Damage control: an experimental study on the impact of regulatory communication strategies on citizen trust after regulatory failure
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Abstract

This paper examines how communication strategies shape citizen trust in regulatory agencies following different types of regulatory failure. Using a survey experiment conducted on a representative sample of 1568 Danish citizens, it tests the effects of five communicative strategies. The results indicate that the effectiveness of communicative responses in promoting citizen trust is highly context-sensitive, and thus dependent on the regulatory sector and the source of regulatory failure. Nevertheless, the overarching patterns in the results support earlier studies that find 'silence' to be less effective in promoting trust than active communication. In addition, the results show that admitting responsibility does not seem to be the key to gaining citizen trust, while active strategies specifically involving a justification or a plan for remedial action appear to be the most effective. The study expands our knowledge of strategic communication generally and the public role of regulatory agencies specifically.

Keywords

Introduction

Regulatory agencies face increased critical media scrutiny which may affect public trust (Maggetti 2012; Verhoest et al. 2023). Managing crises and responding to public and media concerns have become critical functions of regulators as the press and the public are key audiences (Bach et al 2022; Lee 2022). Extant research suggests that regulatory agencies perceive the media as an important accountability forum to which they explain and justify their decisions via press releases or other means of strategic communication (Yeung 2009; Puppis et al 2014). This article investigates the relative effects of different types of strategic communication by regulatory agencies in cases of regulatory failure on citizen trust. The study contributes to the general literature on strategic communication by governmental organizations as well as to the specialized literature on the public role of regulatory agencies in democracies.

The literature on strategic communication has described a broad set of strategies that governmental organizations can use in different situations, such as during crises, in response to allegations, as means of trust repair, or during blame games (Coombs 2007; Gilad, Maor and Bloom. 2015; Kim 2018; Lee 2022). In this study we test the effectiveness of a set of communicative strategies that have been identified more broadly and have been tested in these and other studies. The upshot of previous studies is that there is no silver bullet of communication and that the responses of citizens to communicative strategies will vary according to contextual factors such as instance prior reputation judgments, the nature of the crisis (Coombs 2007), the question whether a response is forced or not (Pang et al 2022), or the nature of the issue (Grimmelikhuijsen, Vries and Zijlstra 2018). This study focuses on a specific

factor: the type of public organization. The work of governments is done by different types of agencies. A previous study focused on the effects of communicative strategies for service providing agencies (Lee 2022); our study broadens the scope to regulatory agencies. Regulators have been found to adopt different communication strategies in response to allegations of failure (Gilad, Maor and Bloom 2015), yet their impact on citizen trust is still unknown. With this approach we contribute to the understanding of the interplay between public administration conditions and communicative strategies in times of crisis or failure.

The more specific literature on regulatory agencies acknowledges the important role of trust in theory while only a handful of studies have empirically linked behaviours of regulatory agencies to citizen trust (Six and Verhoest, 2016). Most of these have examined the effects of increased transparency of regulatory processes on citizen trust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2021; Grimmelikhuijsen, de Vries and Bouwman 2023; Löfstedt and Way 2016). Only one study, to our knowledge, has looked specifically at a regulatory strategy to foster citizen trust in the context of mediatized regulatory failure, focusing on a single organization in a single country only (Grimmelikhuijsen, Vries and Zijlstra 2018). Most studies focus on regulatory reputation rather than on trust (for example Peci 2021; Salomonsen, Boye and Boon 2021; Verhoest et al. 2023; Carpenter 2014; Bach et al 2022). While reputation and trust are related concepts they differ in important respects (Verhoest, Rommel and Boon 2014). Trust is crucial for regulatory agencies as it is consequential for the effectiveness of their work. When citizens and regulatees place trust in the regulator, they are more likely to comply with its regulations (van Ryzin 2011; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2021). Furthermore, many regulatory agencies aim to stimulate trust in products or markets. Financial and educational institutions can only perform their societal

functions when citizens dare to entrust their money or children to them (cf. Coen and Thatcher 2005). Physical objects such as airplanes, elevators or food will only 'work' when citizens entrust their own lives to them (cf. Chou and Liou 2010). Our second contribution, then, is that we study one of the main antecedents of trust which is a key contingency in regulatory governance.

Our research question is: *what type of communicative responses from a regulatory agency to media allegations of regulatory failure due to under- or over-regulation are most effective at promoting citizen trust?* This research question is investigated using a survey experiment on a representative sample of the Danish adult population (n=1568), in the context of three regulatory domains.

Strategic communication and citizen trust

Strategic communication is one of the main tools organizations use to enhance or repair citizen trust (Kim, Dirks and Cooper 2009; Kim 2018). When regulatory agencies are publicly associated with regulatory failure, they need to make strategic choices about whether and how to provide a communicative response. The literature on trust repair suggests that communicative responses may affect citizen trusting beliefs and intentions (Kim et al. 2009; Kim 2018, 271-272). We study the effects of several communication strategies employed by regulatory agencies on citizen trust. We discuss these in detail below after defining trust.

Trust is a multifaceted concept. Its core is defined as *'the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party'* (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995, 712). In a widely used conceptualization three underlying aspects are identified: competence, benevolence, and integrity (Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies 2017; McEvily and Tortoriello 2011). This implies that when regulatory agencies are seen as capable, benevolent, and acting with integrity, they can be trusted to perform their tasks. It is assumed that trusting beliefs lead to trusting intentions: the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to the trustee in the presence of risk (McKnight et al. 1998). For regulatory agencies this may refer to the risk of handing over your most valuable assets to financial or educational institutions or exposing yourself to inherently risky airplanes, elevators or foods. Trust beliefs are in principle quite stable over time. Trust violations, however, in which a person's trust beliefs are disconfirmed, negatively impact trusting beliefs and subsequent trusting intentions toward a trustee (Kim, Dirks and Cooper 2009; Kim 2018, 271). News reports about regulatory failure violate trust and may thwart citizen trust beliefs and intentions in regulatory agencies, with possibly long-lasting effects. When news of failure breaks, organizations are well-advised to provide a speedy strategic response in order to protect or repair citizen trust.

Organizations can choose from a number of communication strategies, stipulated in literatures on crisis communication (Benoit 1997; 2020; Coombs 2007; 2015), blame avoidance and reputation management (Hood 2011; McGraw 1991; Gilad, Maor and Bloom 2015; Maor 2015; 2020; Lee 2022) as well as trust repair (e.g. Kim 2018). The strategies included in the study depart from these different strands of literature as they combine insights from research on communicative responses in crisis. Further, the different strands of literatures from which the communication

strategies are theorised share at least two important theoretical arguments. First, the literatures suggest that communication strategies can be either active (talk) or not (silence). Second, for the active strategies the literatures suggest they differ in terms of the degree to which they are defensive or accommodative (Lee 2020:1126). Below we elaborate on how the individual strategies can be understood in the context of those two defining features.

As mentioned in the introduction, extant literatures suggest that the effects of communicative strategies vary according to contextual factors (Coombs 2007; Grimmelikhuijsen, Vries and Zijlstra 2028). Context-specificity is integrated in the theoretical approach developed below, as we theorize different patterns for different communicative strategies for different types of issues, which are tested in different regulatory contexts. This approach allows us to establish the veracity of specific communicative strategies even in differing contexts as well as shed light on contextual factors that may determine trust-effects of regulatory failures.

Silence vs. active response

A first strategic communication decision a regulatory agency must take when a media story on regulatory failure breaks is whether to respond or stay silent. Silence is commonly practiced by public agencies (Gilad, Maor and Bloom 2015; Rimkuté 2020; Bach et al. 2022). It is seen as a potentially strategic response (Maor, Gilad and Bloom 2013) and it is at times necessary for legal reasons. Although the strategy is prevalent, extant research suggests it is most likely ineffective. Silence is associated with negativity, passivity and uncertainty. Whether or not silence is an explicit strategy, it will be interpreted as such by the multiple stakeholders of the regulatory

agency (Johannesen 1974; Brummett 1980, 294; Dimitrov 2015, 648). Silence has been found to often be less effective than strategies offering a substantive response (Le et al. 2019; Lee 2022; Pang et al 2022). Therefore, our first hypothesis is:

H1. Silence is a less effective strategy for promoting trust compared to active response strategies.

Four active response strategies

When regulatory agencies choose to offer a verbal response in mediatized cases of regulatory failure, they can choose between different strategies. In our study, four active strategies were selected and tested based on a distinction between *problem-admitting* and *responsibility-admitting* responses. Admitting that there is a problem, without taking responsibility for it, is a defensive strategy. Here the organization aims to minimize its role in the emergence of the problem, and its duty to resolve it. Admitting responsibility for a problem is then naturally seen as less defensive strategy than merely admitting the existence of a problem (Coombs 2007; Lee 2022, 1126). The four examined active strategies thus lie on a continuum from being more closed and defensive (including a diminishment posture), to more open and responsive or accommodative (including a rebuilding posture) (Coombs 2007, 2015, 145 - 147; Lee 2022, 1126).

Admission of problem and providing an excuse. Providing an excuse while admitting a problem aims to weaken the causal link between the organization and the negative situation. This can be done by presenting mitigating circumstances such as a lack of resources for which the political principals, rather than the regulatory agency itself, is responsible. An excuse can thus entail a

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vertical diffusion of responsibility (McGraw 1991, 1136) which serves as a blame avoidance strategy (Hood 2011, 52) and a rejection of responsibility (Elsbach 2003, 307). As such, an excuse for an admitted problem aims at diminishing the attributed control the agency has of the 'crisis' (Coombs 2015, 145).

Admission of problem and providing a justification. Combining the admission of a problem with a justification differs in the sense that now the *consequences* of the behaviour are depicted as less undesirable (McGraw 1991, 1136), less damaging (Coombs 2007, 170) or less transgressive (Kim, Dirks and Cooper 2009, 410). One way to do this is to appeal to a shared norm (e.g. legal, moral or democratic) with the aim of reducing the negative connotations of the behaviour (McGraw 1991, 1137). Although negative consequences of the problem are admitted, the justification of the problem suggests that the situation should be evaluated less negatively, as the regulatory agency was acting in accordance with what is generally considered to be appropriate (McGraw 1991, 1137; Kim, Dirks, Cooper 2009, 410). As such, justifying as a response entails some admission of responsibility (McGraw 1991, 1136), while diminishing the negative *consequences* of a problem (Elsbach 2003, 307; Coombs 2015, 145).

Admission of responsibility and offering an apology. Although seemingly defensive, an apology can still be helpful for impacting trust. Previous research has demonstrated that an apology is a more effective strategy in competence-based trust violations compared to a denial, due to the negative effect of the confirmation of responsibility with an apology being '*...less significant than its positive effect on trust from signalling the intent to prevent further violations because people may be willing to believe that the mistrusted party will demonstrate that he or she*

possesses positive competence in the future' (Kim et al. 2004, 107; see also Gillespie and Dietz 2009:140). An apology furthermore suggests that the behaviour or the negative consequence of this behaviour is a departure from the norm (Kim et al. 2004, 107). Hence, although an apology acknowledges responsibility, and thus guilt, *'...its concomitant expression of regret signals an intention to avoid similar violations in the future, which should reduce trustors' concerns about continued vulnerability and should thereby improve trust'* (Kim, Dirks and Cooper 2009, 411).

Admission of responsibility and providing a promise of future action. In addition to apologies, promises of *future action* may also be effective. Existing research on trust repair in interpersonal relations suggests that substantive actions or responses are effective after a critique of the competencies of a trustee (Kim and Harmon 2014, 366). The promise of future remedial action underlines that an acknowledgment of responsibility is not merely 'cheap talk' (Bachmann, Gillespie and Priem 2015, 1129). Crisis communication also suggests that announcing future actions to solve, or prevent the recurrence, of a crisis is effective in terms of reducing felt offensiveness (Benoit 1997, 181; 2020, 107). With this strategy an agency demonstrates its claim to competence. It suggests that the agency may possess the necessary competences to regain citizen trust after a regulatory failure. In other words, this strategy suggests that the verbal response, the talk, will be supplemented with a more substantive response for impacting trust, some action (Kim 2018, 274).

Within the set of responses discussed above, we expect that the main distinction between problem-admitting diminishing postures and responsibility-admitting rebuilding postures carries more empirical weight than the further distinctions between excuses, justifications, apologies and

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promises of future action. Crisis communication literature suggests that attribution of responsibility is the main question citizens address when they evaluate the trustworthiness of an organization confronted with negative media coverage (Coombs 2007, 165). Journalists and citizens want to attribute responsibility for a negative event to some actor. By acknowledging responsibility, the agency finalizes the attribution process, preventing further blame-games (Hood 2011, 54; Gilad, Maor and Bloom 2015, 455).

Admitting responsibility may also be perceived by citizens as signals of the agency's valence, (Stone 2017; Miller and Reeves 2022, 69), honesty and competence, which expectedly impacts citizens trust in the agency. A recent experimental study supports this expectation, as it finds that when elected executives claim blame (and hence admit responsibility) as opposed to deflect blame for a crisis, they are more successful at gaining public support (Miller and Reeves 2022). Claiming and admitting responsibility signals honesty and sincerity, while blame-shifting signals stereotypical perceptions of 'slippery politicians and bureaucrats' (Hood 2011, 55). When a promise of future action is added, attention shifts to the capacity of the agency to solve the problem or prevent it from reappearing. This can help to repair potentially damaged perceptions of the agency (Elsbach 1994, 73) and have a positive impact on trust. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

H2 Admitting responsibility (with an apology or announcing future actions) is more effective at promoting trust compared to the other response strategies.

Under-regulation versus over-regulation

The trust literature argues that the effectiveness of trust repair strategies depends on the type of trust violation (Kim et al. 2004). In this study we focus on situations where an agency's core competences and abilities are challenged, due to *over- or under-regulation*. Gilad and coauthors (2015, 456) conceptualize over-regulation as those situations where regulatory standards or their enforcement impose an excessive burden on the regulated entities and the regulated field overall. A case of over-regulation could for example be the situation in which companies have to make excessive compliance costs in order to meet overly detailed regulatory demands. Under-regulation relates to cases where regulatory standards and/or their enforcement are found to be overly lenient and thus inadequate for protecting the public interest. A case of under-regulation could for instance be the situation in which inedible foods or malicious financial schemes are introduced in the market and the regulatory agency fails to react.

Both over- and under-regulation are types of regulatory failure that may harm citizen trust in the regulator. In general, we expect under-regulation to have greater negative effect on citizen trust. Several studies indicate that citizens prefer tough and strict command-and-control types of regulation over more lenient forms of oversight (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2021; Maman, Feldman and Levi-Faur 2022). Citizen perceptions are very sensitive to whether the regulator is seen to prioritize public (citizen) interests over business interests (Six and Verhoest, 2017; Thiers 2002). Media reports about lenient, under-regulating agencies paint the very opposite picture of this ideal and may well generate disillusionment and trust violations. As such allegations of under-regulation essentially suggest a regulator failing on its core task (Gilad, Maor and Bloom 2015, 452). Further, allegations of under-regulation are, compared to allegations of over-regulation, more salient and holding potential damage to a larger group, having "…greater resonance with the public at large." (Giald, Maor and Bloom 2015, 457) and hence carry a greater threat to

citizen's trust. But over-regulation can also undermine citizen trust in regulators. However, while over-regulation might lead to frustration due to stifled innovation and economic growth, it is less likely to evoke the same level of emotional response by citizens as under-regulation. Citizens may perceive over-regulation as a bureaucratic inconvenience rather a direct threat to their well-being. There is also evidence that regulatory agencies respond differently to allegations of different types of regulatory failure. Gilad and coauthors (2015, 452) showed that a regulatory agency is more inclined to acknowledge audiences' claims of under-regulation compared to over-regulation. The former poses a greater threat to regulatory reputation, as accusations of under-regulation suggest an agency failing *'...to accomplish its distinct core mandate for protecting a specific public value (e.g., protecting the public from unintended side effects of dangerous drugs)'*. This suggests that also regulatory agencies themselves perceive claims of under-regulation as more harmful compared to over-regulation. Combining this empirical observation with the theoretical arguments presented above, our third hypothesis is:

H3: All response strategies will be less effective at promoting trust in the context of under- versus over-regulation.

Design and Methods

We designed and conducted a preregistered[1] survey experiment on a representative sample of Danish citizens. The survey experiment allows us to isolate the effects of regulatory

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[1] See: https://osf.io/8n3wh/?view_only=9e824599a0f049be8afbc22897f3e617. The wording of the hypotheses has been modified slightly to improve readability without impacting their meaning.

communication in the context of under- and overregulation on citizen trust, and thus evaluate their causal relationship.

Cases

We study the effect of regulatory communication on citizen trust in the context of three regulatory domains: food safety, data protection and financial regulation. This allows us to evaluate the impact of regulatory communication on trust across sectors. As Danish citizens are likely to have differing perceptions and opinions of particular regulators, depending on past experiences, personal preferences, and specificities of the regulated sector, the same communication strategy might have a different impact if coming from a different regulator. We, however, do not theorize about the effect of different regulatory sectors on the link between regulatory communication and citizen trust, but we examine the potential sectoral differences in an exploratory fashion.

Food safety is regulated by the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration. The agency ensures that regulation regarding animal welfare and food safety are upheld, and they are highly familiar to the Danish public due to the 'smiley-system', a quality control which is carried out at all restaurants and food vendors in Denmark, and which should be put at public display in the restaurant or shop.

Data protection is regulated by the Danish Data Protection Agency which is an independent authority overseeing data protection regulation. While the media frequently reports breeches of

data protection regulation, this is frequently not linked to the agency but relates to the way data is handled in e.g., municipalities or regions.

Financial regulation is regulated by the Danish Financial Supervisory Authority which controls the financial sector, oversees regulation of the area and provides information. Whereas both food safety and data protection are directly applicable to individual citizens, the Financial Supervisory Authority mostly relates to financial institutions, which obviously have a great impact on citizens.

Experiment

The experiment was fielded in the period between April and June 2022, with the help of the company Userneeds. A total of 1568 individuals took part in the experiment. Their characteristics in terms of age, gender, and educational attainment are representative to the adult Danish population (details provided in Table A.1 in Appendix).

Each respondent was randomly assigned to two experimental vignettes from two of the three investigated regulatory sectors. As a result, the total number of observations is nearly double than the number of respondents at 3109. For food safety and data protection vignettes for under-regulation were developed. For the finance sector there were vignettes for both under-, and over-regulation. This asymmetry in the research design was introduced due to the expectation that under-regulation would present a higher threat to citizen trust. The Danish Financial Supervisory Authority provided input into the design of the finance vignette, in order to ensure its realism.

The experimental vignettes depict realistic incidents of regulatory failure. Specifically, they describe situations of citizens' being poisoned by broccoli due to excessive use of pesticides; citizens' data being leaked after a hack of unsecured hospital server; and citizens charged too high of a fee due to failure in a bank's IT-system. Even though we have strived for comparability between them, their realistic nature introduces some degree of noise we are unable to account for. Therefore, we discuss the findings for each sector separately and are cautious in making comparisons between the regulatory sectors. The text of the vignettes is provided in Table A.2 in Appendix.

The incidents described in the experimental vignettes were followed by a response by the regulatory agency in question. Respondents were assigned[2] to one of the five communicative responses of the regulatory agency or alternatively to the control condition, in which the regulatory agency was not asked to provide a comment on the incident, and no information was provided about their views on the matter. Table 1 below shows the communicative responses; the exact manipulations are in provided in Table A.3 in Appendix.

[Table 1]

To measure the potential effect of the regulator's communication strategy on mitigating the negative consequences of the presented incident on citizen trust in its work, we use a three-item measurement of trust (provided in Table A.5 in Appendix). This presents a shortened version of the validated trust scale by Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies (2017) and captures the three

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[2] The assignment of participants to regulatory sectors and communicative strategies was random but constrained to 24 pre-defined experimental groups reported in Table A.4 in Appendix.

dimensions of trust: ability, benevolence, and integrity. To construct the dependent variable of trust in the regulatory agency, we take the average value of the three items. The Cronbach's alphas for the food safety, data protection, and finance regulator respectively are 0.91, 0.91, and 0.91, denoting high degree of internal consistency of the composite measures of trust (Bland and Altman 1997).

In addition to measuring the trust of respondents in the relevant regulatory agencies, the survey experiment also measured the generalized trust of respondents in other people, their trust in the media, as well as their familiarity with the three investigated regulatory regimes. The experiment also included an attention check, and two manipulation checks: for the different communicative strategies, as well as for the source of regulatory failure: under- versus over-regulation A visual display of the experimental flow, and detailed information about the measurement of all discussed items is provided in the Figure A.1 and tables A.6 and A.7 in Appendix.

The balance checks reported in Table A.8 in Appendix confirm that there are no systematic differences in participant characteristics between the different experimental groups, which suggests that the assignment of participants in different experimental groups was performed successfully. To confirm that the participants perceived the experimental manipulations as intended, we perform a Chi-square test on the manipulation check items. With regards to the manipulation check of the different communicative strategies, from the statistically significant result (χ^2(df = 16, N= 1267) = 1315.6, p < 0.01), we can conclude that the manipulation was perceived as intended by the respondents. Similarly, from the statistically significant result on

the manipulation check of under- versus over-regulation (χ^2(df = 2, N= 1538) = 803.9, p < 0.01), we also conclude that this manipulation was perceived as intended by the respondents.

Findings

The analysis of the effects of different communicative strategies by regulatory agencies on citizen trust is performed for each of the three regulatory sectors separately for H1 and H2. To test H3, we additionally look at the conditions of under- and over- regulation in the finance sector. We estimate one-way Anova models, with post-hoc comparisons between experimental groups. The results reported in Figure 1 (and Table A.9 in Appendix) give insight into the differences between all experimental groups (control group, silence, the four communicative strategies and under- versus over-regulation).

[Figure 1]

A cursory look at Figure 1 reveals that the mean levels of citizen trust in the three regulatory agencies appear to be placed a little below the mid-point of the 7-point trust scale. The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration seems to enjoy somewhat higher citizen trust than the data protection and finance regulators, which is consistent with previous research. Overall, the measured levels of trust in these agencies after the response to the mediatized case of regulatory failure is rather moderate and appears to be a bit lower than previous measures of the trust Danish citizens place in regulatory agencies (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2024) as well as overall

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trust in Danish government (OECD 2023). This suggests that the context of regulatory failure in which the trust question is placed likely has a negative impact on the measured levels of trust.

Silence: not too bad advice

To test for H1 we compare the effect of silence on trust to the effects of the other four communicative strategies. The results of the experiment offer only partial support for the hypothesis. As is shown in Figure 1, silence is not systematically associated with lower levels of trust although in some of the cases it is. As such, we can not conclude that silence is always bad advice and is less effective than more active communication strategies.

A closer look at the results, however, reveals some interesting differences between the cases offering limited support for the hypothesis under narrowed conditions. First, in the context of over-regulation, none of the strategies differed significantly from each other and from silence in their effects on trust. The pattern of effects in the condition of over-regulation is different from what we find in the cases of under-regulation. We will return to the difference between under- and over-regulation when we discuss our third hypothesis.

Secondly, within the narrower condition of under-regulation, we do find that two strategies differ significantly from silence in the hypothesized direction in two out of three cases. In the food safety case, silence leads to significantly lower trust than admitting the problem and offering a justification. In the data protection case, silence leads to significantly worse outcomes in terms of citizen trust compared to an admission of responsibility with a promise of future corrective action. In the finance case, both above-mentioned strategies have significantly better effects on trust than silence in the context of under-regulation.

All in all, the hypothesis in its original form is not supported by our analyses. We do however find some support for a narrower conclusion that silence is *mostly* less effective in promoting citizen trust than two out of four strategies, under the additional condition of under-regulation.

Active strategies: very limited support with some additional patterns

To examine the evidence for H2 we group the two communicative strategies admitting the problem (with an excuse or justification) and the two communicative strategies admitting responsibility (with an apology or promise of future action). To test the hypothesis, we compare the two grouped strategies against each other, 'silence' and the control condition. The results from this aggregated analysis are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2]

We expected that an admission of responsibility would be more effective in impacting citizen trust than the mere admission of the problem. We first compare the results of the two strategies to each other. The results in Table 2 indicate that admission of responsibility does indeed mostly lead to the highest levels of citizen trust in the regulator overall (except for the finance sector in the context of under-regulation). However, the gains in citizen trust from admitting responsibility are statistically indistinguishable from those made by admitting the existence of a problem, if we 'only' compare the two strategies to each other.

The picture changes somewhat if we secondly broaden the analysis to include the three sectors, under- versus over-regulation, as well as 'silence' and the control group. This broader

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comparison offers some limited support for the hypothesis and reveals some additional patterns.

Regarding the hypothesis: admitting responsibility does lead to significantly higher levels of

citizen trust than silence for all three sectors, yet only in the context of regulatory failure due to

under-regulation. The strategy also leads to significantly higher levels of trust in the control

condition in the data protection context. Admitting the problem leads to significantly higher

levels of citizen trust only in the finance sector in conditions of under-regulation, compared to

silence. These results are insufficient to support H2, yet they do suggest that admitting

responsibility is more often effective in relation to trust than admitting the problem.

The results display some interesting additional patterns, apart from the hypothesized effects of

the two sets of strategies. A cursory glance first at Figure 1 suffices to show that the effects of

the various strategies differ considerably between the three sectors. Some sector-specific factors

are thus likely to be relevant. Secondly, in the finance sector we examined both under-regulation

and over-regulation. The effects of communicative responses differ markedly between these

settings with none of the strategies having a significant effect on trust in the context of over-

regulation. Thirdly, we find that two strategies often (but not consistently) have positive effects

on trust in settings of under-regulation. These are arguably the most 'active' responses in which

the regulator either offers a justification or future action. We will return to these three additional

patterns in the discussion.

Under- vs. over-regulation: unexpected differences

Lastly, we examine the evidence for H3, where we compare the effects of communicative

strategies on citizen trust in cases of under- versus over-regulation in the financial sector,

expecting all strategies to be less effective in the case of under-regulation. This, however, is not what we found, as was already evident above. In Figure 1 we see that levels of trust in the control conditions are almost identical: 3.38 in the case of under-regulation and 3.41 in the case of over-regulation. This suggests that our expectation that under-regulation would have greater negative impact on citizen trust was not supported. Additionally, none of the communicative strategies make a significant difference for citizen trust in the context of over-regulation. We thus do not find evidence in support of H3.

A note of caution is needed regarding this conclusion as this hypothesis could only be tested in the finance sector. The previous analyses showed that the patterns differ strongly for the different sectors. This suggests that the effects of communicative strategies in contexts of under- versus over-regulation could also differ across sectors. Having said that, the results for the finance sector differ clearly between the two types of regulatory failure, albeit in the opposite direction. As Figure 1 shows, the different communicative strategies produce much greater variation in the levels of citizen trust in the context of under-regulation as compared to that of over-regulation. In the context of under-regulation in the finance sector it thus seems to matter a great deal how the regulator responds. Although this is not sufficient evidence to conclude that our results prove the opposite of our hypothesis is correct, these results do point in that direction. We will further reflect on this in the discussion.

Finaly, in Tables A.10 and A.11 in Appendix we provide additional exploratory analyses on the level of the three separate dimensions of trust. These show that in the context of under-regulation, in the data protection and food safety domains only the benevolence and integrity

dimensions of trust are affected by the choice of regulatory communication, while in the domain of finance all three dimensions of trust are impacted. In addition, in the context of over-regulation, the benevolence dimension appears to be significantly affected by the choice of regulatory communication.

Discussion

This study has found that *some* response strategies are more effective in *some* settings to impact citizen trust after regulatory failure. The hypotheses were only weakly supported or not supported at all. We will reflect on our main findings below, turn to underlying mechanisms and discuss limitations of this study. Together they offer possible explanations for the limited support for our hypotheses as well as for the additional patterns that the study found.

Limited significance of admitting responsibility

Our second hypothesis suggested that the strategies which include admission of responsibility for the regulatory failure would stand out as the most effective ones at promoting citizen trust in the regulator. The results, however, provided only limited support for this. On the one hand, admission of responsibility led to the highest levels of citizen trust, with the exception of the finance sector in the context of under-regulation. Furthermore, admitting responsibility consistently outperformed silence in terms of citizen trust in all scenarios of under-regulation (supporting H2). On the other hand, across the under-regulation scenarios, we observed no significant difference between (a) the strategies of admitting responsibility and admitting the problem, nor (b) between admitting responsibility and the control group (except for data

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protection). This finding is in tension with the crisis communication literature which considers the attribution of responsibility as key in citizens' assessment of trustworthiness, derived from honesty and sincerity, during crises (Coombs 2007; Stone 2017; Miller and Reeves 2022).

The significance of justifications and promises of future action

Two communicative strategies stood out as most effective at promoting citizen trust in the context of under-regulation. These are the strategies involving either a justification for past behaviour or a proposal for future action. One could argue that these two strategies are more 'active' than the others, as they move beyond excusing and apologizing, and promise to take action, or justify the failure by suggesting it is not as transgressive as it was a consequence of the agency acting in accordance with shared norms.

The practical conclusion stemming from this would be that regulatory agencies when asked for a response by media in a story on under-regulation would most likely be wise to choose one of these two strategies to impact citizen trust. Our findings suggest that agencies can enhance trust more effectively by providing justifications that contextualize their past actions within shared values or norms, and by proposing concrete future actions to prevent similar failures. These approaches signal accountability and forward momentum, which may resonate more with citizens than more passive responses of excuses or apologies, thereby fostering a stronger foundation for renewed trust. Nevertheless, the sectoral differences in our results stress the necessity for tailoring the regulatory communication to the unique circumstances of the regulatory sector at hand.

The ineffectiveness of communication in the context of over-regulation

The findings in relation to the third hypotheses suggest that, in contrast to our expectations (H3), communication responses are less effective in the context of over-regulation compared to under-regulation. The communicative responses of regulatory agencies do not make any significant difference when citizens form their trusting beliefs in a mediatized case of over-regulation, at least in the context of financial regulation in Denmark, where this hypothesis was tested. One tentative explanation for this finding could be that citizens may not include new information from the regulator in their sequential information processing (comprehension; beliefs and evaluation) leading to their trusting beliefs formation (Ferrin et al 2007).

Practically, these findings suggest that regulatory agencies should recognize the limited impact of strategic communication in cases of over-regulation. Agencies might better allocate resources toward internal evaluation and policy adjustment rather than extensive public communication efforts, while focusing more intensive trust-repair strategies on under-regulation cases, where public concern and sensitivity are higher. However, since the broader findings of the study indicate some sectoral variations in the effects of communication on citizen trust, regulatory agencies should also consider the specifics of their regulatory sector when deciding on their communication strategy.

Differences regarding sector and trust dimension

The finding that communicative strategies do not produce uniform effects on citizen trust across the domains of finance, food safety, and data protection underscores the challenge of identifying generalizable patterns in strategic regulatory communication. Trust is shaped not only by the

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content of the message but also by sector-specific factors such as perceived risk, personal

relevance, and public familiarity with the regulatory issues at hand. This variability highlights

the importance of context sensitive theorising (Pollitt 2013) and the limits of one-size-fits-all

approaches and suggests that practitioners must be cautious when applying insights across

different regulatory contexts. While a thorough examination of the sources of sectoral

differences was beyond the scope of this study, we see these in-depth analyses as a promising

avenue for future research.

The picture is further complicated by our exploratory analyses examining the effects of strategic

communication on the separate dimensions of trust (benevolence, integrity, and competence). In

cases of under-regulation, the finding that only benevolence and integrity are affected in the food

safety and data protection domains suggests that strategic communication after regulatory failure

can effectively impact citizens' assessments of these regulators' goodwill and ethical standards,

rather than their technical ability to perform. In contrast, the financial domain shows a broader

sensitivity, with all three trust dimensions, including competence, being influenced by

communication strategies. In over-regulation cases, the fact that only the benevolence dimension

is significantly impacted points to the more symbolic or relational nature of trust evaluations in

these contexts, where the stakes may feel lower or more abstract to the public.

For practitioners and regulatory agencies, this complexity points to the critical role of skilled

communication professionals who can navigate these contextual nuances. These professionals

are essential for tailoring strategies to fit the specific dynamics of each sector, ensuring that

communication efforts are responsive to how different publics interpret and respond to regulatory failures.

Mechanisms

In our experiment we have been able to study the effects of different communicative responses to two types of regulatory failure for different regulatory agencies on citizen trust belief formation (Ferrin et al. 2007). Beliefs are relatively stable convictions by individuals that things held in the mind are true, which are based on prior information. New information is instinctively processed in an unquestioning manner assuming that information is true (Ferrin et al. 2007). However, once beliefs are set, they are hard to change. People are inclined to develop strong and persistent beliefs on the basis of inconclusive evidence (Anderson, Lepper and Ross 1980). Belief formation occurs in the 'comprehension phase', in situations when people are confronted with new information (Ferrin et al 2007: 895).

In the scenario's we studied, participants were confronted with information about regulatory failure and a particular (non-) response in what is effectively a comprehension phase. Citizens have existing beliefs, albeit often quite sketchy, of regulatory agencies. Research on trust in (Danish) agencies suggests that citizens do generally trust these agencies, although to differing degrees (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2024). Our study shows that whatever strategy was adopted, it seems a loss of trust after the news of regulatory failure broke was inevitable yet that some strategies probably managed to cushion the blow. The different types of strategic responses played a role in the trust belief formation of participants.

Given the prevailing relatively positive yet weak beliefs about regulatory agencies, the information about failure may have led to a drop in trust, in line with expectation-disconfirmation theory (Lankton, McKnight and Thatcher 2014). This theory proposes that trust beliefs lead to expectations and that beliefs are altered only when these expectations are clearly disconfirmed. This seems likely in our scenario. This could also explain why the communicative strategies only have effects in some of the under-regulation cases. These are the ones that affect citizens directly and news about failure in such cases can be strong enough to affect prior beliefs, which is not likely for types of failure which are more distant from a citizen's view.

Our theoretical framework suggests that existing beliefs are hard to change, we further suggest that citizens only have somewhat sketchy beliefs about regulatory agencies why those beliefs may be changeable. While our design does not allow us to explain why the communicative strategies were only effective in some of the under-regulation cases, one potential explanation may relate to differences in the salience of the particular issues of the treatments for citizens. Additionally, the scenario features a media story about failure yet leaves it open whether or not the story is correct. It is common knowledge that not all news stories are true yet in this case they have been believed to be true. This points to negativity bias as a further likely mechanism explaining our findings. Participants believed the news to be true as, generally, negative news is believed to be more likely to be true than positive news (Hilbig 2009); an effect found to hold a fortiori for public organizations (Marvel 2016).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, we examine the effectiveness of a set of communicative strategies to impact citizen. With regards to the independent variable, even though the examined strategies are based on previous research, they by no means present an exhaustive list of strategies available to regulators in this context. Further research could seek to expand this list. At the level of the dependent variable, we chose not to include a pre-treatment measurement of trust in our design to avoid the risks of carry-over and demand effects (Charness, Gneezy and Kuhn 2012), hence our design does not explicitly measure trust repair. While our theoretical argumentation was partly inspired by the trust repair literature, future research can more explicitly measure trust repair.

Second, the experimental method inherently bears certain limitations as well. The experimental design isolates regulatory communication from the more complex real-life dynamics in which regulatory agencies operate. It also restricts regulatory communication to one-shot endeavour and does not explore the reasons why regulators might choose a particular type of media response. Likewise, our design does not allow to study temporal effects or dynamics (Murdoch, MacCarthaigh, and Geys, 2023); that is: how the passage of time impacts regulatory agencies' responses to failures, citizens' perceptions and trust, and the choice of communication strategies. Reputation scholars, for instance, show how reputations endogenously develop over time to impact reputation formation (by audiences) and reputation management (by agencies) (Maor, 2020; Salomonsen, Boye and Boon, 2021). Future research could examine whether similar dynamics occur with trust in settings of regulatory failure. To help overcome some of the limitations of survey experiments, future research on effects of regulatory behaviour on citizen

trust in regulators incorporate other methods and data-collection techniques, such as focus groups and interviews.

Third, we examine three regulatory sectors in the context of under-regulation, and although we see remarkable similarities between them, we also see many differences that are potentially driven by the context of the sectors. In this paper, the sectoral context was examined in an exploratory sense. Looking at our results, we can conclude that sectoral context matters. If we had ended up selecting one sector, depending one which one we would have either rejected or accepted certain hypotheses. While our design is thus well-suited to demonstrate this granularity, it is challenged in its ability to explain sectoral differences. Follow-up research could focus on examining how the specifics of the regulatory sector – in terms of reputational history, personal relevance, perceived risk etc. – interact with citizens' interpretations of regulatory action, and evaluations of regulatory trustworthiness. In addition, future research could also examine whether issue salience has implications for the effectiveness of communication strategies, and as such investigate whether context sensitive explanations may not only be of relevance in terms of sector and regulatory agency but also issues. Finally, we invite future research to assess the external validity in terms of whether our findings with regards to H3 in the financial sector replicate in other regulatory sectors and contexts too.

Finally, as is often the case in public administration research, the study was conducted in a single country: Denmark. The results are likely affected to some extent by specific institutional and cultural factors. Some reflection on the scope within which findings are likely to hold is in order. The communicative responses studied emanate from international research in many countries

and are of a generic theoretical relevance. Their effects on trust are however likely to be moderated by the fact that Danish citizens place relatively high trust in government organizations (Hofstede 1980). Similar effects of communicative strategies could therefore be expected in other high-trust settings while different patterns could emerge in other settings. Future research could compare the effects of communicative strategies on trust in settings with less institutional trust or in countries with more collectivistic cultures (Hofstede 1980). In these countries, notably the effects of apologies on trust could differ from our findings, as apologies are more used by organizations in China, Japan, and Korea (Lim 2020:7).

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of different communicative strategies of regulatory agencies in response to media reports of two types of regulatory failure on citizen trust by means of a survey experiment on a representative sample of Danish citizens. The findings support earlier findings that silence is the least effective strategy. While this study did not find sufficient support that admission of responsibility would be the crucial step towards gaining citizen trust, it did identify two strategies that tend to deliver the best results with regards to citizen trust in the context of under-regulation: promising future action and providing justification. These strategies were, however, found to only be significantly more effective than *some* of the other strategies in *some* contexts. Finally, contrary to expectations, the study finds some tentative evidence that active communication is more successful in creating citizen trust in the context of under-, rather than over-regulation.

The study first contributes to the literature on strategic communication from which the studied strategies were taken and in which it is contended that the responses of citizens to communicative strategies will vary according to for instance prior reputation judgments, the nature of the crisis (Coombs 2007; Gilad, Maor and Bloom. 2015; Kim 2018; Lee 2022). In our study we tested the effectiveness of a set of communicative strategies in the specific and salient setting of regulatory governance, where the level of prior trust is relatively high, certainly in Denmark (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2024) which is atypical for bureaucracies (Marvel 2016). The focus on regulators also allowed us to specify the nature of the issue to over- versus under-regulation, which we found to be important: the communicative responses had positive effects on trust only in cases of under-regulation. With these insights, we contribute to the fine-grained knowledge of when communicative responses 'work' for what purposes in what salient domain of public administration.

The study secondly extends the research investigating the public role of regulatory agencies in democracies (Maor, Gilad and Bloom 2013; Gilad, Maor and Bloom. 2015; Rimkuté 2020; Bach et al. 2020). The study supplements the recent findings that press releases from the regulatory agency disclosing the failure to the public, prior to negative media coverage of the failure, mitigate a loss in citizen trust (Grimmelikhuijsen, de Vries and Zijlstra 2018). It also aligns with Lee's (2022) experimental study showing that silence is less effective for mitigating reputational losses for agencies experiencing crisis. Our study extends the focus of this line of research in two important respects. First, we investigate regulatory agencies rather than service providing agencies and thus "include more (…) agencies" (Lee 2022: 1134). Second, we extend this line of research from reputation to trust. While related, both concepts differ in important respects (Verhoest, Rommel and Boon 2014). Reputation refers to a set of beliefs about the unique

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characteristics of an organization in a stakeholder network (Carpenter 2014). Trust relates to the willingness of an actor to be vulnerable to the actions of another actor (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995). Vulnerability here refers to the reliance on the behaviour and performance of another actor for one's own interests which implies risks of damage in the case of malperformance by the agent. This element of vulnerability is a key feature of regulatory systems. Information costs and asymmetries make it hard for citizens to have full information about the intensions and behaviours of specific companies. Citizens are therefore required to take a 'leap of faith' when they buy or consume, and regulators play a key role in ensuring this trust through their regulatory actions (Six and Verhoest 2016). Our study thus contributes to our knowledge of antecedents of trust; a systemically critical function for regulatory governance in times of contestation.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study will be made openly available at DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities (https://dans.knaw.nl/en/social-sciences-and-humanities/).

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Research Ethics Commission of the University of Lausanne (CER-UNIL) (Project number: C_SSP_032020_00002).

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Informed consent

All participants have provided their informed consent to analyse and publish their responses for the purposes of this study. They have also been informed about the goal of the study, and debriefed after completing the experiment.

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**Table 1. Overview communicative responses**

Group	Response
Silence	The agency did not want to make a statement
Admission of problem and justification	The agency recognizes the problem … but adds that they operated within acceptable standards
Admission of problem and excuse	The agency recognizes the problem … but adds that insufficient resources were available
Admission of responsibility and apology	The agency recognizes its responsibility, and offers an unconditional apology to the citizens which have been affected
Admission of responsibility and promise of future action	The agency recognizes its responsibility, and explains that more personnel has been assigned to the job to avoid this situation in the future.

Table 2. Effects of communicative strategy of regulatory agency on citizen trust – aggregated groups of admission of problem and admission of responsibility

Regulatory sector	Control	Silence	Admission of problem	Admission of responsibility
		Under-regulation		
Food safety	3.92 (1.48) N = 117	3.56[a] (1.41) N = 123	3.93 (1.32) N = 260	4.03[a] (1.34) N = 244
Data protection	3.29[a] (1.40) N = 144	3.21[b] (1.37) N = 141	3.40 (1.37) N = 269	3.68[ab] (1.35) N = 253
Finance	3.38 (1.25) N = 123	3.08[ab] (1.27) N = 122	3.64[a] (1.39) N = 274	3.58[b] (1.33) N = 247
		Over-regulation		
Finance	3.41 (1.47) N = 130	3.32 (1.40) N = 138	3.35 (1.40) N = 261	3.59 (1.38) N = 261

Note: Table displays mean levels of citizen trust, standard deviations in brackets, and sample size (n) per group. Trust is measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 is the lowest level of trust, while 7 is the highest. The letter superscripts indicate statistical significance. Equal superscripts indicate statistically significant difference in the group means at alpha 0.05 level with Tukey correction for multiple comparisons. The superscripts should be read per regulatory domain and manipulation of over- versus under-regulation, i.e for each row separately.

Figure 1. Mean citizen trust in regulatory agencies (ci = 95%)
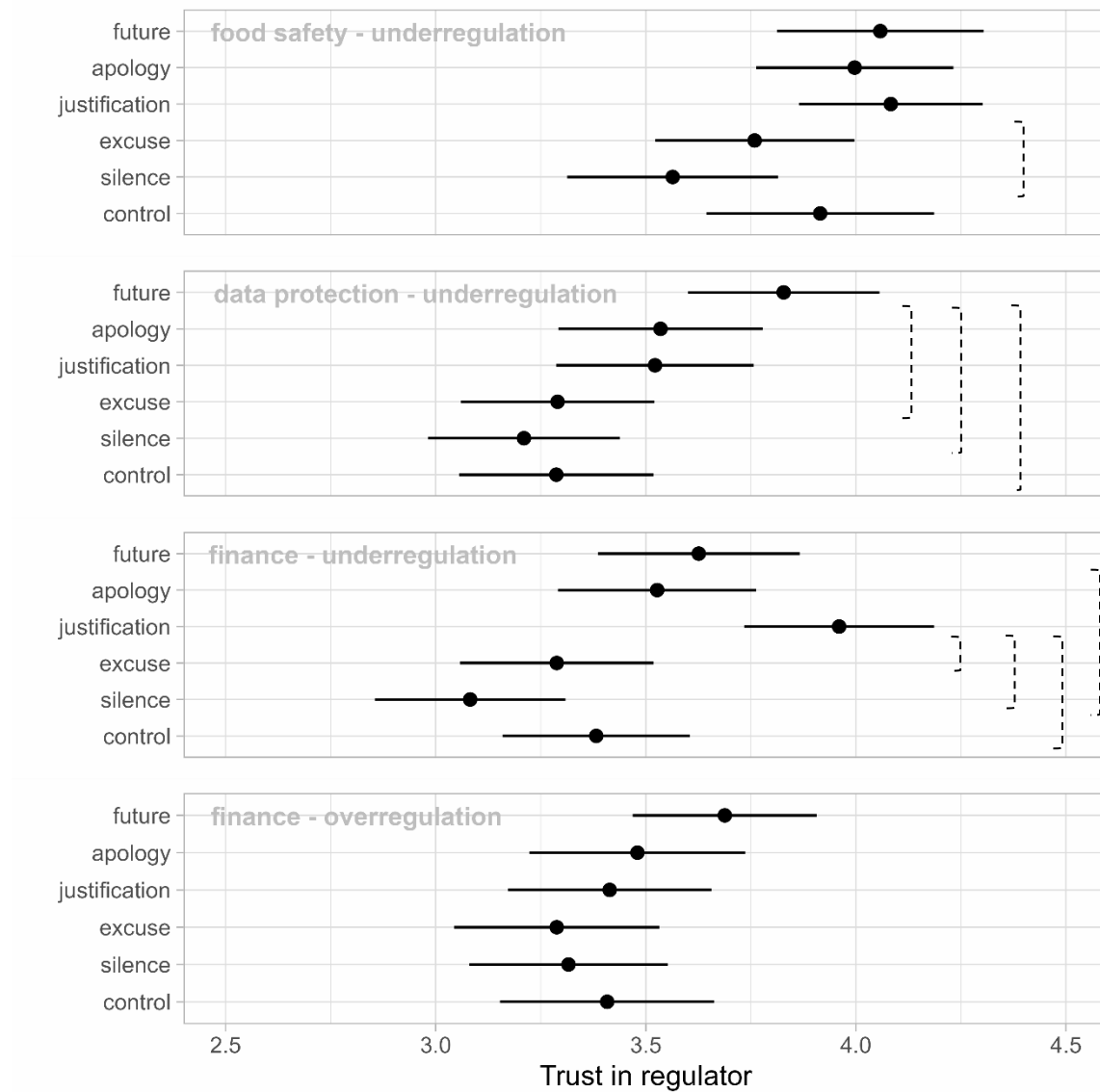
Note. Trust is measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 is the lowest level of trust, while 7 is the highest. Statistically significant differences between groups at alpha 0.05 level are denoted with dashed lines (with Tukey correction for multiple comparisons).