

## Original Research

## Leading Through Story: Integrating CEO Traits, Narrative Use, and Perceived Distance to Crisis

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**Acknowledgment**

This work was supported by the Incheon National University Research Grant in 2021.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Received**

19 Jun 2025

**Revised**

30 Aug 2025

**Accepted**

16 Oct 2025

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how CEO traits interact with narrative use in crisis communication to shape public perceptions of the CEO and attributions of crisis responsibility. A 2 (CEO traits: warm and competent vs. competent only) × 2 (narrative in crisis response: narrative vs. non-narrative) × 2 (social distance to a crisis: close vs. distant) between-subjects experiment demonstrated that narrative enhanced perceived genuineness and generated more favorable attitude toward a competent-only CEO. Narrative also helped lower perceived crisis responsibility, but only when the CEO was viewed as both warm and competent and the crisis felt psychologically close. These findings challenge the presumption that CEO-led narrative is invariably advantageous by showing that it may even backfire for competent-only CEOs in close crises, where the absence of warmth can make storytelling seem insincere. This study shows that the success of narrative depends on CEO traits and audience construals of psychological distance to a crisis, highlighting the value of integrating person perception with construal level theory in crisis communication research.

**KEYWORDS**

CEO traits, warmth, competence, narrative, storytelling, crisis response, social distance

When facing a crisis, organizations often use narrative by crafting stories that help interpret the event, allocate responsibility, and influence stakeholder understanding (Schmidt et al., 2023). Prior research has demonstrated that stories can humanize organizations, engage stakeholders, restore public trust, and reframe crises as opportunities for growth and rebirth (Harsanto & Firmansyah, 2023; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016; Ulmer et al., 2007; Veil & Kent, 2008). However, crisis situations present a distinctive context in which organizations are typically subject to responsibility attributions that can escalate into a reputational threat (Coombs, 2007b). In such settings,

authentic communication becomes even more critical (Seeger, 2006). Under these conditions, the effectiveness of narrative is unlikely to be consistently advantageous; instead, it is contingent upon audience perceptions of the event and the characteristics of the CEO as the primary spokesperson. Understanding these contingencies is essential for determining whether narrative can function as a relevant and effective crisis communication approach.

CEOs often play a central communicative role in a crisis. Their emotional intelligence, communication styles, self-efficacy, and capacity to offer emotional support have been identified as vital for effective crisis communication (Al-Muhaisen & Hammouri, 2024; Liu et al., 2022; Yook & Stacks, 2024). Among the attributes of a CEO, this study focuses on warmth and competence, the two universal dimensions of social judgement of people, to see how they affect the way people evaluate both the spokespersons and their messages. Warmth, which encompasses empathy and trustworthiness, and competence, which includes intelligence and efficacy, jointly determine levels of trust and acceptance, especially in high-stakes contexts, with warmth building emotional connection and competence signalling capable leadership (Cuddy et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2007). Scholars suggest that stakeholder perceptions of leadership efficacy during crises are significantly shaped by these two dimensions (Bor, 2020; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2017) and CEOs who personalize their crisis responses through storytelling can project authenticity and strengthen deeper trust (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). As an example, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella successfully employed storytelling to foster collaborative and encouraging internal culture of the company. His personal narrative involving his child with special needs resonated with the internal audience resulting in boosting a sense of empathy and inclusivity among the employees (Nadella, 2017; Walker, 2020). In this context, the relative influence of warmth and competence

may be further investigated in relation to narrative, as leader traits can affect whether this narrative is perceived as authentic and trustworthy.

A CEO who is perceived as competent but emotionally distant may struggle to build trust, especially under pressure. In such cases, storytelling can compensate for the lack of warmth by creating emotional resonance and demonstrating sincerity (H. Lee & Jahng, 2020). Thus, CEO traits and the utilization of narrative should be regarded as interrelated components that jointly influence public responses during crises. Narrative can interact with CEO traits, whereas the combination of the two traits can determine the degree to which narrative is interpreted as authentic, credible, and persuasive. Unlike previous research that examined narrative, leader characteristics, or leadership independently, this study is among the first to explore how CEO traits of warmth and competence interact with the use of narrative in crisis response to drive public perceptions of CEO genuineness, attitude toward the CEO, and crisis responsibility.

We further explore how the interaction effect between CEO narrative and leader traits depends on perceived social distance to a crisis utilizing the framework of construal level theory of psychological distance (CLT; Liberman & Trope, 2008). According to CLT, when an event is perceived as psychologically close, individuals are inclined to employ low-level construals, focusing on contextualized specific details, while distant crises invoke high-level construals that focus on abstract and generalized principles (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). Because narratives provide vivid, detail-oriented accounts they, align with low-level construals and therefore can be effective in a close crisis. Consistent with this, Oh et al. (2022) found that perceived distance to a crisis activates low-level construals, increasing responsiveness to concrete information such as detailed crisis response strategies. By investigating these dynamics, this study demonstrates how to effectively leverage narrative depending on the

CEO's traits and the public's perceived social distance to a crisis. This study goes beyond prior work by highlighting how audiences interpret both CEO traits and narrative messages under different levels of social distance and advances an audience-centered perspective of crisis communication and offers a novel integration of person perception with CLT.

The study findings aim to guide successful crisis management while advancing the broader understanding of narrative strategies in the field of crisis communication. In addition, our study integrates insights from three distinct but complementary theoretical lens of person perception, narrative persuasion, and CLT, allowing us to explore how leader traits, message strategies, and audience perceptions jointly shape crisis communication outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Narrative in Crisis Communication

Narratives, defined as connected sequences of events involving conflict, transformation, and resolution through human actions (Braddock & Dillard, 2016), offer a compelling tool in organizational communication. An engaging narrative often adheres to a familiar framework, consisting of an introduction, development, and conclusion, and incorporates vital components such as distinct characters, a coherent storyline, a meaningful setting, and a transforming trajectory that leads to resolution or change (Kent, 2015). Narrative theory suggests that stories are often more engaging and persuasive than logical arguments or statistical evidence, due to their vividness and emotional resonance (Fisher, 1984; Lundqvist et al., 2013). Unlike explicit arguments that require subject-specific knowledge, narratives allow audiences to comprehend complex issues through relatable storytelling, shaping how they understand reality (Clementson & Beatty, 2021).

Green and Brock's (2000) notion of "narrative transportation" explains how deep immersion in a story can influence beliefs and attitudes by evoking mental imagery and emotions. Storytelling creates an immersive experience that improves persuasiveness by making the audience feel part of the situation (H. Lee & Jahng, 2020).

Storytelling has become a useful tool for persuasion, with organizations increasingly adopting it to communicate values, influence decisions, and enhance message retention among diverse stakeholders (Eray, 2018; Kent, 2015; Yang et al., 2010). By articulating meaningful visions, storytelling helps organizations rebuild credibility and engage stakeholders while enhancing long-term resilience (Harsanto & Firmansyah, 2023). Narratives can further influence audience responses by lowering psychological resistance, reducing scrutiny, and increasing emotional involvement (Dahlstrom, 2012). Without a well-organized narrative during crises, organizations risk allowing stakeholders to construct their own stories that may not align with the organization's intended message (Zhao et al., 2018). In addition, authentic narrative-based responses have been shown to boost public confidence and strengthen support for organizational actions (Kent, 2015).

Despite the increasing recognition of narratives as a persuasive tool in crisis communication (Clementson & Xie, 2020; H. Lee & Jahng, 2020), empirical evidence remains limited regarding how narratives function within specific crisis response messages, such as a CEO's apology. One notable exception is the study by H. Lee and Jahng (2020), which demonstrated that crisis responses incorporating storytelling led to more favorable organizational evaluations. Specifically, narrative-based responses increased trust and reduced perceived crisis responsibility compared to non-narrative responses. In their study, a narrative that combined the CEO's personal story with the brand's history enhanced perceptions of honesty and transparency. Personal

experiences shared through storytelling also made the CEO feel more relatable, fostering greater identification with the CEO's emotions and viewpoint during the crisis. These findings suggest that narratives, particularly when delivered by CEOs as spokespersons, can positively influence public perception. Thus, we expect narrative use in crisis responses to enhance perceived CEO genuineness and attitudes toward the CEO, while reducing perceived crisis responsibility. Perceived genuineness refers to how authentic and sincere an audience believes a CEO's communication to be (Molleda, 2010). Authentic leadership and message authenticity have been demonstrated to cultivate trust, credibility, and enhanced stakeholder relationships, especially in times of crisis (Jin et al., 2011; Men et al., 2020). Attitudes toward the CEO are closely linked to a wider evaluative assessment that shows how much support stakeholders have for the CEO and how eager they are to accept leadership. These attitudes affect both the company's reputation and its ability to recover from crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; S. Kim & Rim, 2019). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H1. Narrative crisis responses lead to more positive outcomes than non-narrative responses in terms of (a) perceived CEO genuineness, (b) attitude toward the CEO, and (c) perceived crisis responsibility.

In the literature that discusses the role of narratives, who tells the story is also important. Previous research on narrative persuasion has emphasized the importance of the spokesperson's perceived trustworthiness and the audience's attitude toward them (Clementson & Xie, 2020; Heath, 2000). As persuasive narratives invite audiences to adopt the storyteller's perspective, the audiences identify with the spokesperson (Cohen, 2001), and they are more likely to see the crisis through the spokesperson's eyes. Research has further shown that ethical

narratives, as opposed to unethical ones, play a key role in building trust and shaping positive attitudes toward the spokesperson, thereby enhancing identification (Heath, 2004). These findings indicate that the characteristics of the spokesperson such as credibility, may affect the effectiveness of narrative utilization in a crisis situation. Therefore, understanding who delivers the narrative and how their traits interplay with narrative communication is essential. The next section explores this intersection by focusing on the CEO as a spokesperson in times of crisis.

### CEO as a Spokesperson in Times of Crisis

Spokespersons in an organizational crisis play a crucial role as they are in charge of delivering accurate and consistent messages, and their credibility significantly enhances the effectiveness of crisis communication (Coombs, 2023). CEOs are frequently selected as spokespersons during moderate to severe crises to show that the organization is taking the situation seriously (Laufer et al., 2018). A CEO serving as a spokesperson signals to stakeholders the organization's commitment and seriousness in addressing the situation (Jaques, 2012). Previous research showed the critical role of a strategic and trustworthy spokesperson in effective crisis communication. For instance, Coombs (2007b) emphasized the crisis manager's role in tailoring response messages based on the nature of crisis, which in turn shapes stakeholder perceptions. Similarly, S. Kim and Park (2017) demonstrated that CEOs, when serving as spokespersons, are perceived as trustworthy and credible sources of crisis-related information, thereby reducing public perceptions of organizational responsibility. Furthermore, Turk et al. (2012) suggested that a CEO's visibility in crisis communication can enhance stakeholder acceptance, even when adopting a defensive response. As such, prior research demonstrates that a CEO's function as a spokesperson during a crisis not only shows the

organization's dedication and credibility but also bolsters stakeholder perceptions of the company's response efforts.

Although prior literature shows the positive effect of a CEO being a spokesperson, there are factors that can complicate the effect. Organizational figures, such as CEOs and PR professionals, who are perceived as highly affiliated with the company may be viewed with a degree of skepticism. For example, Callison (2004) found that such spokespersons were viewed as less trustworthy than independent third-party sources because their close ties to the organization led audiences to question the sincerity and objectivity of their messages. This aligns with the concept of perceived source bias, which suggests that audiences view spokespersons directly connected to an organization as inherently biased and, therefore, less credible (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Given these considerations, it becomes essential to look beyond traditional notions of credibility and consider additional spokesperson attributes that may influence the effectiveness of the CEO's narrative in crisis communication (Arpan, 2002; Tkalcic Verčič et al., 2019).

Credibility alone may not fully explain why certain crisis responses are more effective than others, as audiences often rely on social-cognitive processes when evaluating spokespersons. Existing crisis communication research has primarily focused on factors such as message framing and crisis response strategies along with spokesperson credibility, but it has yet to fully explore how the CEO's narrative use interplays with the characteristics of the CEO to shape public reactions. Given that crisis situations often heighten emotional and cognitive uncertainty, stakeholders are likely to assess not only the factual accuracy of the message but also the speaker's sincerity and their perception of how responsible the organization appears to be. Thus, it is important to explore how CEO-led narrative affects audience evaluations of the spokesperson. This study aims to provide insights to guide

CEOs in using narrative during crises to engage stakeholders, reduce perceived responsibility, and deepen understanding of narrative-based crisis communication. The following section addresses the CEO's employment of narrative in crisis response, highlighting the potential for narrative to influence public perception and manage crises.

### **CEO's Use of Narrative in Crisis Response**

CEOs are frequently positioned as the primary and credible spokespersons during crises, and the effectiveness of their communication depends on how their messages are delivered, particularly the extent to which they convey personal and emotionally impactful messages. Narratives employed by the CEO can facilitate audiences' comprehension of hard situations, such as a corporate crisis, from the CEO's perspective, rather than adopting an impersonal approach. The CEO's first-person storytelling in crisis response presenting the spokesperson's observations, actions, and feelings can be more engaging for the public (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). These narratives align with broader public relations principles, as storytelling serves as a powerful tool for persuasion and identification, helping audiences connect with organizational messages that are difficult to counter-argue and long-lasting in influence (Kent, 2015). PR professionals, through these narratives, "help shape important moral issues and provide context to organizational actions" (Kent, 2015, p. 483).

When articulated in the CEOs' own voice, narratives enhance message sincerity and function as rhetorical tools that illustrate organizations' symbolic commitment during crises (Cheney & McMillan, 1990; Im et al., 2021; Lee & Jahng, 2020). During crises, CEO response letters to stakeholders can thus function as meaningful narrative instruments that reflect both the organization's stance and response strategies (Cong et al., 2014). Considering the possible impact of narrative in crisis communication,

additional research is required to investigate how narrative contrasts with non-narrative approaches in influencing public perceptions at both the spokesperson level (i.e., perceived CEO genuineness and attitude toward the CEO) and the crisis situation itself (i.e., perceived crisis responsibility).

Storytelling also enables organizations to reestablish credibility, engage stakeholders emotionally, and reinforce core values that guide resilience and long-term stability (Harsanto & Firmansyah, 2023; H. Lee & Jahng, 2020). An exemplary case of effective storytelling in corporate leadership can be found during Satya Nadella's tenure as CEO of Microsoft amid challenging circumstances. Facing stagnation and internal competition, Nadella utilized personal narratives, such as his experience parenting a child with special needs, to promote empathy, inclusivity, and a "growth mindset" (Walker, 2020). This storytelling approach not only improved employee morale but also aligned with Microsoft's broader mission, contributing to its strategic success in cloud computing (Grant, 2018).

Overall, CEO-led narratives can substantially shape audience perceptions by creating immersive, emotionally resonant experiences (H. Lee & Jahng, 2020). In crisis contexts, constructing a coherent organizational story is crucial; otherwise, publics may develop alternative interpretations that conflict with the intended framing (Zhao et al., 2018). To fully understand the impact of CEO-led narrative in crisis communication, it is essential to consider both how the message is created and who delivers it. CEOs are not uniformly seen, particularly in crises where audiences attribute responsibility and evaluate the CEO as both the spokesperson and symbolic figure. The CEO's traits may influence the successful adoption of narrative, as the message's credibility can be overshadowed by the messenger's existing characteristics (Newell & Shemwell, 1995). In the next section, we

introduce two types of CEO traits and discuss the importance of exploring them.

### **CEO Traits based on Warmth and Competence**

Warmth and competence, the two fundamental dimensions of social judgement of people (Fiske et al., 2007), play a crucial role in influencing how individuals shape judgements including evaluation of spokespersons and their messages (Cuddy et al., 2011). Research suggests that stakeholders form impressions based on these two dimensions, influencing how they evaluate leadership during crises (Bor, 2020; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2017). Warmth, which includes attributes such as friendliness and empathy, signals a leader's good intentions and approachability, while competence reflects a leader's ability to achieve goals through intelligence, skill, and effectiveness (Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2007). Warmth is a question of distinguishing friend from foe (does the person have good or bad intentions?), while competence is a question of whether the person is capable of executing those intentions (Cuddy et al., 2011). Peeters (2001) defined warmth as "other-profitable" and competence as "self-profitable".

Studies have shown that warmth judgements are made more quickly with a greater impact compared to competence judgements (Cuddy et al., 2011). Scholars argue that this stems from a human evolutionary tendency where detecting the target's intention to harm is more urgent for survival than assessing the target's capability to achieve the intention (Cuddy et al., 2011; Luttrell et al., 2022; Yzerbyt, 2016). This asymmetry has important implications for leadership: Perceptions of warmth are more difficult to create and change than perceptions of competence. Once coldness (vs. warmth) of a leader is detected, people actively search for information that confirms a lack of warmth, and even after perceiving warmth, a single cold action of a leader can reverse the

perception. Therefore, warmth perceptions are difficult to gain and easier to lose. For competence, once a leader is perceived as competent, this perception remains the same even if there are minor failures, as long as successes continue. Even when competence perception is lost, it can be restored by new successes (Cuddy et al., 2011; Tausch et al., 2007).

Perceptions in crisis communication are often grounded in the perceived balance between warmth and competence (Jeong, 2024; Lim et al., 2025; Pei, 2025). How the public evaluates a CEO along these dimensions can ultimately determine whether an organization maintains trust or struggles with reputational damage. Stakeholders often evaluate leaders based on these traits, as they provide critical insights into a leader's intentions and capabilities (Oleszkiewicz et al., 2017). Research further indicates that these traits shape stakeholders' trust and support for businesses, influencing their willingness to align with corporate messaging and decisions (Costa & Ferreira da Silva, 2015; Ferreira Da Silva & Costa, 2019; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2017).

Competence in crisis communication indicates an organization's capacities to act effectively, encompassing perceptions of confidence, skilfulness, and efficiency (Kervyn et al., 2012). The most fundamental expectation that stakeholders may have of CEOs is competence, demonstrated through a leader's abilities in problem-solving and decision-making as a baseline for effective crisis response. Perceptions of competence reflect the extent to which corporations and leaders have good capabilities in performing their decisions (Cuddy et al., 2011; Jeong, 2024). In performance- or product-harm crises, such competence cues signaling the organization's ability to handle the situation and prevent future failures serve as critical indicators of effective leadership (Jeong, 2024).

Besides competence-related qualities in crisis management, warmth becomes a crucial complementary dimension of leadership

effectiveness. By being empathetic and communicative, a warm leader can mitigate panic and ensure that the organization's response is caring (Bor, 2020; Sainz et al., 2021). Warmth in leadership enhances the leader's ability to build strong, trusting relationships both within and outside the organization (Cuddy et al., 2011, 2013). This trust is vital when making difficult decisions that require collective support and coordinated efforts. For example, Blake-Beard et al. (2020) suggested that global pandemic crises, such as COVID-19, need compassionate and empathetic leaders who can build trust and collaboration to help solve complex problems across cultures. A CEO who exhibits warmth can provide reassurance and emotional support to employees, stakeholders, and the public, which is crucial for maintaining morale and confidence (Fiske, 2018; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2017).

Prior research suggests that warmth, in combination with competence, influences perceptions of leadership by signaling both good intentions and the capability to act effectively. Competence alone highlights a leader's ability but may lack the relational and trust-building qualities provided by warmth (Blake-Beard et al., 2020; Cuddy et al., 2011, 2013). Crisis responses centered on warmth were shown to promote forgiveness and restore trust by alleviating negative attributions (Barbarossa et al., 2018; Xie & Peng, 2009). Apologies with warm tones are perceived as more sincere and diminish negative emotional reactions more effectively than those focused on competence (Lim et al., 2025). In crisis situations, reestablishing connections and trust with diverse stakeholders is crucial, and thus the presence of warmth alongside competence is expected to yield additional benefits for crisis management. Accordingly, we expect CEOs perceived as both warm and competent to generate more positive responses than those perceived as competent only. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. CEOs perceived as warm and competent lead to more positive outcomes than those perceived as competent only in terms of (a) perceived CEO genuineness, (b) attitude toward the CEO, and (c) perceived crisis responsibility.

### **The Interplay between CEO Traits and Narrative Use**

Despite the positive effects of warmth perception, as reviewed, warmth is harder to gain and easy to lose. This is why Cuddy et al. (2011) warned that leaders should be vigilant about losing perceived warmth. Crisis communication research showed that varied emotional appeals used in crisis news coverage affect people's information processing and company evaluations significantly (H. J. Kim & Cameron, 2011). Even people's perceptions of leaders' existing warm features, such as approachability and concern for others' well-being (Stogdill, 1948, 1974), may be susceptible to decline, given heightened public scrutiny and blame attributions in times of crisis. This shows that even leaders who regularly uphold perceptions of warmth may struggle to keep them during crises. Because the benefits of warmth and narrative largely overlap, narrative may serve as a complementary tool: By revealing personal experiences, a CEO can project authenticity and emotional connection, supplementing warmth when it is lacking. Narratives help audiences feel involved and make CEOs appear more relatable (Green & Brock, 2000; H. Lee & Jahng, 2020). This potential motivates our investigation into whether narrative in crisis response can meaningfully enhance CEO communication.

CEOs are generally presumed to be competent, as their positions inherently reflect expertise and leadership capacity (Cuddy et al., 2011). Therefore, we focus on warmth as the more variable and fragile trait, examining how narrative may compensate when warmth is absent. Because warmth perceptions are difficult to

establish in the first place (Cuddy et al., 2011), and particularly hard to cultivate during crises, we focus on narrative as a potential substitute that can generate comparable effects. In crisis situations, competence is frequently assumed by organizations and stakeholders, whereas warmth is far more challenging to create and sustain. Since narratives can convey authenticity and build trust while mitigating perceptions of crisis responsibility (H. Lee & Jahng, 2020), exploring the link between warmth and narrative offers valuable insights into crisis communication research.

A CEO perceived as competent but lacking warmth may struggle to connect emotionally with the public, as they may be viewed as cold or indifferent, potentially undermining trust and stakeholder support. In such cases, narratives can serve as a bridge, fostering emotional engagement and authenticity (H. Lee & Jahng, 2020). By integrating personal stories, CEOs may counteract perceptions of detachment, strengthening public perception of genuineness and relatability. On the other hand, a CEO already perceived as both warm and competent may not experience the same additional benefit from using a narrative, as their inherent warmth already fulfills the role of emotional connection (Fiske, 2018). In these cases, narratives may not substantially alter stakeholders' perceptions or attitudes. However, for competence-only CEOs, narratives can be particularly advantageous by enhancing perceptions of sincerity and emotional investment, reinforcing stakeholder confidence in leadership (Denner et al., 2019; Kent, 2015). Therefore, the following hypotheses are posed:

H3. When a CEO is perceived as competent-only, using a narrative in crisis response leads to higher perceptions of CEO genuineness compared to a non-narrative response. However, when a CEO is perceived as both warm and competent, the difference between narrative and non-narrative responses disappears.

H4. When a CEO is perceived as competent-only, using a narrative in crisis response leads to more favorable attitude toward the CEO compared to a non-narrative response. However, when a CEO is perceived as both warm and competent, the difference between narrative and non-narrative responses disappears.

Prior research has examined how crisis response strategies impact public attributions of crisis responsibility, yet the results have been inconsistent. Ki and Brown (2013) found no significant differences among various response strategies, such as justification, apology, and reminding, in reducing crisis responsibility attributions. In contrast, Brown and White (2011) found that the reminding strategy, which highlights an organization's past positive actions for various stakeholders, was the most effective in lowering attributions of crisis responsibility. This suggests that crisis responses that strengthen relationship ties with stakeholders may be more effective than those that focus solely on minimizing blame. In essence, instead of concentrating on particular crisis response strategies, the critical factor may be the fundamental psychological mechanisms by which audiences attribute responsibility.

To that end, attribution theory offers a cohesive theoretical framework for understanding how stakeholders assess crisis events. The theory suggests that individuals evaluate whether a crisis is caused by internal (dispositional) or external (situational) factors, with a greater attribution to internal factors, such as leadership failure, leading to increased responsibility for the organization (Coombs, 2007a; Weiner, 1985). The public's attribution of crisis responsibility may differ depending on how they perceive the CEO's characteristics as a dispositional factor, alongside the decision to employ CEO-led narrative as a potential situational factor in managing a crisis.

Warmth and competence are core dimensions

of person perception (Fiske et al., 2007) that may influence how people attribute perceptions of crisis responsibility. This nuanced view indicates the need to examine how CEO traits and communication style, guided by narrative utilization, collectively impact the attribution process in crisis situations. Attribution theory posits that dispositional cues, such as CEO characteristics, may influence crisis responsibility assessments; however, limited empirical research has examined the interaction between these cues and message strategies, specifically narrative versus non-narrative responses, in crisis contexts. To address this gap, we ask:

RQ1. How do CEO traits (warm and competent vs. competent only) and narrative in crisis response (narrative vs. non-narrative) interact to influence perceived crisis responsibility?

### **Moderating Role of Social Distance to Crisis**

Social distance has been identified as an important moderator in crisis communication research, shaping how individuals respond to various crisis strategies (Oh et al., 2022). When a crisis is perceived as socially close, people are more likely to evaluate a company's recovery efforts based on situational factors such as the response message itself, rather than on the company's dispositional characteristics. Conversely, when the crisis feels socially distant, evaluations may rely more heavily on general impressions of the organization. This can be explained by construal level theory (CLT), which posits that people interpret events differently depending on their psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010).

According to CLT, individuals construe events at different levels of abstraction: close events are processed in concrete and contextual terms (low-level construals), whereas distant events are understood in more abstract, generalized ways

(high-level construals) (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Maglio et al., 2013; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). Thus, audiences who feel socially close to a crisis may focus on details of the response, while those who feel more distant may rely on broader, dispositional cues.

Building on this framework, we suggest that CEO traits and narrative map onto these two construal levels. CEO traits such as warmth and competence represent abstract, dispositional qualities (high-level construals), whereas narrative reduces psychological distance by offering concrete, personal accounts that foster emotional engagement (low-level construals). In other words, narrative may be particularly effective when audiences perceive a crisis as socially close, because they provide the detail and immediacy needed for low-level processing. By contrast, when a crisis is perceived as socially distant, dispositional cues such as CEO characteristics may dominate evaluations, with narrative offering less incremental value.

Despite these theoretical insights, empirical evidence remains scarce regarding how social distance moderates the joint effects of CEO traits and narrative use in crisis response. To address this gap, we pose the following research question (see Figure 1 for the study's theoretical model):

RQ2. How does social distance to a crisis moderate the interaction between CEO traits (warm and competent vs. competent only) and narrative in crisis response

(narrative vs. non-narrative) on (a) perceived CEO genuineness, (b) attitude toward the CEO, and (c) perceived crisis responsibility?

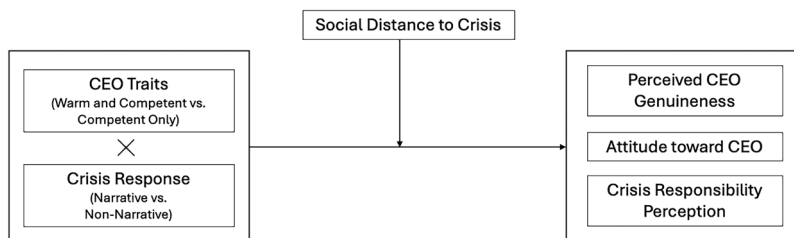
## METHOD

### Experimental Design and Procedure

This research received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of one of the authors' universities, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants. At the beginning of the online experiment, we obtained consent from each participant and informed them that they could stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. No personally identifiable information was collected at any stage of the study.

We utilized a between-subjects experimental design with two independent variables and one moderating variable: CEO traits (warm and competent vs. competent only), narrative in crisis response (narrative vs. non-narrative), and social distance to a crisis (close vs. distant). Given that perceived crisis severity can influence individuals' responses to crisis communication (Coombs, 1995; Zhou & Ki, 2018), we included it as a covariate to account for any residual variance not controlled by random assignment. In addition, demographic variables including age, gender, ethnicity, and education level were

Figure 1. Theoretical Model



used as covariates enhancing the precision of our statistical analyses.

The design included two levels for each independent variable and a moderating variable, resulting in a total of eight experimental conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions and read three different stories in each condition. First, they read a featured article from a news magazine about a CEO that focused on the CEO's qualities. Specifically, the article stated either they are competent only or both warm and competent in their leadership styles. Next, they read a description of a story about a corporate incident, manipulated either as socially close or distant. For the last stimulus, the participants reviewed the CEO's statement, in which narrative was either present or absent, in response to the incident. At the end of the online experiment, demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, and education level was collected.

## Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a platform where individuals register to take part in online surveys. Every participant received monetary compensation in return for their participation. A total of 484 U.S. adults participated in the online survey. Ages ranged from 21 to 78 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 40.07$ ,  $SD = 11.18$ ). Gender was balanced (male:  $n = 236$ , 48.8%; female:  $n = 247$ , 51%; other:  $n = 1$ , .2%). Regarding race and ethnicity, most of the individuals were Caucasian ( $n = 413$ , 85.3%), followed by African American ( $n = 27$ , 5.6%), Asian American ( $n = 13$ , 2.7%), and Hispanic American ( $n = 11$ , 2.3%). The remaining participants reported their ethnicity as 'Other' ( $n = 20$ , 4.1%). Regarding education level, 3.1% ( $n = 15$ ) were high school graduates or lower, 28.1% ( $n = 136$ ) were college students, 48.8% ( $n = 236$ ) completed college, and 20.0% ( $n = 97$ ) had postgraduate education.

## Stimuli

The manipulation of CEO traits was based on levels of warmth and competence. In one condition, the news magazine article stimulus portrayed the CEO as an individual with exceptional skills and capabilities who was recognized for adeptness in designing effective strategies and delivering value to both consumers and stakeholders, thereby achieving the company's objectives. In another news article condition, the CEO was depicted as both warm and competent. Specifically, in addition to all the competent traits mentioned in the other article, this article highlighted the CEO's warm, caring, and friendly nature, which led to their empathetic leadership.

In the presented descriptions of a company incident, social distance to the crisis was manipulated to be either close or distant. A fictional organization was used to minimize potential confounding effects from participants' preexisting knowledge or past experiences with an existing company. In the close crisis condition, participants read a story about a food delivery service experiencing food damage and quality issues that led to a customer's disappointment and anger, with the story emphasizing the potential for such incidents to happen to anyone. In the distant crisis condition, participants were presented with a story depicting a situation where a food delivery service exhibited negligence by deliberately overburdening its delivery workers to maximize profit.

In the CEO's statement in response to the crisis, the presence of narrative was manipulated; that is, the statement was written either with or without narrative. The statement conveyed the CEO's remorse and apology and promised further measures to rectify the problem. In the narrative condition, the CEO's personal story related to the crisis was included, emphasizing the company's mission and core values. This narrative element was excluded in the non-narrative condition.

## Measures

### Perceived CEO Genuineness

We measured the perceived genuineness of the CEO with three items adopted from Park and Kang (2020) using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Specifically, participants rated their agreement with the following statements: (1) “The CEO is honest in communicating with its publics”; (2) “The CEO is straightforward in communicating with its publics”; and (3) “The CEO genuinely commits to the conversations with its publics” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### Attitude toward CEO

To measure attitude toward CEO, we used four 7-point semantic differential scales: (1) *Bad–Good*; (2) *Unfavorable–Favorable*; (3) *Unpleasant–Pleasant*; and (4) *Unlikable–Likable* (Brown et al., 2005; Yang & Kang, 2009) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .93$ ).

### Perceived Crisis Responsibility

We measured the extent to which participants believed the crisis was caused by the company using three items adopted from B. K. Lee (2004) on a 7-point response scale: (1) “To what degree do you think the incident was caused by [the company]?” (1 = *Not at all caused by [the company]*; 7 = *Totally caused by [the company]*); (2) “To what degree do you think [the company] could have prevented the incident?” (1 = *Not at all preventable*; 7 = *Absolutely preventable*); and (3) “To what degree do you think [the company] could have controlled the incident?” (1 = *Not at all controllable*; 7 = *Absolutely controllable*) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .88$ ).

### Crisis Severity

To measure the perceived level of severity of the crisis, we utilized the following three items adopted from Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) and Laufer et al. (2005): (1) “I think

the outcome of the incident is very serious” (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 7 = *Strongly agree*); (2) “How damaging do you think the incident was?” (1 = *Not at all damaging*; 7 = *Extremely damaging*); and (3) “How severe do you consider the event described in the article?” (1 = *Not at all severe*; 7 = *Extremely severe*) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ; see Table 1 and Table 2).

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Checks

To check the manipulation of CEO traits (warm and competent vs. competent only), we adopted six items from K. Y. Kim et al. (2021). We utilized the following six items on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .93$ ): (1) “[The Company] CEO is warm in addition to being competent”; (2) “[The Company] CEO is friendly in addition to being competent”; (3) “[The Company] CEO is sincere in addition to being competent”; (4) “[The Company] CEO is empathetic in addition to being competent”; (5) “[The Company] CEO is responsive in addition to being competent”; and (6) “[The Company] CEO is caring in addition to being competent.” A *t*-test analysis revealed that participants correctly identified the conditions to which they were assigned ( $M_{\text{competent-only}} = 5.44$ ,  $SD = .98$ ;  $M_{\text{warm and competent}} = 5.90$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ;  $t = -4.99$ ,  $df = 482$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

For the manipulation of social distance to a crisis (close vs. distant), we adopted four items from S. Y. Lee et al. (2021). For the socially close condition, we utilized the following two items with a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*;  $r = .75$ ): (1) “The incident seems to cause problems for me on a personal level”; and (2) “The outcomes of the incident would be associated with me at a personal level.” For the socially distant condition, we employed the following two items rated on a 7-point scale (1

**Table 1.** Measurement Items, Descriptive Statistics, and Reliability

| Variable                        | Measurement Items   | $\alpha$ | M    | SD   |
|---------------------------------|---|----------|------|------|
| Perceived CEO genuineness       | The CEO is honest in communicating with its publics                           | .893     | 5.63 | 1.23 |
|                                 | The CEO is straightforward in communicating with its publics                  |          | 5.54 | 1.36 |
|                                 | The CEO genuinely commits to the conversations with its publics               |          | 5.62 | 1.25 |
| Attitude toward CEO             | I think the CEO is...   | .928     |      |      |
|                                 | bad–good  |          | 5.65 | 1.26 |
|                                 | unfavorable–favorable   |          | 5.58 | 1.35 |
|                                 | unpleasant–pleasant   |          | 5.62 | 1.38 |
| Perceived crisis responsibility | unlikable–likable   |          | 5.69 | 1.32 |
|                                 | To what degree do you think the incident was caused by [the company]?         |          | 5.23 | 1.56 |
|                                 | To what degree do you think [the company] could have prevented the incident?  | .882     | 5.25 | 1.50 |
| Crisis severity                 | To what degree do you think [the company] could have controlled the incident? |          | 5.26 | 1.52 |
|                                 | I think the outcome of the incident is very serious                           |          | 4.99 | 1.49 |
|                                 | How damaging do you think the incident was?                                   | .890     | 4.62 | 1.47 |
|                                 | How severe do you consider the event described in the article?                |          | 4.67 | 1.54 |

**Table 2.** Cell Means and SDs for Perceived CEO Genuineness, Attitude toward CEO, and Perceived Crisis Responsibility

| CEO traits         | Narrative     | Social distance to crisis | Perceived CEO genuineness | Attitude toward CEO | Perceived crisis responsibility |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Warm and competent | Narrative     | Close                     | 5.57 (1.28)               | 5.71 (1.47)         | 4.93 (1.65)                     |
|                    |               | Distant                   | 5.40 (1.10)               | 5.60 (1.06)         | 5.02 (1.26)                     |
|                    | Non-narrative | Close                     | 5.95 (0.94)               | 6.07 (1.01)         | 5.55 (1.32)                     |
|                    |               | Distant                   | 5.52 (1.26)               | 5.60 (1.22)         | 5.10 (1.37)                     |
| Competent only     | Narrative     | Close                     | 5.69 (1.28)               | 5.92 (1.15)         | 5.86 (1.17)                     |
|                    |               | Distant                   | 5.70 (0.98)               | 5.63 (1.09)         | 4.98 (1.39)                     |
|                    | Non-narrative | Close                     | 5.42 (1.18)               | 5.35 (1.23)         | 5.26 (1.33)                     |
|                    |               | Distant                   | 5.25 (1.17)               | 5.20 (1.19)         | 5.29 (1.27)                     |

= *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*;  $r = .88$ ): (1) “The incident seems to cause problems for society”; and (2) “The outcomes of the incident would be associated with society.”

For each condition, we performed a separate

*t*-test analysis. The results indicated that the participants in the socially close crisis condition identified the crisis correctly compared to the participants in the socially distant crisis condition ( $M_{close} = 5.54$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ;  $M_{distant} = 4.14$ ,  $SD =$

**Table 3.** Effects of CEO Traits, Narrative, and Social Distance to Crisis (MANCOVA)

| Multivariate results          |                           |         |                     |         |                                 |         |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|---------------------------------|---------|
| Source                        | Wilks's $\lambda$         | F       | df                  | p-value | par. $\eta^2$                   |         |
| CEO traits (CT)               | .986                      | 2.19    | 3, 469              | .088    | .014                            |         |
| Narrative (Narr)              | .992                      | 1.25    | 3, 469              | .292    | .008                            |         |
| Social distance (SDi)         | .966                      | 5.49    | 3, 469              | .001    | .034                            |         |
| CT $\times$ Narr              | .965                      | 5.61    | 3, 469              | <.001   | .035                            |         |
| CT $\times$ SDi               | .994                      | .959    | 3, 469              | .412    | .006                            |         |
| Narr $\times$ SDi             | .995                      | .806    | 3, 469              | .491    | .005                            |         |
| CT $\times$ Narr $\times$ SDi | .981                      | 3.06    | 3, 469              | .028    | .019                            |         |
| Univariate results            |                           |         |                     |         |                                 |         |
| Source                        | Perceived CEO genuineness |         | Attitude toward CEO |         | Perceived crisis responsibility |         |
|                               | F                         | p-value | F                   | p-value | F                               | p-value |
| CT $\times$ Narr              | 10.10                     | .002    | 12.33               | <.001   | 4.57                            | .033    |
| CT $\times$ Narr $\times$ SDi | .05                       | .824    | .47                 | .493    | 7.56                            | .006    |

Note. Crisis severity, participants' age, gender, ethnicity, and educational level were treated as control variables. MANCOVA = multivariate analysis of covariance

1.55;  $t = 10.96$ ,  $df = 467.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the participants in the socially distant crisis condition identified the crisis correctly compared to the participants in the socially close crisis condition ( $M_{\text{close}} = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ;  $M_{\text{distant}} = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ;  $t = -15.49$ ,  $df = 360.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, the participants correctly identified the conditions to which they were assigned.

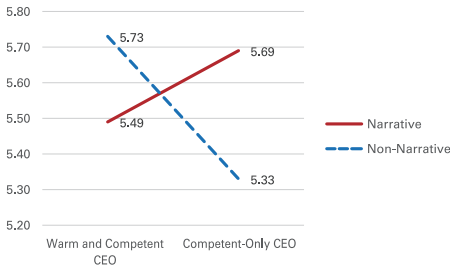
For the manipulation checks for narrative in crisis response (narrative vs. non-narrative), we used the following three items rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ) borrowed from Escalas (2004): (1) "The CEO's story showed his personal character"; (2) "The statement includes a specific, particular event involving the CEO's personal experience"; and (3) "The CEO included his personal story in the statement." A  $t$ -test revealed that participants correctly identified the conditions to which they were assigned ( $M_{\text{narrative}} = 5.98$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ;  $M_{\text{non-narrative}} = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $t = -10.68$ ,  $df = 434.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Ultimately, all the manipulation checks were successful.

## Results for Hypotheses and Research Questions

To answer all of the four hypotheses and two research questions, we conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with crisis severity, age, gender, ethnicity, and education level as covariates. Regarding H1 and H2, there was neither the main effect of narrative use in crisis response [Wilks's  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F(3, 469) = 1.25$ ,  $p = .292$ ] or the main effect of CEO traits [Wilks's  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F(3, 469) = 2.19$ ,  $p = .088$ ] on the three dependent variables. Therefore, both H1 and H2 were not supported (see Table 3).

For H3 and H4, the MANCOVA results indicated that there was a significant two-way interaction between CEO traits and narrative in crisis response on the three dependent variables altogether [Wilks's  $\lambda = .97$ ,  $F(3, 469) = 5.61$ ,  $p < .001$ , par.  $\eta^2 = .035$ ]. Follow-up univariate analysis results revealed a significant interaction between CEO traits and narrative in crisis response on perceptions of CEO genuineness [ $F(1, 471) =$

**Figure 2.** Interaction between CEO Traits and Narrative in Crisis Response on Perceived CEO Genuineness

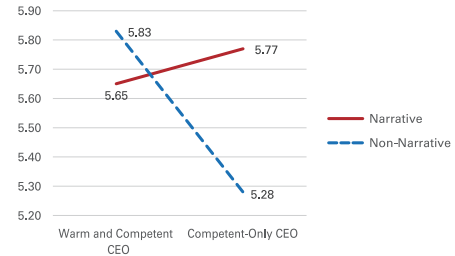


10.10,  $p = .002$ ,  $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .021$ ]. As predicted, a competent-only CEO was perceived as more genuine when utilizing narrative in their crisis response ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) compared to not utilizing narrative ( $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ,  $p = .008$ ), while for the warm and competent CEO, there was no such difference ( $p = .067$ ; see Figure 2). Thus, H3 was supported.

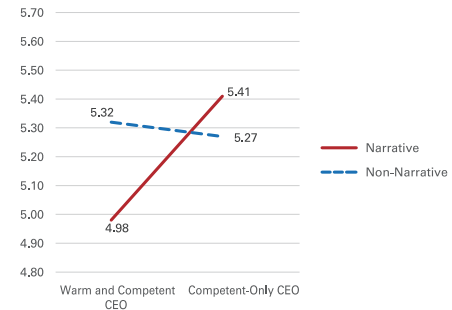
For H4, univariate analysis results revealed a significant interaction between CEO traits and narrative in crisis response on attitude toward the CEO [ $F(1, 471) = 12.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .026$ ]. Attitude toward the CEO was more positive when the competent-only CEO utilized narrative in the crisis response ( $M = 5.77$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) than when he did not ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For the warm and competent CEO, however, there was no such difference ( $p = .178$ ). Therefore, H4 was also supported (see Figure 3).

For RQ1, we found a significant two-way interaction between CEO traits and narrative in crisis response on perceived crisis responsibility [ $F(1, 471) = 4.57$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .010$ ]. Pairwise comparison result showed that a warm and competent CEO gained less crisis responsibility when utilizing narrative in crisis response ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) compared to not utilizing narrative ( $M = 5.32$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ,  $p = .049$ ). For the competent-only CEO, there was no such difference ( $p = .289$ ; see Figure 4).

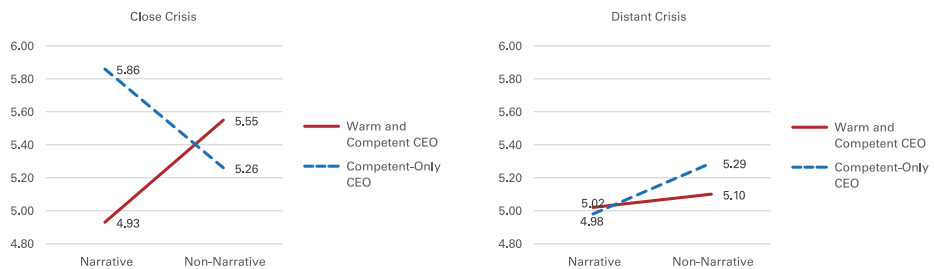
**Figure 3.** Interaction between CEO Traits and Narrative in Crisis Response on Attitude toward CEO



**Figure 4.** Interaction between CEO Traits and Narrative in Crisis Response on Perceived Crisis Responsibility



Regarding RQ2, the MANCOVA results indicated that there was a significant three-way interaction between CEO traits, social distance to a crisis, and narrative in crisis response on the three dependent variables altogether [Wilks's  $\lambda = .98$ ,  $F(3, 469) = 3.06$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\text{par. } \eta^2 = .019$ ]. Follow-up univariate analysis results revealed that there was no significant three-way interaction between CEO traits, social distance to a crisis, and narrative in crisis response either on CEO genuineness [ $F(1, 471) = .05$ ,  $p = .824$ ] or on attitude toward CEO [ $F(1, 471) = .47$ ,  $p = .493$ ]. The only significant three-way interaction between CEO traits, social distance to a crisis, and narrative in crisis response was on perceived crisis

**Figure 5.** Three-Way Interactions on Perceived Crisis Responsibility

responsibility [ $F(1, 471) = 7.56, p = .006, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .016$ ]. As shown in Figure 5, pairwise comparisons indicated that social distance to a crisis moderated the interaction between CEO traits and narrative in crisis response. In a close crisis, utilizing narrative resulted in less perceived crisis responsibility for a warm and competent CEO ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.65$ ) compared to a competent-only CEO ( $M = 5.86, SD = 1.17, p = .001$ ). In a distant crisis, there was no such difference ( $p = .746$ ; see Figure 5).

## DISCUSSION

Our main findings are as follows. For a competent-only CEO, utilizing narrative helps improve perceptions of the CEO's genuineness; however, the same is not true for a warm and competent CEO. We found similar results with regard to attitude toward the CEO: For a competent-only CEO, utilizing narrative helps garner positive attitude toward the CEO, but this was not the case for a warm and competent CEO. Lastly, regarding perceived crisis responsibility, there was a difference between a competent-only CEO and a warm and competent CEO when utilizing narrative: A warm and competent CEO was perceived as less responsible for the crisis compared to a competent-only CEO. Looking further, the three-way interaction results showed

that this difference existed only when a crisis was perceived as close rather than distant. By contrast, for a distant crisis, no such difference was observed.

Overall, the results demonstrate the positive impact of utilizing narrative in crisis response in terms of managing perceptions about a CEO. For a competent-only CEO, the use of narrative can help convey genuineness and garner a positive attitude from publics in a crisis regardless of the perceived distance to the crisis. However, for perceived crisis responsibility, different patterns emerged: The closer the crisis, the more useful narrative utilization becomes, which is true only for a warm and competent CEO and not for a competent-only CEO. For a competent-only CEO, utilizing narrative may backfire in a close crisis.

Regarding the positive impact of utilizing narrative in crisis response that was observed especially for competent-only leaders, we can speculate that the absence of warm leadership may be overcome through the use of narrative, as narrative itself can be perceived as showing genuine concern and caring, thereby increasing the perceived genuineness of and positive attitude toward the CEO. Studies on person perception show that warmth judgments are both more fragile and harder to revise once the target is viewed as cold compared to competence (Fiske et al., 2007; Cuddy et al., 2011). Building on this

body of research, our study suggests that narrative can function as a compensatory strategy, enabling competent-only CEOs to convey genuineness and good intentions even when warmth is absent. Moving beyond previous research that focused primarily on organizational-level evaluations such as organizational trust (H. Lee & Jahng, 2020), this study demonstrates how CEO narrative influences evaluations of the spokesperson (i.e., the CEO), providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of narrative in crisis communication.

This study presents a new perspective by showing that the interaction between CEO traits and narrative adoption can be influenced by the perceived social distance to a crisis in the three-way interaction effects, as audiences mentally construe the situation. The three-way interaction result showed that, in a close crisis, only warm and competent CEO using narrative produced more positive result compared to a competent-only CEO. This means that the two-way interaction results showing the potential of narrative for replacing warmth cannot always be supported, and that there is a conditional effect of perceived distance to a crisis. First, we can posit that once people perceive a crisis as close, individuals construe the event at a low level, focusing on concrete, situational details (Lieberman & Trope, 2008). Narrative aligns well with this low-level construal because they provide vivid, contextualized, and personalized accounts. CLT suggests that judgments vary by distance: when events feel close, individuals rely more on concrete details and contextual understanding, whereas distant events generate fundamental values, principle-based judgments (Agerström & Björklund, 2009; Eyal et al., 2008; Liberman & Trope, 2003, 2010). In line with this, Oh et al. (2022) showed that perceived proximal distance to a crisis induces low-level construals, being sensitive and responsive to new information offered by the organization such as specific details of crisis response strategies.

Second, the effectiveness of such narrative depends on the perceived intentions of the source. For narrative to resonate in a close crisis, the CEO must also be perceived as warm, someone who has good intentions toward stakeholders (Cuddy et al., 2011). Without warmth, narrative may appear strategic but insincere, failing to reduce attributions of responsibility. This demonstrates how construal level theory and person perception, two theoretical traditions, can converge to explain mechanisms in crisis communication. Unlike earlier research that mainly focused on identifying effective response strategies across the defensive–accommodative spectrum in relation to responsibility perception (e.g., Coombs, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2002, 2009), our findings highlight an audience-centered perspective. Because crises are unexpected and non-routine events that generate high levels of uncertainty and threat (Seeger et al., 1998), the way audiences understand, interpret, and respond to them is especially important.

In the larger context, the findings of this research contribute to the ongoing discourse on leadership communication strategies, particularly in the context of crisis management. The different impact of narrative use depending on a CEO's warmth and competence highlights the importance of integrating CEO traits with crisis communication strategies. Specifically, this research illustrates that for CEOs who are perceived as highly competent but lacking warmth, narrative can effectively bridge this gap, improving public perceptions of CEO genuineness and fostering positive attitude toward the CEO. This study builds upon prior research that explored the significance of empathy in leadership and its impact on crisis management, emphasizing the value of empathy and other soft skills (Holt & Marques, 2012), as well as both the positive and negative consequences of CEO empathy (König et al., 2020). Our investigation broadens this inquiry by focusing on warmth as a more comprehensive trait that encompasses

empathy. We highlight that the utilization of narrative may function as a strategic mechanism to offset the lack of warmth, advancing our understanding of how narrative communication interacts with CEO traits. These findings support the idea that leadership effectiveness in crisis situations is not solely dependent on inherent traits but rather can be significantly enhanced through strategic communication practices such as the use of narrative. Traits tend to be interpreted as inherent and fixed, but they can be shaped or reinforced through communicated messages such as narrative. The positive evaluation that stems from warmth can be created by presenting a story. In this regard, we contribute to theoretical development by linking predispositional traits with narrative utilization in the context of crisis communication.

Moreover, while previous research suggests that companies in crisis should prioritize providing factual, non-narrative information in media relations rather than using storytelling (Clementson, 2020), our findings highlight the persuasive power of narrative in CEO's crisis communication. As Kent (2015) noted, the ability to craft compelling narratives is a critical skill for PR professionals. Extending this idea to the realm of CEO communication during crises, our findings suggest that narrative is not simply a rhetorical device, but a strategic tool that enhances message acceptance and determines how the public attributes responsibility. Our research builds on prior studies on narrative persuasion in crisis contexts (Clementson & Beatty, 2021; H. Lee & Jahng, 2020) by examining how narrative interacts with CEO traits and perceived social distance to the crisis. This integrated approach offers a deeper understanding of how narrative functions in crisis settings by demonstrating its interactive effects on public perceptions. Specifically, when coupled with CEO characteristics, narrative appears to make complex or unfamiliar crisis-related information more accessible and emotionally

resonant, ultimately shaping public evaluations of both the spokesperson and perceptions of crisis responsibility, moving beyond company evaluations.

Practically, the findings suggest that organizations should tailor their crisis communication strategies based on the CEO's predominant traits and the nature of the crisis. To this end, training programs for CEOs could include modules on narrative communication and contextual crisis management to enhance their effectiveness. Such training programs may incorporate narrative communication as a core component, particularly emphasizing how different narratives resonate depending on the perceived characteristics of CEOs. In addition, CEOs should receive training that emphasizes the value of narrative communication and equips them with the skills necessary to tell stories that effectively connect with their audiences, particularly during high-stress and close-proximity situations.

Additionally, organizations should carefully select spokespersons that align with both the nature of the crisis and the CEO's traits. In crises where the public feels socially close, using narrative can be particularly effective for warm and competent CEOs, helping to reduce perceived crisis responsibility. However, competent-only CEOs may face backlash if they employ narrative in such situations, as their lack of warmth might undermine the intended message. By aligning CEO traits with appropriate communication techniques, CEOs can enhance perceptions of their genuineness, foster positive attitudes toward them, and mitigate crisis responsibility. This subtle approach ensures that crisis communication strategies are both relevant and strategically impactful, protecting the organization's reputation during challenging times.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research is subject to several limitations. First, this study utilizes the CEO's own story

based on the existence of narrative (i.e., present vs. absent) in the context of crisis response. In the narrative condition, the statement was longer due to an additional paragraph describing the CEO's personal feelings, experiences, and vision. This difference in length may have unintentionally influenced participants' perceptions. Future research could extend this work by applying other approaches, such as analyses of competing narratives and the adoption of specific perspectives (e.g., first-person vs. third-person). Additionally, although this study examines the role of social distance to a crisis as a moderator, the CEO's use of narrative may have influenced the public to understand the situation as being more socially relatable. We employed social distance to the given crisis situation; however, future studies should also investigate the social distance to the CEO and to the company to determine how varying perceptions of social distance may influence crisis outcomes, contributing to the application of social distance and construal level perspectives to crisis communication research. Similarly, considering the intricacy of the warmth trait, the concept of warmth warrants more examination in relation to CEO characteristics during a corporate crisis, where CEO leadership is crucial in addressing the demands of various stakeholders. Future research can demonstrate how a CEO's warmth may foster public empathy toward the CEO, thereby eliciting positive responses toward the organization. We also suggest that future research employ a more robust manipulation approach by adopting separate warmth and competence measures to provide stronger validation of the manipulation.

Given cultural variations in public expectations regarding CEO traits and the use of narrative in crisis contexts, future research should consider cross-cultural comparisons to examine how these dynamics may operate differently across cultural settings. For example, relational features rooted in Eastern cultures such as the importance of maintaining face (Huang, 2001), known as

*chaemyun*, could be explored as essential values shaping public responses to CEO narratives aimed at minimizing reputational damage during crises. Although the differences were not statistically significant, the trend indicating that non-narrative messages could receive more favorable evaluations than narrative ones among warm and competent CEOs remains as an area to explore in future studies. Finally, future research may examine the influence of narrative as well as CEO traits on behavioral evaluations of both the CEO and the crisis, beyond perceptual assessments.

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