Beyond reputational and financial damage: Examining emotional and religious harm in a post-crisis case study of Hillsong Church

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Crises have dominated news headlines, media reports, and social media posts over the past decade. Stories of corporations swindling innocent customers, natural disasters wreaking havoc on local communities, and products accidentally harming the users they intended to help have been shared widely through formal media channels and within informal conversations between friends and family members. One such variety of crisis that has captured the media's attention includes crises that involve religious organizations, including churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques. In-depth expose 's on religious leaders sexually assaulting minors, stealing money from pious parishioners, and cheating on their spouses with sex workers have been featured on credible news channels and gossip sites (Dixon, 2004; Legg, 2009; Morehouse, 2020; Spaulding, 2018).

Yet, while the rate at which news reports on crises within religious organizations has increased, scholarly attention given to this crisis genre has not seen much development (Barth, 2010; Boys, 2009; Courtright & Hearit, 2002; Dixon, 2004; Maier & Crist, 2017; Morehouse, 2020; Morehouse & Austin, 2022; Swanson, 2012). This disparity is problematic. Crises within religious organizations have the potential to impact core identities within stakeholders, including their religious identity, and have consequences for stakeholders beyond financial,

reputational, and material harm, which is predominately assessed in crisis communication scholarship (Spaulding, 2018). As a result of these factors, crises within religious organizations are unique from crises in other types of organizations, including for-profit, government, and non-faith-based non-profit organizations, and have the potential to further theorizing in the crisis communication and public relations literature.

This study addresses theoretical and topical gaps in public relations and crisis communication scholarship by advancing Spaulding's (2018) emotional and religious harm categories for religious crises. Specifically, this study examines the ability for a crisis to cause religious and emotional harm to stakeholders, both of which are forms of damage that have been overlooked in the crisis communication scholarship. To do this, we conducted a qualitative case study of Hillsong Church's crisis with Carl Lentz, a megachurch pastor accused of sexual assault, harassment, extramarital affairs, and unethical treatment of employees. Data included controlled content from the religious organization's post-crisis communication efforts, news media concerning the crisis, and stakeholders' responses to the crisis. Hillsong Church is a Protestant global megachurch with locations in 23 countries.

Before reviewing specifics of the crisis and case, the literature review will discuss major trends in crisis communication scholarship, followed by gaps in the literature concerning religious crises. Next, the study will

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discuss two new harm categories before presenting the research questions at the center of this inquiry.

1. Literature review

Crisis communication is an area of scholarship that examines the preand post- crisis management organizations exert for a variety of crisis situations that occur (Coombs, 2007, 2015a**). A crisis is defined 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" (Coombs, 2007a, pp. 2–3).**

In practice, crisis communication is utilized by strategic communicators to protect the reputational and financial well-being of organizations when facing a crisis (Coombs 2007c). Crisis communication scholars typically identify crises according to Coombs' (2007a, 2007c, 2015b) three broad categories, based on predicted attribution of blame and perceived crisis responsibility. Those categories include victim crises, accidental crises, and intentional (or preventable) crises (Coombs 2007a, 2007c).

Victim crises include crises where the organizational is viewed as the victim of the crisis, thus resulting in the public perceiving low attribution of organizational crisis responsibility (e.g., rumors, product tampering, or damage from natural disasters like flooding or fires) (Coombs, 2007c, 2015a, 2015b). Accidental crises include crises that are perceived as accidents, thus the organization is viewed as having "minimal attribution of crisis responsibility" (e.g., technical or product errors) (Coombs 2007c, p. 168, 2015a). Lastly, intentional crises are crises that are viewed as preventable and the public perceives strong

attribution of organizational crisis responsibility (e.g., organizational or human misdeeds and misconduct) (Coombs 2007c).

Traditionally, researchers examine the practice and effects of crisis communication by applying a variety of crisis communication theories, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs 2007a, 2007c, 2015b), contingency theory (Cancel et al., 1997; Lee et al., 2022), apologia (Hearit, 1995; Kent & Boatwright, 2018), discourse of renewal (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Sellnow et al., 2002; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002), image repair theory (Benoit, 1995, 1997), social mediated crisis communication (Liu et al., 2012; Mak & Song, 2019) and more.

Recently, scholars have turned their attention towards examining how crises unfold on social media, and examining other factors that can impact organization's recovery from a crisis, like empathy (Schoofs et al., 2022), listening (Crist´ofol et al., 2020), and dialogue (Cheng, 2020).

1.1. Limitations in crisis communication scholarship

While crisis communication scholarship has undoubtedly progressed since its first introduction within the public relations literature, certain trends dominate the literature, which consequently limits theorizing and our ability to address practical problems practitioners face. For instance, despite crises occurring within all types of organizations, scholars also tend to focus on specific types of organizations, namely corporations, and specific types of damage organizations experience as a result of the crisis, including physical, material, reputational, relational, and financial harm or damage (Avery et al., 2010; Coombs, 2007a, 2014a, 2014b, 2015b; Kent, 2010). While this type of research is necessary, the heavy focus on corporations, certain types of damage inflicted upon corporations, and prioritizing organizational recovery as opposed to stakeholder recovery limits our ability to provide recommendations to a wide range

of practitioners who are attempting to plan or mitigate crises.

For example, Zhu et al. (2017) examined and compared McDonald's and KFC's post-crisis communication efforts during a series of crises involving the fast-food restaurants in China. Specifically, researchers examined how the crises unfolded on social networking sites, how both corporations responded via social networking sites, and the reputational harm the organizations endured as a result of the crises and their post-crisis response strategies. Similarly, Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2018) examined the post-crisis communication efforts and subsequent financial and reputational damage of Nestle India. Using a case study approach, researchers analyzed various internal (e.g. brand webpages, social media posts) and external (e.g. news stories, government orders) documents related to Nestle India having monosodium glutamate (MSG) in prepackaged noodles specifically labeled as being MSG-free.

While there is methodological and theoretical variety in crisis communication scholarship, the narrow focus on corporations, physical, financial, and reputational damage, and emphasis on organizational recovery remains steadfast (Coombs, 2018; Kent, 2010; Spaulding, 2018). Overlooking how other types of organizations practice post-crisis communication, other forms of harm, and how to communicate to foster stakeholder recovery after a crisis occurs constrains theory building in crisis communication scholarship and prevents scholars from providing research-based guidance to practitioners. For instance, our knowledge on how to respond to religious crises is limited to a small number of papers examining similar cases, and some include recommendations that contrast secular crisis communication scholarship, or include recommendations that secular crisis communication research does not address. The next section will review literature regarding religious crises before presenting the research questions.

1.2. Religious crises

Two primary categories exist in scholarship on religious crises, including crises that occur within religious organizations and crises that include a religious component. Much of the crisis communication literature including religious crises, publics, or organizations falls into one of these two categories (Barth, 2010; Boys, 2009; Courtright & Hearit, 2002; Dixon, 2004; Gaither & Curtin, 2007; Jaques, 2015; Kauffman, 2008; Knight et al., 2009; Legg, 2009; Maier, 2005; Maier & Crist, 2017; Mancini & Shields, 2014; Morehouse & Spaulding, 2022; Spaulding, 2018). The categories are distinct because while they both involve religious publics, the organization at the center of the crisis is fundamentally different.

For instance, Jaques' (2015) study on Cadbury's crisis involving pig DNA in the company's signature chocolate treats serves as an example of a crisis with a religious component. This crisis occurred in Malaysia, a "largely Muslim nation where pigs are regarded as unclean and halal standards of food production are central to Islamic dietary practice" (Jaques, 2015, p. 468). Thus, because the corporation violated Muslim consumers' direct religious practices/beliefs by including pig DNA in a food item labeled as halal, this crisis is categorized as having a religious component. Results of their case study concluded that Cadbury successfully weathered the crisis and recovered in about two weeks due to Cadbury's passive post-crisis response strategy, which largely contrasts recommendations in crisis communication scholarship (Jaques, 2015). Notably, Cadbury did not apologize, the organization maintained a neutral stance regarding the crisis, did not dispute the Malaysian Health Ministry's report of the presence of pig DNA, and did not "take a side" on the "differing interpretations of halal and its implications for true Muslims" (Jaques, 2015, p. 477). Thus, by strategically not engaging in

post-crisis communication and instead regularly releasing information that was informative, but not contradictory or inflammatory towards religious publics, harm to Cadbury's reputation and profit was minimal. Conversely, Legg (2009) examined a crisis occurring within a religious organization through their analysis of Jimmy Swaggart's post-crisis communication strategies. Swaggart was a televangelist who was defrocked for moral failures surrounding extramarital affairs with sex workers and refusal to accept punishment for these choices by his religious governing body. In their study, researchers analyzed Swaggart's image repair campaign using stage theory and theory of image repair discourse (Legg, 2009). Results suggest mortification was initially a successful post-crisis communication strategy for Swaggart; however, because Swaggart continued to reject consequences from his religious

governing body, he did not recover from the crisis (Legg, 2009). Thus, while Swaggart overcame the original crisis of soliciting sex workers, "not submitting to authority" and "his defiance of the church" is ultimately what damaged his reputation, as opposed to extramarital affairs with sex workers (Legg, 2009, p. 249). The current study will advance Legg's (2009) work by utilizing a case study methodology to examine the post-crisis communication efforts of a celebrity pastor and multi-million-dollar religious organization during and after an intentional crisis.

Of the limited research conducted on religious crises, scholars tend to focus on few major world religions, including Islam, Catholicism, and Evangelical Christianity. For instance, the few researchers who have studied crises with Muslim publics tend to focus on crises with secular

organizations that include a religious component, like the Cadbury pig DNA crisis (Jaques, 2015) mentioned earlier, and the Danish and New Zealand newspapers that published cartoons of the prophet Muhammed (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Gaither & Curtin, 2007; Knight et al., 2009). The most popular area of religious crisis communication scholarship lies within the Catholic Church sexual abuse crisis (cf. Boys, 2009), where scholars employ a variety of theoretical approaches to examine the post-crisis communication. For instance, Kauffman (2008) examined the image restoration strategies of Archbishop Cardinal Bernard Law during a press conference titled "Statement on the Issue of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Clergy." Results suggest that Kauffman utilized appropriate image restoration strategies, such as mortification, corrective action, and bolstering; however, the Cardinal's efforts were not successful at repairing his reputation and repairing the crisis due to lack of trust in the Cardinal and offensiveness of the crisis (Kauffman, 2008).

Notably, very few scholars have focused on intentional crises involving Evangelical Christianity, and those that do tend to focus on the post-crisis communication of celebrity pastors (Legg, 2009; Spaulding, 2018) or celebrity believers (e.g., Duggar family) (Perreault & Perreault, 2019). Results from this limited area of research broadly suggests that celebrity pastors do not consistently follow recommended post-crisis communication strategies, which results in irreparable damage to their reputation and relationships with the church and congregants (Legg, 2009; Spaulding, 2018).

1.3. Limitations in religious crisis scholarship

While the small body of research that exists on religious crises has theoretical variety and valuable applied outcomes, much of the focus has remained on studying religious crises squarely through the lens of

existing crisis communication theories (Morehouse & Spaulding, 2022). Few scholars have examined the unique components of religious crises, religious organizations, and religious publics in their studies (Morehouse & Austin, 2022). This is problematic because religious organizations have the ability to utilize religious rhetoric (cf. Burke, 1970), employ religious tactics (e.g. public prayer), and capitalize on stakeholders' religious identities in their post-crisis communication. This limitation ultimately constrains our understanding of how stakeholder and organizational identity, values, and morals can impact an organization's and stakeholders' recovery efforts.

Few exceptions to this limitation exist, one of which is Spaulding's (2018) study on evangelical pastors causing crises through misconduct or suffering through crises as victims of rumors. Through a case study of four Evangelical Christian crises regarding celebrity pastors embroiled in same-sex scandals, Spaulding (2018) identified two new harm, or damage, categories that occur with religious crises: religious and emotional harm. According to Spaulding (2018):

Many evangelicals believe that having a prominent member of their community sin can ultimately lead to a corrupt society and lead others to either intentionally or unintentionally participate in that system. This belief that one person's sin may cause others to sin, gives credence to the idea that damage from the crisis can be spiritual rather than physical, and this point is particularly important to understand when the "sinner" is the community's pastor. (p. 38).

The proposed new harm categories are notable for crisis communication theorizing and research on religious crises. For example, a corporate CEO engaging in an extramarital affair would hardly constitute an organizational crisis in most cases and lead to very little harm to the organization and stakeholders; however, a religious leader cheating

on their spouse—thus violating tenets of the religion in which they practice and teach—could cause worshippers to question their relationship with that particular religious organization, the religious leader, and the religion (Boys, 2009; Morehouse, 2020). Yet, these nuances have been overlooked in the crisis communication literature, which has constrained theorizing in this field and progress in the religious crisis subfield. It is necessary to examine the two new proposed harm categories in depth to understand the emotional and religious harm crises can potentially produce to advance theory development in crisis communication scholarship.

To address these gaps in the literature, the current study poses two research questions aimed at understanding how emotional and religious harm are understood in post-crisis communication materials from the organization and media, and how the two new harm categories emerge in stakeholders' responses. Specifically, this study asks:

RQ1: In what ways did Hillsong Church and the media position the Carl Lentz crisis?

RQ2: In what ways does religious or emotional harm emerge in Hillsong Church's crisis with Carl Lentz?

2. Method

Given the unique phenomenon under investigation, a qualitative case study is the most appropriate method to answer the two proposed research questions. The case study method examines a complex and contemporary problem that is situated within a real-world context, namely the management of and implications associated with religious organizational crises (Yin, 2018). Through an in-depth, qualitative approach, a case study relies on numerous sources of evidence within defined boundaries to advance theory related to the case (Yin, 2018). In this way, the value of the case study is to offer analytic or conceptual

generalizations, which can corroborate, modify, and advance existing theory (Yin, 2018).

Previous scholars have relied on the case study approach to uncover insights and advance theory related to various public relations phenomena (e.g., Cardwell et al., 2017; Lemon, 2019; Merkelsen, 2013). Additionally, case studies are useful when asking and answering research questions that investigate applied communication topics (Levenshus, 2016), which is appropriate in this case. Specifically, this case study explored how an international megachurch managed a crisis involving a senior pastor, and the ways in which the religious and emotional harm categories emerged within this context.

2.1. Case description

Hillsong Church's crisis with Carl Lentz became public in November 2020 when Lentz was fired from his lead campus pastor position at Hillsong Church's flagship U.S. East Coast campus (located in New York City) by Brian Houston, Hillsong Church's senior pastor (French & Adler, 2021; Graham, 2020). According to the email sent by Houston to members and staff of Hillsong Church's East Coast campus, Lentz was fired due to unspecified "moral failures" (Graham, 2020). The next day, under a photo published on Instagram featuring Lentz, his wife, and three children, Lentz admitted to being "unfaithful in [his] marriage" and apologized to his wife and followers for "breaking [their] trust." Over the next several months, details of the "moral failures" emerged, including a 5-month extramarital affair, sexual harassment towards multiple congregants and church volunteers, sexual harassment and labor exploitation towards the family nanny, bullying, racism,

homophobia, lying, abuse of power, and narcissistic behavior dating from 2015 to his termination in 2020 (French & Adler, 2021; Graham, 2020).

As news of Lentz's misconduct and misdeeds became public, victims of Lentz's abuse and former congregants began speaking out (Stone, 2022). For example, after Lentz was fired and admitted to having an extramarital affair in November 2020, the woman engaged in the consensual affair provided a televised interview in November 2020 detailing the timeline of the affair, and many celebrities associated with Lentz (e.g. Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez) announced in December 2020 that they were no longer affiliated with Lentz or Hillsong Church (Graham, 2020). Then, in May 2021, Lentz' former family nanny published an essay describing the abuse she endured during the seven years that she worked for the Lentz family (Goldstein, 2021; Stone, 2022).

As congregants, staff, volunteers, and celebrities began speaking out, Brian Houston engaged in post-crisis communication. The first instance occurred in February 2021, when Houston emailed congregants and staff at Hillsong Church's East Coast campus to share that the church conducted and concluded an "independent investigation," included broad results of the investigation, and provided a brief plan outlining steps the church was going to take as a result of the investigation. Then, in an email sent to congregants at Hillsong Church's East Coast campus in March 2021, Houston apologized, admitted to wrongdoing regarding Lentz's continued tenure at Hillsong Church despite evidence of misconduct, and admitted to a lack of leadership on multiple levels. Next, in May 2021, Houston participated in an interview with The Today Show and acknowledged Lentz's moral failures again, and shared his version of when he became aware of Lentz's misconduct and how he handled these issues over the years. During this interview, Houston

shared contradictory statements from his previous emails. For example, in the email to congregants in February 2021, Houston said he had recently become aware of Lentz's misconduct; however, during The Today Show interview, Houston claimed he had several discussions with Lentz over the years regarding Lentz's inappropriate conduct and behavior.

2.2. Sample procedures

This case study relied on a dual sampling strategy, which is preferred for all qualitative work to ensure emergent themes are fully developed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first sampling strategy was purposive, where the goal was to identify a sample made up of rich, helpful sources that could provide the most information regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009). In this case, the purposive sample included all statements posted by Hillsong Church to its website from November 4, 2020 to May 31, 2021, which contained six statements over the course of the five time periods that featured important information associated with the crisis. The sample also included 137 news articles that covered stories related to the Lentz crisis during each of the significant time periods. Table 1 summarizes each crisis phase and how many news articles and organizational statements were included in the purposive sample.

The second sampling strategy was theoretical, where data collection drives what additional data need to be gathered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, theoretical sampling encouraged us to collect data that included stakeholder content from social media. Specifically, social media posts from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were downloaded to capture stakeholder sentiment towards the crisis and to further investigate the emergence of the religious and emotional harm categories. In total, 26,073 posts were included from across three social media platforms

from November 1, 2020 to August 1, 2021, which means all five crisis phases were included in the social content.

2.3. Data collection procedures

Data collection relied on triangulation, where multiple data sources were used in convergence to answer the proposed research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As mentioned, data sources included controlled content from the organization, media coverage, and stakeholder social media posts.

To collect organizational content, one researcher reviewed all posts made available under the newsroom tab at www.hillsong.com during the crisis time frames. Statements related to the Lentz crisis case were screenshotted and saved to a password-protected computer. To collect news articles, one researcher used Nexis Uni, formerly known as Lexis Nexis, to download all news articles that included the key term "Carl Lentz" during the previously discussed time periods, which resulted in 227 news articles. News articles were saved in separate files for each time frame, and an Excel spreadsheet was created for all content. The news articles were then reviewed for relevance, repetition, and language. Articles that did not focus on the Carl Lentz case, were written in a different language or duplicates of another were removed from the sample, which resulted in 137 news articles. To collect social media posts, the social media listening platform Sprinklr was used to collect publicly available posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Content that was published between November 1, 2020 and August 1, 2021 and included at least one of the following terms was captured and download into an Excel spreadsheet: #carllentz, @carllentzNYC, "carl lentz," @hillsongNYC, and @hillsong. A research assistant then cleaned the data by removing posts from news organizations since news articles were already included in the purposive sample; this resulted in 26,073

social media posts.

2.4. Data analysis procedures

Given the qualitative nature of the study, data collection followed an inductive process, where emergent themes were identified to answer the proposed research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, the data analysis procedures included a total of eight steps across three different platforms. A Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), NVivo for Mac, was used throughout data analysis to ensure the data was organized and an audit trail could be followed. In addition, Microsoft Excel was utilized for theme development. Last, given the size of the social media content sample, Leximancer was used for data analysis. Leximancer (www.leximancer.com) is a data-mining tool that allows for the visualization and interpretation of large, complex text data (Rooney, 2005). Previous research suggests that

Table 1

News Article Data.

Crisis

Phase

Time

Frame

Time Frame Description Number of

News

Articles

Number of

Hillsong

Statements

Phase

1

Nov. 3 –

Nov. 18,

2020

News breaks about

Lentz’s firing and Lentz

posts on social media

about the affair.

94 1

Phase

2

Feb. 12 –

Feb. 26,

2021

Houston announces end

to independent

investigation of Hillsong

NYC (related to Lentz

crisis).

6 2

Phase

3

March 3 –

March 18,

2021

Houston offers first

apology for Lentz’s

behavior in congregationwide

email addressed as

“Dear Church.”

0 1

Phase

4

May 18 –

June 1,

2021

Houston joins The Today

Show to address Lentz

crisis.

21 1

Phase

5

May 31 –

June 14,

2021

Leona Kimes, former

Lentz family nanny,

published a blog post on

Medium detailing

harassment and abuse.

16 1

J. Morehouse and L.L. Lemon

Public Relations Review 49 (2023) 102282

5

Leximancer could be used in conjunction with other CAQDAS software

to enhance both credibility and dependability in a qualitative study

(Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

Data analysis began with open coding of the organizational statements

and news articles in NVivo. Open coding included assigning codes

to words and phrases that were relevant to the research questions (Miles

et al., 2014). As the methodological expert, one of the two researchers conducted open coding and completed analytical memoing during this stage. Open coding resulted in 68 codes. The second step featured the collapsing and combining of repetitive codes, which resulted in 37 codes. The third step included the collapsing of codes into emergent themes using a coding tree; this was completed in Microsoft Excel. This step was completed using peer debriefing sessions with both researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), one who is the subject matter expert and the other who is the methodological expert. In total, three themes emerged for RQ1 and two themes emerged for RQ2. The last step was to use additional peer debriefing sessions to ask questions of the data to confirm the emergent themes were exhaustive across all data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Leximancer also included a step-by-step process to analyze the social media data due to the copious amount of content. The first step was semantic extraction, where the text was scanned to identify concept seeds by generating frequencies for words and phrases in the text. The second step was concept cleaning, where the list of concept seeds was reviewed to remove irrelevant content and merge duplicate content. The third step was relational extraction, where the text was scanned again to identify concept counts and frequency to work towards theme development. The last step included optimizing theme sensitivity, where the sensitivity was adjusted to increase or decrease the number of themes present in the concept map. This final step allowed for uncovering any nuance that may have been missed while still depicting the importance of and connection between each theme.

2.5. Steps to ensure trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that reliability and validity are not the best ways to assess the quality of qualitative research, and instead,

offered credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity as the checks that can be used to ensure the trustworthiness of a study. Therefore, the following steps were taken to establish the study's trustworthiness and rigor.

To ensure credibility, where the findings are representative of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), triangulation was used in both data collection and analysis. Triangulation uses multiple sources to compare and cross-check the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, data collection involved three sources (organizational statements, news articles, and social media) and data analysis used three platforms (NVivo, Excel, and Leximancer). Additionally, memos were taken throughout data collection and analysis. Last, a robust audit trail of all data sources was used to ensure organization and easy retrieval of information. To ensure transferability, whether the findings are applicable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), theoretical sampling was used, and thick descriptions are included in the findings. To ensure dependability, the assumption that the findings demonstrate a unique time and place and are consistent across the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), data were checked to certify that themes were emergent across the multiple sources. To ensure confirmability, the process of confirming the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researchers participated in several debriefing sessions to review and ask important questions of the data to safeguard that the themes were fully developed. Last, to ensure integrity in the research process, both researchers were committed to documenting every decision made and exercising rigor in each step of data collection and analysis.

3. Findings

The current study conducted a qualitative case study to address gaps in the crisis communication and public relations literature regarding

religious crises, specifically two new types of harm that occur among stakeholders as a result of a crisis, as well as the applicability of current crisis communication theories in the religious context. Findings reveal unique factors, elements, and strategies employed by the offending organization and offending organizational leader, many of which have not been previously reported in crisis communication scholarship, like making the leader an object of devotion and utilizing identity-activating religious rhetoric in post-crisis responses. The following section first discusses findings for RQ1 before turning to findings for RQ2.

3.1. Morality, devotion, and renewal in a religious crisis

The first research question asked about the ways in which Hillsong Church and the media positioned the Carl Lentz crisis, which resulted in three emergent themes. The first theme addressed how the crisis was positioned as a moral crisis. The next theme demonstrated how Lentz was depicted as a celebrity pastor by his community. Lastly, the third theme uncovered how rhetoric of renewal, restoration, and religious acts was used within this unique context. All themes are discussed next and supported by data.

3.2. The moral crisis

The initial crisis of Lentz engaging in an extramarital affair was positioned as an issue of morality. A statement posted on Hillsong Church's website from lead pastor Brian Houston stated, "This action [terminating the employment of Pastor Carl Lentz] has been taken following ongoing discussions in relation to leadership issues and breaches of trust, plus a recent revelation of moral failures" (emphasis added). This same or adapted verbiage from Houston's initial post-crisis statement was used across numerous news sites that covered the unfolding events. For example, an article posted by The Sun stated:

> The worship leader was axed for a "a recent revelation of moral

failures," according to a statement that was allegedly sent out to church members on Wednesday… A shocking email from Hillsong founder and senior pastor, Brian Houston, said that the church was 'very sad' to inform that Carl's employment had been terminated (Chenoweth, 2020, p. 1).

Coverage from the Associated Press stated, "Megachurch Pastor Carl Lentz fired, admits cheating on wife" (Italie, 2020, p. 2). Additionally, Good Morning America coverage said, "Also this morning, fall from grace. Celebrity Pastor Carl Lentz, and one-time spiritual adviser to Justin Bieber, fired for what the hugely popular Hillsong Church calls moral failures" (Stephanopoulos, 2020, p. 1). In addition to how the organization and media positioned the crisis, Carl Lentz also posted on his personal Instagram account that he was "guilty of moral failure" following his termination.

The social media data reinforced the emergent theme of the crisis being labeled as a moral one. The moral failure concept map (Fig. 1) shows that the concepts of "moral," "failure," and "affair" exist in the relational overlap between "alleged" and "pastor." Also in this space, "leaders" and "megachurch" were presented based on the frequency of the concepts, which depicts the central role of the church in the moral crisis.

Although Lentz's actions were explicitly positioned and explained as an issue of morality, Hillsong Church also participated in the moral crisis, but it was less explicit. Church leadership contradicted their moral code by utilizing a denial post-crisis response strategy in the initial stages of the post-crisis communication instead of adopting a crisis communication strategy that is recommended within the Situational Crisis Communication Theory for intentional or preventable crises, and concurrently aligns with the tenets of their faith (e.g., rebuild strategy

includes taking responsibility and apologizing) (Coombs, 2007a). Utilizing the denial response strategy damaged the reputation of Hillsong Church and delayed the relationship rebuilding process for the organization. For example, coverage in The Sun stated:

A woman that was previously involved with Hillsong exclusively told The Sun that the church knew about the affairs well before Carl was fired. The source revealed… 'We heard Carl was sleeping with people and we tried to address it the proper way within leadership…and it was swept under the rug' (Schaffstall, 2020, p. 2).

Additionally, the statement posted to Hillsong Church's website from Houston days after Lentz's firing highlighted the denial approach the church initially utilized regarding the crisis:

We thank Pastors Carl and Laura for the way they have served faithfully and sacrificially since the start of Hillsong NYC and for contributing so significantly to the countless lives that have been transformed for Jesus Christ through this ministry. They have a heart for people and we are confident that after a time of rest and restoration, God will use Carl in another way outside of Hillsong church. In terminating his tenure, we in no way want to diminish the good work he did here.

It wasn't until additional allegations of Lentz committing sexual assault in spring of 2021 that leadership shifted their response strategy towards one of accountability and remorse. For example, during The Today Show interview, Houston said, "I have reflected many, many times, and I'm acknowledging that mistakes have been made and that there are things where we need to get far better, much better. I'm not shrinking back from that." The public apology came four months after

the initial moral crisis was revealed and the firing occurred. By not exercising best practices in the post-crisis response according to theories like Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007a), the crisis was extended, potentially damaging the reputation of the organization and emotional and religious harm felt by stakeholders even further.

3.3. Celebrity pastor

The second theme that emerged was in regard to how Lentz was positioned as an entity to be worshipped by his community and because of his community. Lentz was depicted as a celebrity pastor through his elevated status and connections. For example, numerous media articles described Lentz as a celebrity pastor and an object of devotion because of who he knows, his social media following, and/or public persona. For instance, a Mail Online news story said, "While the Biebers were their most famous friends, Carl and Laura [Lentz] have mingled with countless celebrities over the years after being introduced to them through the church. He's been seen with the Kardashians, Drake, Vanessa Hudgens, and various NBA stars" (Zilber et al., 2020, para. 40). Additionally, a Daily Telegraph article said, "Mr. Lentz is most known for his high energy sermons, designer clothes and baptizing Justin Bieber" (Van Homrigh, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, an article from The Sun stated, "The 'Rockstar pastor,' as he has been referred to in the past… has gone on TV shows such as The View, Comedy Central and did a sit-down with Oprah Winfrey about his personal life" (Chenoweth, 2020, p. 2). No news coverage discussed Lentz's religious or professional accomplishments, but instead, only focused on his associations with celebrities.

Lentz's elevated status potentially explains why Hillsong Church originally utilized the denial strategy and why the public apology from Hillsong came four months later.

Social media content reinforced the theme of the highly worshipped celebrity pastor, which is demonstrated by the celebrity pastor concept map (Fig. 2). Specifically, the map shows how the “celebrity” concept overlaps with both “pastor,” illustrating how Lentz is defined by and known for his celebrity status.

Evidence of stakeholder confusion as a result of Lentz’s celebrity status was particularly evident in data immediately following Lentz’s termination at Hillsong Church. Many congregants questioned whether Lentz’s termination was a crisis for Lentz due to moral failure, or a crisis for Hillsong Church for wrongfully terminating a devout and morallyconscious employee. For example, congregants and other followers of Hillsong Church initially questioned if Lentz’s termination was a result of his social justice activism—a morally admirable action—and not for violating tenets of his faith. For example, a Daily Mail article shared:

His sudden sacking therefore sparked a flurry of speculation on social media, with many calling for Hillsong to reveal more information about Lentz’s alleged offences - while others suggested that the pastor may have been fired over his open support of the Black Lives Matter movement, although these rumors have not been confirmed (Mazzoni, 2020, p. 2).

Hillsong’s statement also expressed similar sentiment about Lentz,

Fig. 1. Moral Failure Concept Map.

Fig. 2. Celebrity Leader Concept Map.

where even amid the moral crisis, Houston acknowledged that Lentz “served faithfully and sacrificially since the start of Hillsong NYC [and contributed] significantly to the countless lives that have been transformed

for Jesus Christ through this ministry."

3.4. Rhetoric of renewal, restoration, and religious acts

Included in post-crisis communication messages from Hillsong Church was rhetoric that focused on renewal, restoration, change as a result of the crisis, and optimism towards the future. This future-focused positive rhetoric embedded within the post-crisis communication messages from the offending organization also included religious terms and phrases. This suggests that in later post-crisis communication messages, Hillsong Church utilized discourse of renewal with religious rhetoric, potentially to capitalize on the identity of the religious publics they were speaking to in order to both address and overcome the crisis.

For instance, the initial post-crisis statement from Hillsong in November 2020 closed with the following language, "I appreciate the great team of people who serve here, and as we embark on the process of selecting new leadership, we are praying that God would bring about an exciting new season for our church and this region." A second statement in February 2021, Houston said:

During [the transition of leadership at Hillsong East Coast], I want you to know that all along the way, we have tried to understand and address our organizational weaknesses and mistakes so that our church can move forward to a healthier place. We have a lot of work still to do at Hillsong East Coast… In addition to cultural changes, we will be implementing significant structural changes and enacting new policies and procedures in order to rectify the issues we've uncovered. I plan to address this more comprehensively in my next email to you… As we finalize plans to implement new Lead Pastors, our work begins afresh with hope, purpose, clarity, and the greatest of all – love. We intend to love greatly as we rebuild trust with you. I promise you that our entire team will work hard to earn it. As we prepare the way for new leadership

for Hillsong East Coast, we will also make room for God to work in new ways for our Church. We are confident that our best days are ahead.

In a third statement from March 2021, Houston shared the following regarding the new leadership that would replace Lentz:

Moving forward, we are committed to taking the necessary action to confront these failings. We will endeavor to be open and clear about all new policies and procedures. The changes we will be making are essential to ensuring the wellbeing of staff, volunteers, and members as our church continues to grow globally. Finally, I want to express how hopeful I feel about our new East Coast Lead Pastors… as the church enters this new season of restoration and change. We will be making significant changes to address the serious shortcomings and empower our new East Coast Lead Pastors for the days ahead. I fully understand that new leadership is only one step in the process of rebuilding trust, and I want to assure you that we are not afraid to do the hard work of bringing our culture back into alignment with the biblical standards and Kingdom culture that has been the heart of Hillsong Church from its beginning.

Another statement from Houston was released in May 2021 following revelations of Lentz's sexual assault allegations. The statement concluded with the following discourse:

As we work to rebuild Hillsong East Coast, [Lentz's former family nanny's] experience will be central in our processes. Earlier this year, we made this commitment to update our suite of infrastructure services including increased HR training and the requirement of our policies to be standardized across our network of churches and we hope to improve accountability and communication even further. We ask for your continued prayer as we seek to bring Godly wisdom to what has been a difficult and heartbreaking situation and season.

And finally, an email from Houston in early 2021 concluded with,

"We cannot change the past, but we can and will learn from our mistakes and use this knowledge to build a better future. That's our commitment" (emphasis added).

While a religious organization utilizing religious rhetoric to communicate with their religious publics may seem routine, this phenomenon has not been scrutinized within the context of crisis communication (Morehouse & Austin, 2022). Burke (1970), was the first to describe "rhetoric of religion" and explore the extent to which each religious belief system develops and implements its own vocabulary to describe the world, the way the world works, and what things mean (Henderson, 1989). Nonetheless, the use of religious and renewal rhetoric, along with other themes regarding the framing of the crisis as a "moral failure," and Lentz's celebrity pastor status presents novel insights that can advance theory within the crisis communication scholarship.

In sum, the findings to RQ1 illustrate how a moral crisis may emerge as a unique problem for religious organizations. In addition, when the lead pastor adopts an elevated celebrity status, best practices for postcrisis response strategies could be stifled due to the confusion surrounding the elevated status. Lastly, findings reveal religious organizations have the unique ability to utilize discourse of renewal and religious rhetoric that reminds stakeholders of the shared issue, values, or morals the organization has with their key publics. Next, RQ2 examines two new forms of harm.

3.5. New harm categories

The second research question inquired about the ways in which religious or emotional harm emerged in Hillsong Church's crisis with Carl Lentz, and two themes developed from the data. The first theme

uncovered how emotional harm is distinctly different from religious harm and is expressed through a range of five primary emotions. The second theme revealed that religious harm only emerged when stakeholders enacted defensive or protective measures to avoid such harm.

Both themes are discussed in detail with supporting data.

3.6. Emotional harm

In the Lenz crisis case, emotional harm emerged separate from and more often than the religious harm category. To clarify, Spaulding (2018) originally called for a crisis category that includes "organizational misdeeds [that result in] spiritual or emotional harm" (p. 38, emphasis added). Data from the current study reveal both harm categories, thus reinforcing the argument that religious and emotional harm are not interchangeable, and it is necessary to examine both concepts distinctly.

The emotional harm stakeholders expressed fluctuated and included emotions like sadness, animosity, heartbreak, concern, and disappointment. Table 2 captures the emotions that were conveyed across the data with a quote as evidence to support each.

In the social media data, an emotion that materialized in terms of frequency and sensitivity was "bemoaning." Bemoaning, or expressing sorrow and discontent, emerged in connection with the "pastor" concept (see Fig. 3). Social media users shared statements such as, "Spiritual abuse is real but rarely discussed. Carl doesn't deserve protection or sympathy." Another user said, "When will victims be believed? When will church leadership stop covering up abuse?" Again, someone else shared, "My heart breaks for all of the people who lost a pastor today. Not because of him leaving, but because of whatever he did to hurt his congregation… having your trust betrayed in this way is painful."

Despite the emotional harm experienced by stakeholders as a result

of the crisis, data showed that some stakeholders were receptive to Lentz and his confession. This is evident through various messages of encouragement to Lentz on his journey to seek forgiveness, heal, and repair the damage. People were open to Lentz's ability to change as opposed to thinking that a pastor should never teach or lead again if they failed in a moral capacity.

For example, the Australian Daily Telegraph printed reader responses

that said, "Moral superiority in our Christian leadership is surely a delusion, setting impossible expectations for all. Christianity is a religion of healing for the fallen, something needed now more than ever by Pastor Lentz" (Sexton, 2020, p. 3). Additionally, an International Business Times News article said, "Lentz received love and supportive messages from his followers following his public apology. Many of them said they were praying for his family, and they will continue to support them (Armecin, 2020, para. 10)." Lastly, The Sun quoted social media comments and said, "Comments continued to flood in that praised the father-of-three for being 'brave' enough to 'speak his truth.' 'It's so refreshing to see a man take accountability for his actions… We forgive your sins and wish you well moving forward'" (Van Homrigh, 2020, p. 1).

Given the range of emotional responses paired with the expressions of understanding and receptiveness, a continuum of emotional harm best depicts how this category may emerge in a crisis that includes a violation of mutually agreed upon morals or values. On one end, negative emotions exist such as disappointment and bemoaning, and on the other, more positive emotions of understanding and forgiveness may be

present. Such continuum demonstrates that the emotional harm category might be in constant flux across the lifecycle of a religious crisis, recognizing that the individuals involved may experience different emotional responses at various times.

3.7. Religious harm

Next, data reveal the religious harm category emerged, but not to the extent that the emotional harm category occurred. When present, religious harm presented as the physical, emotional, and sometimes religious distancing from the pastor, church, and in some cases, religion itself. The distancing from Lentz, the morally compromised pastor and offending religious leader, was used as a religious protective measure to safeguard one's religious development and growth. Given the prominence of the individual, news articles mostly discussed how Justin Bieber exited the relationship with Lentz and Hillsong Church. For example, The Sun reported the following:

> Justin and Hailey Bieber have cut ties with their former close pal, Carl Lentz, following the cheating pastor's affair being exposed…After shocking details of the former Hillsong leader's infidelity came to light, the pop star and his model wife are "distancing themselves" as the "irreparable damage" has been done (Chenoweth, 2020, para. 1).

Social media users also expressed their decision for distancing, disassociating, and leaving Hillsong Church. For instance, one Twitter user said, "I'm leaving @Hillsong because of the bedroom shenanigans of Fr. Carl Lentz." Another user shared, "But when a cheating scandal blew up the pastor's life, congregants were left to question their relationship with a church that cultivated its own kind of fame." Another post read, "So who holds Dave Ramsey accountable? Mark Driscoll? Carl Lentz? Brian Houston? Mark Gungor? Owen Strahan? SBC's beloved James Lindsay? Sean Feucht? Jerry Falwell Jr? Josh Duggar? RZIM? Women

shouldn't have to, perhaps this is why ppl are leaving." Some social media users even expressed leaving the church because of previously experienced religious harm. For instance, one Twitter user recalled, "Leaving religion was the best decision I've made for my personal wellbeing. This story could literally be from any religious institution across the country, and it's heartbreaking." Congregants' decisions for distancing were used as protective measures to prevent against future religious harm.

In sum, the findings to RQ2 demonstrate the distinctiveness between emotional harm and religious harm. Emotional harm emerged more often and in the form of a continuum, ranging from negative emotions to positive ones. Religious harm was less evident and primarily surfaced as protective measures via distancing to lessen the personal impact of religious harm caused by the crisis.

4. Discussion

Theoretical Implications.

Through a qualitative case study of Hillsong Church's post-crisis communication concerning Carl Lentz's extramarital affair and other actions, the current study revealed several theoretical implications for crisis communication and public relations scholarship. Each is discussed in depth next.

4.1. Moral crises

First, crisis communication scholars largely focus on ethics, including ethical models and considerations, due to ethical values being more easily identified, agreed upon, and standardized in the public relations profession (Kim, 2015; Tao & Kim, 2017; Xu & Li, 2013). However, this study joins a growing body of scholarship exploring crises that

Table 2

Examples of Emotional Harm.

Emotion Example Quote

Sadness “Their heart is with her and their kids right now, but they just feel sad about the whole situation,” the source added.

Animosity The sacking of Laura Lentz has triggered animosity, leading the church’s founder to respond on social media yesterday.One follower, under the name poshpopcorn, posted, “Maybe I’m late to the party but wasn’t his wife a victim of her husband’s affair. Why would she have been fired?”

Heartbreak I spoke to quite a few parishioners. What is your message to those who love this church and are heartbroken about what`s happened?. “I’m never surprised when there’s dark stuff in the church because the church is made up of people and people are dark, you know?” Griff says. “It’s heart-breaking when that’s brought into church and the leadership. It’s sad but not surprising. Humans are humans. Hillsong is Hillsong.”

Concern In a statement given to DailyMail.com last Friday, the church said: “Since last week’s announcement of a leadership change at Hillsong East Coast, we have heard from a number of people about their experiences and concerns.”

Disappointment Soon after the fired Hillsong preacher shared the shocking news that he was terminated due to cheating on his longtime wife, Laura, many of Carl’s followers expressed their disappointment.

Fig. 3. Bemoaning as Emotional Harm Concept Map.

violate moral standards (e.g., Beldad et al., 2018; Legg, 2009; Thiessen & Ingenhoff, 2011; Varma, 2011; Yim & Park, 2019), and is one of the first to examine the framing of a religious crisis as an issue of moral

failure. To clarify, Legg (2009) mentioned that Jimmy Swaggart's crisis was also positioned as a "moral failure;" however, Legg did not focus on the framing of the crisis and instead analyzed Swaggart's post-crisis image repair strategies.

Even within the limited body of scholarship examining moral crises, the conceptualization of a moral crisis centers on violating "social or ethical issues surrounding the values espoused by the brand" (Dutta & Pullig, 2011, p. 1282). Our inquiry suggests an expanded definition of moral crisis is needed. We propose a new definition of moral crises, one that includes clarification that the crisis was intentional or preventable (cf. Coombs, 2007), and focuses on violating moral standards assigned and mutually agreed upon by the organization and its key publics. Moral crises typically involve a "character-based trust transgression… and is detrimental to integrity-based trust" (Beldad et al., 2018, p. 153). Therefore, we define moral crises as a crisis that features strong attributions of crisis responsibility, where the crisis event is considered purposeful and breaches prior mutually agreed upon moral principles and values the organization and stakeholders abide by.

The identification and advancement of the conceptualization of a moral crisis is critical for crisis communication scholars. Moral crises are situated squarely within intentional or preventable crises according to Coombs' (2007b) Situational Crisis Communication Theory; however, nuances into sub-types of crises that can exist within the intentional crisis category have not received the attention they deserve (Spaulding, 2018). Results from the current study suggest exploring sub-types of crisis categories is imperative to advance theorizing on types of crises, how organizations should respond to such crises, and why certain events are considered crises for some organizations and non-crises for others. Again, a CEO having an extramarital affair would hardly constitute a

crisis for a corporation, yet a religious leader committing adultery would likely cause an organizational crisis within churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques.

4.2. Discourse of renewal

Next, this study advances previous literature on discourse of renewal. Discourse of renewal, or renewal rhetoric, is a post-crisis communication strategy organizations employ that comprises of rhetoric that "focuses on the future, how previous limitations can be overcome and what new opportunities can be explored" (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 137). Sellnow et al. (2019) argues that discourse of renewal is:

…Based on two foundational principles. First is that crises serve an epistemic function by revealing failures in organizations, agencies, and communities, some of which are subtle and overlooked, others clearly evident and ignored prior to the crisis. Crises bring these failures, subtle or obvious, to the forefront, creating an exigence for change (Seeger & Griffin Padgett, 2010)… Second, a discourse of renewal is based on the assumption that organizations can and do act intentionally to change their internal functions and their surroundings. These actions are established and supported through a discourse based on good reasons for changed. p. 123.

Renewal rhetoric typically shares four key characteristics, including provisional communication as opposed to strategic, a prospective outlook on the crisis as opposed to retrospective, a focus on optimism as opposed to pessimism in post-crisis communication, and effective leadership as opposed to ineffective leadership (Ulmer et al., 2007, p. 131). This framework has primarily been applied to examine crises within corporations (Anderson & Guo, 2020; Du Plessis, 2018; Seeger et al., 2005; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Ulmer et al., 2007), victim and accidental crises (Ulmer et al., 2007), and large non-profit organizations

(Morehouse, 2020), making this study the first to examine discourse of renewal with an offending religious organization. We focus on discourse of renewal, as opposed to discussing image repair strategies like bolstering, mortification, and corrective action, due to Houston's ethical, provisional, and optimistic communication, and "[articulation of] a forward-looking vision [to] improve their chances of post-crisis recovery" (Fuller et al., 2019, p. 273).

The current study advances theorizing on discourse of renewal by expanding on how renewal rhetoric is practiced, when it is practiced, and who can practice it. This occurs in four key ways. First, previous research largely focuses on how corporations practice discourse of renewal (Anderson & Guo, 2020; Manzie, 2018; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Ulmer et al. (2007) even stated "research on renewal suggests that privately held corporations might have an easier time adopting renewal than do publicly held corporations… there is often more of an entrepreneurial spirit and greater autonomy exercised by private owners of companies" (p. 133). While megachurches like Hillsong Church are frequently compared to corporations in their income and media use (Klaver, 2018), they are technically international nonprofit nongovernment religious organizations. Thus, this study is one of few to document how a different type of organization—one frequently overlooked in crisis communication literature—practices a post-crisis communication strategy that has been frequently studied with corporate crisis cases. Understanding how different types of organizations practice post-crisis communication expands the applicability of crisis theories and examining theories in different contexts is necessary for theory advancement.

Second, discourse of renewal has been predominately studied with accident and victim crises (Lambiase & English, 2021; Seeger & Ulmer,

2002; Wombacher et al., 2018). Again, Ulmer et al. (2007) stated, "natural disasters and crises that are massively destructive often create a context and a space most conducive to renewal" (p. 133). Some scholars have expanded upon this narrow application (Anderson & Guo, 2020; Manzie, 2018), and this study joins their efforts. Indeed, renewal rhetoric can be utilized and studied with intentional crises, as demonstrated by the results of this study, and are not solely limited to crises that include require "renewal" via rebuilding of physical structures (e.g., rebuilding factory that burned down). As this study and others demonstrate, renewal, rebuilding, and restoration can occur with policies, culture, trust, and relationships that are damaged and harmed as a result of crises (Morehouse, 2020).

Next, previous scholars argue that renewal rhetoric derives from the personal values and virtues embodied within organizational leaders (Manzie, 2018; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Ulmer et al., 2007). Findings from our study reveal that organizational values and the organizational leaders' morals might also influence the decision to utilize discourse of renewal as a post-crisis communication strategy.1 This is evident by Houston's regular inclusion of value- and morally- laden religious rhetoric in the post-crisis communication messages, as well as his continued use of "our" within phrases like, "…our culture there did not align with that of our church's global core beliefs and culture." The emphasis on God's plan for "our Church," God's work in "our Church," "Hillsong's heart and core values" and "Hillsong global culture" reveal that renewal discourse did not solely boil down to Houston's personal values. The organizations values and Houston's moral principles (e.g., religious beliefs) also influenced their decision to include "ethical, optimistic, provisional, and prospective communication… [that] invokes the notion of 'change'" (Manzie, 2018, p. 203).

Lastly, previous research argues that organizational leaders draw upon their personal values when deciding to utilize renewal rhetoric as a post-crisis communication strategy and importantly, do not

1 Values and morals are two distinct concepts. Morals are learned characteristics influenced by external factors, like an individual's community, culture, religion, and more (i.e., "what does my community/culture/religion deem as important, right, or wrong?"). Values are characteristics influenced by internal factors (i.e., "what do I deem as important, right, or wrong?") (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015).

communicate those values, but instead demonstrate them through corrective care-based actions as a direct result of the crisis (Morehouse, 2020; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Findings from our study suggest that Houston drew upon his personal values and morals, as well as the organization's values, and explicitly communicated and referenced them in post-crisis communication messages. In other words, messages referenced the mutually-agreed upon belief system shared by both organizational leaders and stakeholders, and included plans that will result in rebuilding policies, restoring trust, and repairing the culture after the crisis. This significant because it demonstrates that renewal rhetoric can be provisional, optimistic, prospective, and transpicuous when coming from an effective leader. While restorative and renewing actions are a critical component of discourse of renewal, this case study demonstrates that renewal rhetoric also includes communicating those actions in a way that stakeholders will understand, relate to, and benefit from.

4.3. Object of devotion

The third theoretical contribution this study makes focuses on the

elevation of the pastor from a religious leader to an object of devotion worthy of congregant praise and allegiance. An "object of devotion" has previously been defined as entities worthy of praise, allegiance, and often worship, with examples including video games, soccer teams, deities, angelic beings, and sanctified persons (Spaulding, 2016; Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006; Xifra, 2008). To date, objects of devotion have not been living persons; however, data from this study suggest Lentz obtained an object of devotion status by his congregation and community as a result of who he pastors.

Previous research details that organizations strive to foster relationships between stakeholders (e.g. congregants) and objects of devotion through public relations campaigns in order to cultivate covenantal relationships between the two entities (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006). Based on data in this study, this relationship seems to have occurred; however, the object of devotion was a living celebrity pastor as opposed to a deity, saint, angel, or a non-living brand or item. Lentz's classification as an object of devotion is a significant theoretical finding because his object of devotion status contributed to the initial confusion surrounding the crisis (i.e. fired for moral failures v. fired for social activism), preliminary disbelief that a pastor could violate a moral code so boldly, poor organizational post-crisis response strategies, and emotional and religious harm caused by the crisis. A pastor who violates a moral code is shocking and disappointing; however, a celebrity pastor who violates a moral code who people also praised, pledged allegiance to, and devoted potentially elevates feelings of hurt, anger, and confusion for both the organization and stakeholders.

This finding advances theorizing in the crisis communication scholarship because we should not only consider who caused the crisis and what they did, but scholars and practitioners also need to evaluate how

the individual at the center of the intentional crisis is perceived by stakeholders. There is likely a difference between a regular employee, little-known CEO, seasoned board member, and an individual who is loved and doted on by publics. Findings from the current study reveal there may be a different standard for objects of devotion at the center of intentional crises. Meaning, the crisis could be viewed as more egregious depending on the status of the offending individual and stakeholders' perceptions of the object of devotion.

Furthermore, a crisis where the offending individual is considered an object of devotion by key publics can lead to greater emotional and religious harm and might result in the organization utilizing a post-crisis communication strategy that prolongs the crisis recovery process. For instance, Hillsong Church utilized the denial strategy in the beginning of the Lentz crisis by praising him in initial messages reporting his termination and by focusing the blame completely on Lentz, despite Hillsong Church nurturing Lentz's star status through years of complaints from volunteers and congregants. In other words, the object of devotion status could cloud the organization's perceptions, impact their response strategies, and cause further harm to crisis victims and stakeholders. Lastly, a crisis that includes an object of devotion might require a different recommended post-crisis response strategy by the organization that goes beyond apologizing, accepting responsibility, and compensating victims to also include recommendations for healing for victim and non-victim stakeholders.

4.4. Religious and emotional harm

The fourth and final theoretical implication of this study is the identification of religious and emotional harm. These two new forms of harm, and how they are enacted (e.g., emotional harm continuum and distancing as protective measure during religious harm), advances

Spaulding's (2018) arguments around theory development for Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). While previous research has demonstrated that SCCT and other crisis communication theories are relevant and applicable to religious crises (Johnson, 2019; Spaulding, 2018), it is necessary to interrogate overlooked factors that are unique to religious crises, like religious and emotional damage to stakeholders. As mentioned earlier, no known study has investigated the existence of emotional or religious harm, Spaulding (2018) briefly proposed them as an area of future research.

These two new harm categories reveal the complexities of religious crises, highlight the intricacies of crisis communication strategies organizations should utilize, and give credence to de-centering organizations in the post-crisis communication process. For example, because the Lentz crisis case resulted in religious and emotional harm, Hillsong Church should consider communicating about the recovery process for the organization and healing process for stakeholders in their post-crisis messages. To date, few crisis communication theories consider how organizations can help stakeholders heal from physical, financial, emotional, or religious damage, beyond apologizing and offering compensation. Even so, in most cases, compensation in the form of monetary payments will do little to heal emotional and religious harm, which could last much longer than other types of harm and even the crisis itself. Therefore, it is necessary for scholars to probe deeper into the complexities of consequences of crises to understand the impact certain crises have on stakeholders, to test theory on appropriate postcrisis responses when emotional and/or religious harm is present, and to prioritize stakeholders' recovery in the crisis communication process, not just the organizations.

4.5. Practical implications

This research highlights practical implications for both organizations and stakeholders. First, all organizations, including religious organizations, should avoid elevating an organizational leader to an object of devotion status and actively combat praise and devotion of an organizational leader by key publics. Such elevated status obscures the organization's perception of the leader and crisis since members, staff, and publics cannot dissociate the person from the elevated role, which may lead to the privileging of leadership over the needs of affected publics. Second, post-crisis communication should be two-fold. First, the communication ought to capitalize on identity-activating rhetoric when addressing and overcoming the crisis to reiterate the shared values or morals between stakeholders and the organization. Second, communication needs to include specific recommendations for stakeholders to navigate and heal from the emotional and religious harm as a result of the crisis. Recommendations could include language that acknowledges the full range of emotions one may experience over the course of a crisis as well as resources within the organization that stakeholders can use to ameliorate emotional or religious harm. The key is to consider the needs of all organizational stakeholders including leadership, staff, volunteers, members, and other publics. In doing so, organizations become stakeholder-centric in their post-crisis response strategies.

4.6. Limitations

While rigorous in methodology and approach, this study is not without limitations. First, this study did not elicit direct feedback from stakeholders regarding the religious and emotional harm experienced. Future research should interview or survey stakeholders to assess the

new harm categories as well as perceptions of the object of devotion status of the offending organizational leader. Lastly, our data does not indicate if Hillsong Church implemented their post-crisis plans, aside from hiring new leadership for the NYC campus and conducting a thirdparty investigation of the NYC campus culture. Proving that the organization changed and evolved as a result of the crisis is an important component of discourse of renewal.

5. Conclusion

Research on topics outside the bounds of "normal" public relations scholarship has the potential to reveal unique insights, advance theory, and help practitioners in the field (Spaulding, 2018). By examining a religious crisis within an international megachurch, this study addressed theoretical and topical gaps in the public relations and crisis communication scholarship. Specifically, this study proposed a new conceptualization of moral crises, examined two new harm categories, identified an emotional harm continuum for intentional crises, examined the use of religious rhetoric within post-crisis communication, and assessed the potential influence of the status of the offending organizational leader within an intentional crisis. Future research should continue exploring sub-categories of crises, the emotional harm continuum, objects of devotion in crisis communication scholarship, and crises that violate tenets of the organization's and stakeholders' morals and values to test, refine, and advance theorizing in crisis communication and public relations scholarship.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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J. Morehouse and L.L. Lemon