	31.6%	21.1%	21.1%	26.3%

Table 5 Correlational analysis between previous organisation position(s) and CRSs

The results of the correlational analysis (*Table* 5) between previous organisation position(s) towards a crisis and the crisis response strategies opted for the same organisation in the present crisis are presented in this table. What is striking about the figures in this table is that victim organisations are likely to offer an excuse with a portion of 53 per cent or a justification or concern about the present crisis with an equal portion of 33 per cent. Another closer inspection of the table shows also that concern and compensation are surprisingly the common crisis response strategies opted for by organisations whose crises were labelled as accidental with a significant portion of 60 per cent. Interestingly, offering an excuse remains also at the top of CRSs with 80 per cent among organisations with the same position.

Furthermore, no significant correlation was found between organisations which witnessed an accidental crisis and regret as a CRS. Noteworthy, regret appeared to be insignificant to these organisations. Turning now to the organisations with an intentional position. It can be seen by far that these organisations varied their crisis response strategies. Both excuse and compensation received notably an equal portion of 80 per cent respectively. The figures also show that these organisations opted largely for ingratiation and concern. These two response strategies have recorded a 60 per cent per each. Overall, these results provide important insights into the way the previous crisis position of an organisation may affect the type of CRS opted in the present crisis.
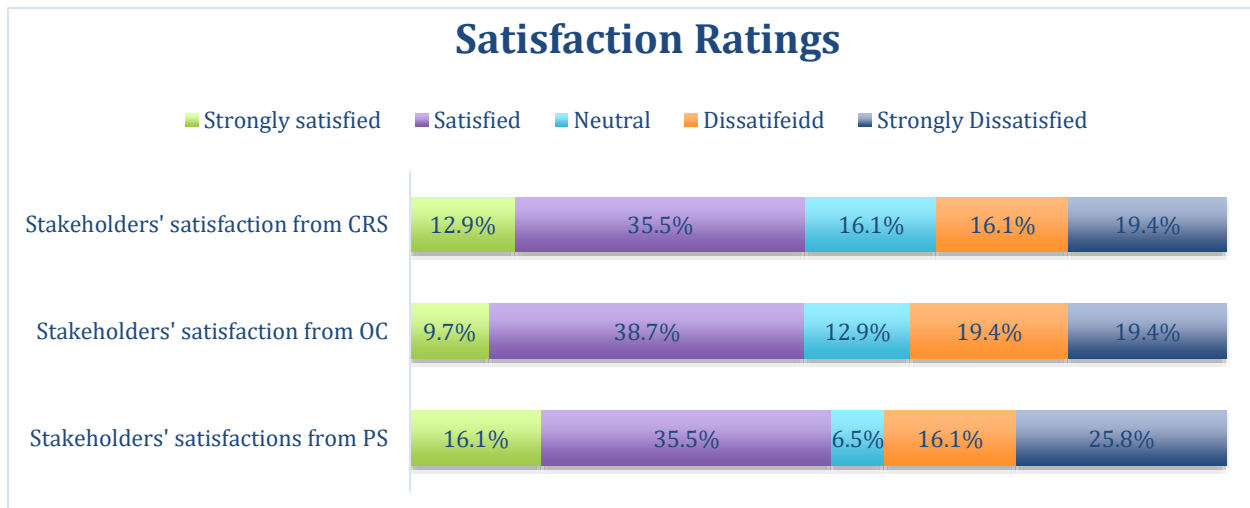
Figure 1 Skated bar chart of satisfaction ratings

This staked bar chart (*Figure* 1) shows the stakeholder's satisfaction ratings with respect to the overall organisation's psychological support, organization's communication, and crisis response strategies.

With regards to stakeholders' satisfaction with their organisations' psychological support during the time of crisis, the chart shows that over 25% of the respondents were strongly dissatisfied. Strikingly, both respondents who are either dissatisfied or strongly satisfied received an equal portion of 16% respectively. What stands out also in the figure is that only a small number of respondents expressed their neutrality to the psychological support offered by their organisations. Satisfied respondents represent over one-third of the whole sample of this study 35%.

In reference to stakeholders' satisfaction with the quality of communication provided during the present crisis, it is apparent that almost 39% of the stakeholders from different organisations were satisfied. Noteworthy, respondents whose feedback is either dissatisfied or strongly dissatisfied represent almost 40% of the whole sample, over 19% per each. Of the whole sample, only 12% expressed a neutral point in terms of satisfaction. Surprisingly, only a minority of respondents were strongly satisfied with the quality of communication among their organisations during the ongoing crisis. Overall, together these results suggest that the majority of stakeholders were satisfied with the quality of communication provided by their own organisations during the covid-19 pandemic.

The figure also provides the summary statistics for the respondents' level of satisfaction from CRS. What stands out in this chart is that most of the respondents were satisfied with over 35% whereas those who were strongly satisfied recorded the smallest portion with almost 13%. Noteworthy, respondents who claimed they were neutral or dissatisfied with the course of actions taken by their organisations represent only 16% of the whole sample respectively. This graph also shows that 19% of the sample were strongly dissatisfied with the crisis response strategies opted for by their organisations during the present covid-19 crisis. These results suggest that respondents who were satisfied with CRSs adopted by their organisations represent the largest population.

5. Discussion

Our results clearly state that tourism organizations' CRS conform to Coombs strategy guidelines (2007), mainly the victimage in the cases of natural disasters. In addition, Coombs also argues that crises with low responsibility attribution (victim crises) are best treated with Diminish strategies (i.e., Excuse, Justification, Compensation, Apology), which are noticed to have taken the lions' share in the CRS employed during covid-19. Furthermore, stakeholders have had a positive attitude towards the CRS employed by their organizations. As shown in *Figure* 3, respondents were mostly satisfied, especially with diminish strategies.

As discussed in the result section in *Table* 5, there was a striking correlation between victim organisation and both excuse and justification as diminish crisis response strategies. A similar trend has already been reported in Coombs' situational crisis communication theory. According to this authority, these types of crisis responses are recommended when organisations are dealing with victim crises (Coombs, 2007). Concordantly, these results are considerably similar to the guidelines offered by the same authority. Since SCCT tenets impose that diminishment strategies can be blended with rebuilding strategies (Coombs, 2019), the results showed that the organisations targeted in the present study tend to mix diminishment strategies (excuse, justification) with rebuilding strategies (compassion, apology). Seemingly, the stakeholders' organisations in this study did not violate SCCT guidelines in this regard.

According to Coombs (2007), while in crisis, intentional organisation positions prerequisite a bolstering strategy. However, these results suggest something slightly different, especially at the level of crisis response strategy in which a diminishment strategy (excuse), according to their stakeholders, was opted for by organisations with previous intentional crisis positions.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from the analysis is that most of the stakeholders were satisfied with their organisations during the time of the covid-19 pandemic. One possible explanation for this significant satisfaction is that these organisations, in the tourism industry, have been highly involved in adjusting information to the victims during the time of crisis which might be functioning as a basis to a reputational remedy. These results are consistent with Sturge's claim that "adjusting information helps stakeholders to cope psychologically with the crisis" (Sturge, 1994). A high level of satisfaction among stakeholders may have a say on the stakeholders' perceptions because, as asserted by Patel and Reinsch, adjusting information may include expressing sympathy or concern for those affected (2003).

6. Conclusion

This study's findings indicate that the type of the organisations' position(s) in previous crises influence significantly the so likely CRSs to be opted for by the same organisations. The first question in this study asked which effects the type of organisation position(s) has on the crisis response strategies taken by the same organisations during the present crisis. The findings related to this question suggest that organisations during the present crisis in the Moroccan tourism sector favoured a diminish approach to the crisis. The study has also shown that most of the stakeholders stated their organisations opted for excuse as a crisis response strategy. This result provides support for Coombs' theory that the excuse strategy is used when the organisation was not in control of the events that caused the crisis (2007). These results are also consistent with one of the premises of SCCT which involves comprising communicative efforts to influence how stakeholders perceive the crisis and the organisation in crisis. Despite our study providing little evidence to the relationship between adjusting information and reputational assets, this gap is still worth highlighting in further research.

Overall, this paper has obtained encouraging results demonstrating that not only does the type of the present crisis affects the type of crisis response strategies, but also the organisation position in previous crises does significantly affect the so likely crisis response strategies to be opted for in the present crisis. These findings add substantially to our understanding of how organisations in the Moroccan tourism industry communicated the covid-19 crisis and the effects of their course of actions on stakeholders' perceptions on the present crisis.

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