

WHEN PRODUCT LOSS MINIMIZES PRODUCT HARM:
THE REFRAMED NARRATIVE OF BLUE BELL
CREAMERIES' 2015 LISTERIOSIS CRISIS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the public narrative of Blue Bell Creameries' 2015 listeriosis crisis as it was constructed by news media. Treating media coverage as public narrative (Boje, 2001), this intertextual narrative analysis advances the notion that public support of a corporation in crisis is part of an intertextual process of news production, distribution, and consumption that privileges companies whose products have cultural ties. This study analyzed news coverage from local and national sources ($N = 1,316$) to understand how local outlets shaped the positively framed public narrative of Blue Bell Creameries and how national media—in warning consumers of health risks associated with this crisis—became the antenarrative. The results of this study underscore the ability of local media to reframe a crisis event in terms of product loss instead of product harm. Further, producers in an intertextual system of news coverage employed Aristotle's tragic form in this crisis event to achieve greater resolution amongst consumers, suggesting theoretical and practical implications in crisis communication.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

For decades, news framing research has highlighted the relationship between media coverage and public opinion. While existing research has examined the impact of news framing on perception of a crisis (Castello, 2010; Entman, 1989; Scheufele, 1999), news coverage has not been traditionally examined as narrative. More than a chronological account of an event (Czarniawska, 2004), narratives function as ordered and emplotted reconstructions of information. Boje (2001) treats news stories as intertextual narratives, placing media at the center of an intertextual system wherein producers, consumers, and other actors take part in shaping a grand public narrative. However, a gap exists as to how news frames intertextually construct and reinforce public narrative to maintain consumer loyalty in a crisis. Available consumer loyalty research addressing product-harm crises has isolated the consumer-corporation relationship without shedding light on how information is mediated and framed between the two entities. In treating news coverage as public narrative, this study positions itself within the connection of news framing and consumer loyalty during crisis.

In April 2015, ten people were hospitalized and three people later died from listeriosis—a life-threatening illness which results from eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*—after consuming ice cream products from Blue Bell Creameries (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Blue Bell Creameries, a popular ice cream company spanning 23 states, voluntarily recalled all of its products on April 20, 2015. Initially, Blue Bell could not confirm whether or not *Listeria* bacteria were present in its products. Upon subsequent intervention from the CDC and Food and Drug Administration, Blue Bell (2015) claimed the contamination was not derived from the product itself, but rather, from the production facilities. All operations ceased indefinitely.

Blue Bell's products remained off the shelves for months, with few updates from the corporation itself or national media sources. While the CDC and FDA continued their investigations, employee layoffs began, and the crisis started to hit close to home. Headquartered in the small town of Brenham, Texas, local news filled in the media coverage with personal and emotional features about how Blue Bell's crisis was affecting life for employees, Brenham residents, or even consumers who were sad to see their southern cultural staple off the table for dessert. Additionally, local residents from small towns across Blue Bell's 23-state spread penned letters to their local newspaper editors, many of which included emotional pleas for their favorite ice cream to return to the shelves. It quickly became clear that local news was telling the story of local people, and local people wanted Blue Bell back. Blue Bell Creameries is a company that is ingrained in the culture of Texas and other southern states where its products are popular, making its crisis all the more difficult for consumers. While Blue Bell's crisis received a substantial amount of news coverage, the vast majority did not include what journalists might call "straight news" stories: stories with a succinct description of the particular news event and minimal excess. In fact, most content was incredibly emotional, taking the stories from a particularly local angle of the crisis. Blue Bell's coverage qualitatively differed vastly between national news coverage and local news coverage, but it also had disparities in quantity. Blue Bell sold a particular lifestyle of the American South, a lifestyle which was disrupted by an indefinite product recall. Blue Bell's contamination and recall engendered narrative frames crafted from local and national media outlets which served as the basis for the present study.

Food crises are inherently personal since consumers are forced to place an immense amount of trust in food producers and corporations on a daily basis. When a corporation's product directly harms the consumer's health, it can be disastrous for the organization post-crisis.

Corporate crisis recovery can be difficult in the case of U.S. food crises because blame is quickly attributed to individual corporations, often stigmatizing their entire brand (Zhang, Jin, & Tang, 2015). Even outside of the corporation at fault, consumers are often hesitant to purchase similar products manufactured elsewhere as a consequence of a food crisis (Millner, Veil, & Sellnow, 2010). With or without reputation maintenance or crisis response strategies, food crises are incredibly difficult events for the livelihood of corporations. In general, news coverage surrounding food crises tends to focus on blame attribution and accountability instead of prevention or explanation (Dorfman, Wallack, & Woodruff, 2005). However, the Blue Bell crisis did not mirror current research suggesting a consumer shift away from a product or corporation after a contamination event. Rather, consumers remained extremely loyal to Blue Bell Creameries before, during, and after the crisis.

Rationale for the Present Study

This study seeks to build understanding of news framing in crisis as it relates to consumer loyalty and further aims to distinguish how proximity to a crisis might impact the news media's contribution to public narrative surrounding an organization in crisis. Blue Bell's contamination and recall presents an opportunity to study news framing of a corporation that fared shockingly well compared to many organizations post-crisis. The company's customers' loyalty to the brand has been nearly unwavering throughout the crisis; in fact, many fans of the ice cream took to social media to lament their desire to have Blue Bell back on the shelves regardless of the health risks that might involve. Previous research might suggest brand reputation pre-crisis has impacted this outcome; however, even corporations with historically positive reputations take a hit to consumer loyalty during and following a crisis. This was not the case for Blue Bell. Food-borne illness—due to a company's production missteps—harms the consumer directly at the

fault of the corporation. While Blue Bell did have a positive reputation pre-crisis, its reputation has not been impacted at the same level as other corporations facing similar crises. Blue Bell is a cultural element whose absence had social impacts in communities where it was enjoyed.

News coverage of a crisis provides a living and growing narrative over time, and Boje's (2001) intertextual narrative analysis considers news coverage constantly shaped by a cycle of production (how the news story is crafted), distribution (how the news story is disseminated with strategic intent), and consumption (how the news story draws on both previous and future texts). Under this model, public narrative evolves through the interaction between news coverage and audiences. This can have implications on several facets of an organization's crisis including accountability, blame attribution, and forgiveness, among others. Intertextual narrative analysis is an appropriate fit for this study, as it accounts for Blue Bell's surprisingly strong consumer loyalty through a crisis which directly harmed its own consumers. This study explores the dynamic roles of media and news consumers in constructing the public narrative during a crisis, often in order to save a company's reputation. The following chapters will review current research literature in news framing and crisis, clarify the methods in this study, provide results, and discuss the salience of these findings in the context of crisis communication.

CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

News Framing and Crisis

The way we receive information from news media has greater influence on public opinion than political partisanship or other closely-held ideological views (Delshad & Raymond, 2013). Therefore, media organizations play a large role in the development of positive or negative public attitudes. Before journalists can tell a story, though, they must first assign value to the newsworthiness of stories — including specific elements of each story — based on a number of contextual factors (Shan et al., 2013). Until relatively recently, scholarly literature on news was concerned with theoretical media effects, which assume a link between media and public policy. News framing, however, moves beyond this notion to offer a more nuanced view of the ways journalists construct and package news, lending saliency to certain parts of stories, and minimizing others. News, in this view, is framed, or situated for particular meanings. Entman (1993) described four objectives of news frames: Defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. Since journalists craft news stories, they are responsible for the creation of news frames and identifying problem-solution constructs. However, this model, and relevant framing literature for decades, did not adequately measure the impacts that news frames had on audiences and society. Scheufele (1999) aimed to operationalize a model for news framing and media effects by using a four-stage process: frame building (mass media constructs a story and assigns public orientation), frame setting (what parts of the story that audiences should consider most salient), individual-level effects of framing (how framing shaped individual dispositions), and journalists as audiences (how journalists tend to converge their framing with other mass media coverage). This process places emphasis on the multiple participants in news production and subsequent framing of coverage. Framing as a

theory of media effects is based on the premise of second-level agenda setting, which asserts that media not only inform publics about what is important—setting the agenda—but also tell news consumers how to think about and assign value to certain events (Scheufele, 1999). A strategic method by which media outlets are able to persuade audiences is through editorial content. Editorials are most effective on subject matter newly introduced to the public, and interestingly, those with a strong sense of ideology are more easily persuaded by editorials than moderates on any given issue (Entman, 1989). Newspaper articles such as “letters to the editor” or editorial board commentaries hold particular significance in times of breaking news or crisis.

Community journalism, such as newspapers in rural areas, has the added burden of representing local interests and allowing geographic stakes to shape news coverage (Kim, Carvalho, Davis, & Mullins, 2011). This social pressure allows story importance to become open to compromise. Specifically, crisis news coverage fails to acknowledge societal implications outside the immediate space surrounding the crisis. Where local news may fail to acknowledge large-scale implications, national news often underreports on crises that, even if serious in magnitude, are small in geographical reach (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012). Therefore, audiences outside the physical space of a crisis may fail to understand its importance due to differences in the geographical frames. Likewise, audiences within the physical space of a crisis may fail to understand the widespread impact and intensity of a crisis situation. When making a decision between local and national news coverage during a crisis, people in closer proximity to the crisis tend to prefer local outlets because they are “part of the community, not motivated by profit” (Anthony & Sellnow, 2011, p. 93). The challenge presented here is that, though information received may not be false, news framing has influenced selection of content.

As a news organization applies similar broad frames over time, it becomes known for its coverage under this frame and can lead to a lack of balanced content.

Consistently, crises that involve harm on consumers or community members have the most serious effects on public opinion of the organization (Delshad & Raymond, 2013). Nonetheless, news coverage occasionally overlooks organizational risk by overemphasizing small positive outcomes or historically good reputations. While stories of public safety or environmental hazards are typically covered from a “watchdog” journalism perspective, local media often frame other benefits over potential costs if it aligns with local community interest (Castello, 2010). Often, conflicts of interest arise when large portions of the news consumer base are actively engaged in a story and news organizations frame stories to appease their audience. This reactive framing is just as harmful to balance information and coverage as proactive framing with an established agenda, but consumers may or may not view it that way.

News Framing and Health Crisis

In a crisis situation, media serve as information distributors, providing live monitoring of the crisis to the public. Health crises, in particular, are more pressing than other crises, as they have the potential to directly harm the well-being of news audiences. Wilkins (2005) notes that the cyclic nature of information consumption via news media places immense power on the role of media, as public health officials often monitor information from media organizations to better understand the crisis at hand. Given the responsibility of transferring scientific or medical information into audience-friendly language, news organizations are tasked with framing health messages, but often are left with far more editorial control than strict information distribution (Glik, 2007). Health crises related to food are sustained on audience uncertainty and ambiguity, causing increased consumer risk evaluations so long as audiences remain unaware of some

aspects of a crisis (Mitchell, Bakewell, Jackson, & Heslin, 2015). Glik (2007) found that health information tends to induce stress responses, regardless of whether the messages are proactive or reactive. This could be attributed to the fact that news media often focus solely on negative consequences in a health crisis and fail to “attempt to reduce generalized anxiety and concern” in order to sustain a crisis for news value over time (Pan & Meng, 2016, p. 103). This is further exacerbated when the health issues at hand are remotely political, as journalists tend to employ the conflict news frame in their coverage since controversy often increases audience size (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008).

Health crises affect everyone from the journalist telling the story to the news audiences on the receiving end. Thus, the journalistic rules change for health crises. Normative public relations practices such as declining a comment to media outlets is not an option during a health crisis due to public urgency surrounding the problem (Covello, 2003). Since audiences tend to subconsciously attribute blame to an entity during any crisis, even when seemingly unrelated, health messages transmitted through news media typically frame public health in terms of accountability rather than prevention or explanation (Dorfman et al., 2005). This creates problems for corporations when they are responsible for causing public health crises, as their business depends on reputation maintenance. While preventative risk communication may take place, it cannot guarantee successful risk management (de Sa, Mounier-Jack, & Coker, 2009). If a corporation is definitively blamed for a crisis, reputation maintenance becomes an arduous process for the corporation. Additionally, the underlying problems, such as contamination, that may cause a food crisis often occur throughout the industry.

In order to avoid an entire segment of the food industry being stigmatized and financially harmed, an individual corporation is typically scapegoated as the brand permanently associated

with a given crisis (Gao, Knight, Zhang, Mather, & Tan, 2012). For example, Subway restaurants were vilified for unknowingly placing a dead rodent on a customer's sandwich even after it was determined that the rodent came from a third party's bagged spinach (Blackman, 2015). Subway may have been cleared of any contamination concerns, but the chain remained on trial in the court of public opinion. Most consumers misattributed blame to Subway instead of the third-party spinach producer who caused the incident. In order to avoid this problem, corporations often maintain ties with media outlets in order to minimize threats of vilification when crises occur. Food industries, such as the peanut industry, have employed these tactics in the past in order to minimize potential economic risks following the 2009 *Salmonella* outbreak (Irlbeck, Jennings, Meyers, Gibson, & Chambers, 2013). Interestingly, the individualistic nature of the United States causes American news media to attribute health problems to individuals — people or entities — rather than looking to societal change as a solution to health concerns as is the case in eastern nations (Zhang et al., 2015). Often, food crises hit close to home. This is largely because food serves as a cultural artifact for many. Food can hold symbolic meaning, emotional memories, or even function as a coping mechanism.

News Framing and Emotion

One of the most effective ways media provoke changes in public beliefs or attitudes is through the usage of emotional news frames. Emotional news framing engenders deep information processing in audiences, often affecting opinions in line with the emotional response (Lecheler, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2013). By framing a story using emotion, other elements of the story are inherently lost. While crises or disasters may not have any emotional spin for the corporation, response messages often employ appeals to emotion in order to lessen the potential public backlash (Kim & Cameron, 2011). In many cases, this strategy works. Unfortunately,

emotional frames also have the ability to distract audiences from serious issues in a given article. In contrast, generic news frames such as blame attribution or explanation of unexpected crises can routinize the tragic and force human loss into a formulaic model, especially when crises deal with human death or other similar tragedy (Shahin, 2016). In such cases, news frames detach audiences from the tragedy itself. Given the two opposite choices, the ideal choice for both audiences and news organizations should be the implementation of emotional frames when appropriate, without allowing emotion to overrun content that is not directly tied to an emotional event.

Cho and Gower (2006) found that the public's emotional response brought on by a human interest media frame significantly impacted attribution of blame to a corporation. The public has a tendency to assign responsibility to corporations when crisis news stories depict negative elements, such as a corporation causing direct physical or emotional harm to its consumers. When a corporation caused consumer harm unintentionally, Cho and Gower (2006) found that the public had an equally emotional response but did not assign blame to the corporation. This study has particular salience when considering consumer reaction to food crises wherein the consumers have experienced physical harm as a result of a corporation's negligent actions. When a company is depicted as immoral by the news media during a crisis, the public has an extremely negative response (An, 2011). When depicting a crisis narrative, the media can either implicitly or explicitly frame the organization at fault as immoral. Regardless of whether or not the organization engages in a responsibility or crisis recovery strategy, An (2011) found that the public will still hold an immense amount of anger and attribute blame to the organization. The news media has power as the public's moral compass during a crisis. After a crisis is initially presented and framed to the public, emotion, both in framing and in response,

remains a major component of the public's perception of blame attribution. While the crisis type may not be as pivotal, news frames, such as morality or conflict, have a direct impact on the public's crisis response (An, Gower, & Cho, 2011).

Emotion and consumption have shared a long relationship. As Kemp, Kennett-Hensel, and Williams (2014) note, many consumers engage in indulgent purchases to cope with stress, anxiety, and fear. Commonly known as retail therapy, organizations can take advantage of consumer emotion to drive profits and deepen consumer relationships. Consumer emotion can be either a driving force or a road block to high levels of organizational consumption. However, this places the power of emotion solely in the hands of the consumer. Shifting the emotional power, this view was later expanded when Allen, Machleit, and Kleine (1992) agreed that consumer purchases are heavily influenced by emotion but went further to build the idea that some emotions are attached to the act of consumption of a particular good or service itself. These emotions, brought on by patronage of an organization, are instilled in the consumer in association with the entity of consumption. So-called consumption emotions have direct correlations with customer satisfaction and repeated patronage. That is, positive consumption emotions lead to high satisfaction and continued patronage, and negative consumption emotions lead to low satisfaction and ceased patronage (Han & Back, 2008). It can therefore be inferred that organizations can call upon positive consumption emotions to expand patronage and deepen customer loyalty.

Consumer Loyalty During Crisis

Consumer loyalty tends to manifest itself in three relationships: Consumers and products, consumers and services, or consumers and brands (Salegna & Fazel, 2011). Regardless of the loyalty established in the corporation-consumer relationship, crisis can take a hit on a

corporation's brand, product, and service loyalty. When a corporation goes through a period of crisis, consumer loyalty can either diminish or be sustained through appropriate reputation maintenance strategies. Pre-crisis loyalty and familiarity function as moderators of crises, though they become less important if repeated crises occur for the same corporation (Cleeren, Dekimpe & Helsen, 2008). Interestingly, Helm and Tolsdorf (2013) suggest crises more severely impact corporations with good reputations than those with already poor reputations due to the greater violation of stakeholder expectations. Though trust and loyalty are essential components for a corporation's successful management of a crisis, communication during each stage of the crisis is equally important. A corporation's lack of communication during and after a crisis severely depreciates brand value. On the contrary, if a corporation has a responsive reaction, it can improve its reputation by showing corporate resilience (Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013). Coombs (2007) established a framework for effective post-crisis communication to minimize reputational threats in his situational crisis communication theory. SCCT categorizes three crisis types based on corporate responsibility: Victim (organization also directly harmed by crisis), accident (organization unintentionally at fault), or preventable (organization as causal agent of crisis). Based on the crisis type, there are three primary corporate responses to crisis: denying the link between the organization and the crisis, diminishing the severity of the crisis or the organizational connection to the crisis, or rebuilding reputational assets with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Even if the corporation doesn't take responsibility for the crisis, maintaining communication helps to keep ties with consumers who found themselves loyal to the brand pre-crisis (Hegner, Beldad, & op Heghuis, 2014).

While most corporations' crises affect consumers in some manner, crises caused by a corporation's product harming consumers directly are especially difficult to manage. So-called

product-harm crises create a tense relationship between corporation and consumer for even the most loyal of customers. This differential makes it particularly difficult for corporations to communicatively manage a product-harm crisis, as they risk isolating one group in favor of another. Information processing during a product-harm crisis tends to fluctuate based on whether or not the consumer is a loyal, returning customer or a potential customer (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Therefore, communication during the post-crisis phase could attract loyal customers to remain positive about the corporation while casting away potential customers. Interestingly, communication has been more effective for stronger, more successful brands than weaker brands in its relationship to navigating a corporation through crisis (Cleeren, Dekimpe & Helsen, 2008). Although loyal customers may be maintained through a crisis, a corporation may be permanently tainted in the eyes of new customers even if attempts at reputation maintenance are made before, during, and after the crisis.

Consumer loyalty has also been tied to the perception—or reality—of unethical behavior by the corporation. Although corporate social responsibility promotes a more ethical image for the corporation, ethical behavior also impacts a corporation's finances through customer retention, product loyalty, and likelihood of recommendation (Singh, Iglesias, & Batista-Foguet, 2012). Because corporate reputation contributes to successful navigation of crises, ethical behavior on the part of the corporation could likewise lead to a more resilient image post-crisis. Images of goodwill are equally important during a crisis itself, especially when it comes to blame attribution. Voluntary recalls or other improvement assessments have significant positive impacts on corporate reputation, while contested corporate recalls severely harm consumer loyalty (Souiden & Pons, 2009). An organization's positive reputation prior to a crisis creates a "deflective power" for the organization, even if other information is released that could damage

its reputation (Kim, 2016, p. 46). News coverage that emphasizes historicity or an organization's previous good behavior helps to shape public opinion that such a crisis event is unusual and unprecedented. With that, the organization's crisis becomes an exception.

When Blue Bell Creameries found *Listeria monocytogenes* in its facility in 2015, the company recalled its product line and was plunged into a crisis. The Blue Bell *Listeria* contamination event represents a unique opportunity for study of news framing of a food crisis. Blue Bell customers have demonstrated unwavering consumer loyalty to the brand both during and after the crisis. Blue Bell has seemingly escaped blame attribution altogether for the deaths of its own consumers. The present study seeks to understand how local and national news coverage intertextually shaped the public narrative of Blue Bell's crisis, effectively shielding the company from public scrutiny and accountability. Thus, this study asks:

RQ1: How did local media outlets shape the public narrative of Blue Bell Creameries' 2015 listeriosis outbreak, such that the corporation maintained a high level of consumer support?

RQ2: How did national media outlets shape the public narrative of Blue Bell Creameries' 2015 listeriosis outbreak, such that the corporation maintained a high level of consumer support?

CHAPTER THREE. METHODS

Narrative Framing

Media stories may best be understood narratively, as emplotted stories that represent ordered reconstructions of information packaged for a public audience. Understood as narrative, news stories are more than chronological retellings of events. Boje and Rosile (2003) argue that news stories are narrated by journalists who force emplotted structure (rising action, climax, solution, and denouement) onto events as a means of helping the audience make sense of the situation. The journalist collects and organizes information, imposing order onto chaos, sequencing events and actions, giving certain elements of the story salience. Journalists serve not only as gatekeepers (Lewin, 1947), but as active narrators in a textual system.

In this view, news producers function as part of a narrative system of production, distribution, and consumption of news. Stories produced by news media are inherently intertextual insofar as they are situated in a network of antecedent and subsequent texts. Texts are created and distributed in context with other news coverage and information channels and distributed amongst a narrative audience who processes, interprets, and interacts with media to become part of the intertextual system (Boje, 2001). As such, news stories help shape, challenge, and reinforce the public narrative surrounding a given subject. By treating news stories as part of public narrative, journalistic production of news creates frames for public consumption.

Boje (2001) conceptualizes two intersecting axes that place narrative texts in terms of historicity and proximity to the audience. Any given news story, then, is examined for its proximity to the audience in both time and space. Intertextual analysis envisions a horizontal axis that demarcates the place of the story in relation to other texts in the system (historical texts that precede the story, and anticipated texts that will come after). A vertical axis traces the sense of

proximity the narrative gives by lending saliency to either local or distant voices and actors.

Analysis considers the intertextual play between these two dimensions, or as Boje (2001) writes, “The methodological task is to unravel a text’s intertextual network of attributed and unattributed links to other texts” (p. 92).

For Boje (2001; 2008), news narrative is a living and constitutive system in which news producers, consumers, and actors actively engage in story creation. Intertextual narrative analysis, thus, traces the production, distribution, and consumption of news to better understand how public narratives both shape, and are shaped by, the news cycle. Intertextual analysis of production has two primary goals: Determining whose voice is given representation in the story and identifying what interpretive utterances are used by the author. Production analysis aims to identify the role of other contexts in the creation of narrative. Once produced, the text is released in context with all other information available. Therefore, intertextual analysis of distribution draws on the juxtaposition of similar texts with the produced text and helps identify the editorial differences between the produced text and others. Finally, consumption analysis examines the place of news stories in an ongoing textual system by searching for traces of antecedent texts that are either blatantly, or sometimes unintentionally, included in the news by the author. It also assumes that news shapes an ongoing living narrative, and thus it looks for cues to anticipated texts that may result from the story. Once distributed, the text becomes part of a chain of other texts before and after it. Between production, distribution, and consumption, Boje’s (2001) intertextual analysis provides six unique items for coding: Voice (production), interpretive utterances (production), differences (distribution), juxtapositions (distribution), antecedent texts (consumption), and anticipated texts (consumption).

Intertextual analysis is particularly appropriate in analyzing Blue Bell's crisis. Blue Bell represents a household brand that evokes strong emotional responses from its customers. The brand markets as a lifestyle or nostalgic product, and it is considered by many living in the American South a staple of life. The 2015 listeriosis crisis and subsequent recall pulled Blue Bell products from the shelves, and thus freezers of these consumers, leading to an avalanche of news coverage and social media commentary from consumers. The deep consumer connection to Blue Bell, the place of ice cream as both a childhood and summer favorite in the southern household, contributed to a unique narrative of crisis shaped by public desire to return the product to the shelves, even at the expense of potential bacterial contamination. This study examines the living narrative of the crisis as it both shaped, and was shaped by, publics and news producers. Intertextual analysis of production will highlight the strategic editorial decisions made by journalists. Intertextual analysis of distribution will be important in understanding how Blue Bell's crisis was evaluated uniquely as compared to other similar contamination events. Finally, a consumption analysis calls upon Blue Bell's corporate reputation and considers the company's future in the news cycle.

Data Collection

This study examined public narrative construction through news coverage. The data set for this study, thus, consisted of all published news articles pertaining to the Blue Bell listeriosis crisis. The sample included both local (published in areas where Blue Bell products are sold) and national news articles collected through internet search and news databases. Local news articles were collected via the Access World News database on Newsbank. The researcher limited results based on country of origin (United States), date range (March 2015 to June 2016), headline search ("Blue Bell"), and all-text search ("Listeria"). The date range was determined based on

the first contamination reports and Blue Bell's return to market. National news articles were collected via Google News using the same criteria as the Newsbank database search. In total, 1,418 articles were included in the initial collection. After removing 102 duplicates, 1,316 articles were used for data analysis. The data set included both local ($n = 1,284$) and national ($n = 32$) news articles.

Data Analysis

Consistent with Boje's (2001) method of intertextual analysis, data were analyzed in a three-stage process. Initially, data were reviewed with attention to general story and purpose to garner a picture of the grand narrative of the Blue Bell crisis. In the second phase of analysis, the researcher read news articles paying close attention to narrative structure and emplotment. In this phase, actors in the narrative were identified (e.g. Blue Bell officials, local officials, national officials, victims of the outbreak, families of victims) and locations of publications were noted. Finally, data were analyzed using Boje's (2001) schema of production (voice and interpretive framing), distribution (juxtapositions and divergences), and consumption (antecedent texts and anticipated texts). The researcher coded data line-by-line, placing all relevant quotations into the schema. Local and national stories were analyzed as separate sets, but using the same schema.

CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

The results of this intertextual analysis depict the public narrative surrounding Blue Bell Creameries during their 2015 listeriosis crisis as framed by national and local news media. The intertextual narrative of crisis that emerged from the data highlights the divergence of national and local media in their framing of news stories about Blue Bell's crisis. Following Boje's (2001) intertextual narrative analysis, the subsequent results move beyond frame analysis to examine living news narrative during a crisis by examining the production, distribution, and consumption of news coverage in shaping the existing and growing public narrative of Blue Bell Creameries' 2015 listeriosis crisis. Thus, the following results trace the public narrative of Blue Bell's crisis as it was produced by journalists, distributed alongside other competing texts, and consumed by audiences with attention to past and future texts.

Production

Intertextual analysis of production considers the role of journalists and news organizations in shaping the public narrative. Boje (2001) considers news an intertextual system in which news producers and consumers are all actors who play roles in a living network. News producers, in this view, both affect and are affected by the system. Producers make editorial decisions to give primacy to voices over others, limiting or expanding the role of some narrative participants. Journalists also frame stories by reconstructing the order of events and highlighting certain elements of the story through their own interpretive utterances. The strategic wordsmithing of stories as crafted by producers shapes the public narrative especially in cases of continuing coverage, such as a crisis. Production analysis identifies who is given voice and the writers' interpretive framing.

Voice. Analysis of voice identifies who producers choose to quote, paraphrase, or exclude from the story, how often a person or entity is given voice, and the prioritization of voices within a story. Primacy of voice in the news articles differed as a function of whether the news organization publishing the article was a national or local source. Major national media gave voice almost exclusively to government institutions involved at each stage of the crisis. When the voluntary recall was first announced, the Washington Post of March 13, 2015 led with statements from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration about the investigation. Although the CDC and FDA dominated the primary voice in national news articles, the Los Angeles Times of March 14, 2015 cited the spokesperson of the Kansas Department of Health and the Environment, as all three deaths caused by Blue Bell consumption occurred in Kansas. Toward the end of the crisis, the Department of Justice investigated Blue Bell for its negligence in food safety measures after a report issued by the FDA indicated the company had not adequately met sanitization standards two years prior to the 2015 listeriosis crisis. National media almost exclusively gave voice to national government institutions involved in the crisis, primarily the CDC, FDA, and Department of Justice. Blue Bell CEO Paul Kruse and spokesperson Jenny Van Dorf were typically given voice in national news coverage; however, their statements consistently followed the findings or reports of government agencies and officials.

Local news articles represented entirely different voices from national news coverage. Local news coverage was concentrated in areas where Blue Bell did business and was elevated to the status of cultural icon. KHOU-TV, the CBS affiliate in Houston, Texas, is a station in the media market of Blue Bell's headquarters in Brenham, Texas. On March 15, 2015, KHOU produced a story exclusively quoting loyal customers who were steadfast in their support of Blue

Bell, with one customer even claiming they were not concerned about the voluntary recall because she “[prays] over [her] food.” KHOU’s coverage of Blue Bell was arguably the most continuous of those within the scope of this study, with their April 24, 2015 newscast focusing on a “Support Blue Bell” Day being held in Brenham near the headquarters of Blue Bell. Throughout KHOU’s coverage, voice was notably absent from government agencies investigating Blue Bell. The station documented the emotional struggle taking a toll on many loyal fans of the ice cream company on May 7, 2015, as they interviewed a customer who rationed Blue Bell—after refusing to return her recalled product—by the teaspoon, savoring the dessert once weekly until it returns to the shelves. The station quoted the customer lamenting, “I’m hoping I won’t catch it. It’s more of a faith thing.” Yet, this bold decision to continue eating potentially contaminated and recalled products was not unique to the area near Blue Bell’s headquarters. The (New Orleans, LA) Times-Picayune of April 21, 2015 dedicated an entire article to consumers who boldly challenged the recall and any notion of the ice cream being unsafe to eat. One such customer told the newspaper, “My husband had one, and I had one, and we’re still here.” Some Blue Bell devotees circumvented the recall by pursuing their options for purchase online. Mashable.com of May 14, 2015 reported that Blue Bell was listed for sale on Craigslist for as much as \$10,000. What began as an announcement to help the public avoid health risks created an upset customer base willing to pursue Blue Bell on ice cream’s black market. Additionally, even when other voices were included in the story—which was not typical in this study—local journalists gave primacy to loyal customers over the company itself. The Las Cruces (NM) Sun-News of April 21, 2015 gave voice to Blue Bell spokesperson Jenny Van Dorf only after describing the laments of loyal Blue Bell fans. These selected quotations indicate

journalists chose loyal customer voices to demonstrate the unwavering support of a company in crisis, even at a risk to their personal health.

Local news sources reported emotional responses to loss of Blue Bell's products following the recall. The Lubbock (TX) Avalanche-Journal of April 27, 2015 quoted a 92-year old fan of the ice cream claiming that "returning [Blue Bell] was like saying goodbye to a longtime friend." Indeed, media stories reported that the dessert was enjoyed by many ages, often served in school cafeterias. The Huntsville (TX) Item of September 23, 2015 gave voice to high school students yearning for Blue Bell products to be back in their lunches. The newspaper quoted one student who related Blue Bell's absence to "losing part of [his] childhood." The sense of customer loyalty was a constant presence in local news coverage. Even months later, news coverage quoted upset customers hoping the product would return to stores. The Dothan (AL) Eagle of August 12, 2015 penned a story about anxious customers waiting for Blue Bell's return, with one customer stating, "I didn't know why they took it away, but yes, I will be buying it again." Likewise, the Waco (TX) Tribune-Herald of April 21, 2015 interviewed multiple longtime customers who "feel sorry for Blue Bell" during this crisis. Because the public support was so intrinsically tied to what the corporation meant to its consumer base, journalists constructed a public narrative that shifted blame away from Blue Bell.

Unsurprisingly, when Blue Bell made its return to stores, local news coverage was dominated by stories mirroring the Waco (TX) Tribune-Herald of November 2, 2015, which described masses of customers "applauding [Blue Bell's] return to stores" in their area. The public narrative, as constructed by local news stories, is overwhelmingly focused on the loyal customers of Blue Bell Creameries. In fact, notably absent are the voices of outraged customers demanding Blue Bell take responsibility for the listeriosis crisis. It was only when employee

layoffs occurred in the midst of the company's financial woes that any negative local press was generated, and this time, voice was given to now jobless former Blue Bell employees. KFSM-TV, the CBS affiliate in Fayetteville, AR, on October 13, 2015 told the story of a former Blue Bell employee who felt the listeriosis crisis was "overlooked" by both the public and corporate management. Employee voice, however, was drowned by the vast majority of local news coverage highlighting the steadfast loyalty of its customer base. The findings of this production analysis of voice indicate that national and local news differed substantially with regard to whom they gave primacy of voice. While national media referred to government agencies and the corporation itself, local media gave voice to loyal customers, supporting a public narrative of support for the company during its time of crisis.

Interpretive framing. Intertextual analysis of production additionally highlights the wordsmithing, interpretive utterances, and strategic framing provided for stories by journalists and news organizations. Notably, interpretive framing occurred less in national news coverage. In local news, however, stories were wrought with emotional word choice and framing. National news sources described the listeriosis crisis in scientific and objective terms, detailing the health risk for consumers, as illustrated by NPR on August 24, 2015. Stories like this were formal, structured, and expository in nature. The New York Times of August 12, 2015 described the financial struggles of Blue Bell during the crisis in strict, objective terms, as well. Such stories came in stark contrast to the emotional rejoicing of local news articles when the crisis was resolved and Blue Bell returned to stores. Throughout the crisis, national media's emotion remained static and objective. Journalists for local media outlets made constant use of interpretive language in their coverage of Blue Bell. At the onset of the voluntary recall, news coverage flooded with stories of Blue Bell's legacy in Texas. The Fort Worth (TX) Star-

Telegram of March 13, 2015 and the Dallas Morning News of March 24, 2015 described Blue Bell as an “iconic Texas brand” when describing the terms of the recall. In fact, multiple news sources made artful comparisons between Blue Bell and other facets of Texas history and culture. The Houston Chronicle of April 21, 2015 deemed Blue Bell “as much a part of summer in Texas as triple-digit heat and barbecue.” Three days later, the Chronicle added more significant synonyms to this list, this time equating Blue Bell “in recognition to the Alamo or San Jacinto Monument in our history.” While food is part of culture everywhere, these results indicate local journalists in particular used interpretive language to frame Blue Bell and Texas as one.

Local journalists framed Blue Bell as an emotional attachment and ritualistic part of life and culture in their respective areas. Blue Bell is often called “the little creamery in Brenham,” as pointed out by the Huntsville (TX) Item of April 26, 2015. The Abilene (TX) Reporter-News of September 17, 2015 suggested Blue Bell’s product marketing is based on “romantic country scenes of cows being led by hand to the milking stool” invoking a sense of story to Blue Bell’s product. Blue Bell consumers nurtured this relationship with the product as much as the company. The Las Cruces (NM) Sun-News of April 21, 2015 described loss of the product almost like the loss of a family member, reporting that locals had to “cope with [Blue Bell’s] ice cream recall.” Local stores known for selling Blue Bell soon put up signs reading, “I get cranky without my Blue Bell,” during the recall, according to the Dallas Morning News of April 23, 2015. The (Conroe, TX) Courier of April 27, 2015 expanded this tragedy by adding, “Knowing how a heapin’ bowl of Blue Bell relieves tension and calms tattered nerves, I envision patients standing in line, awaiting prescriptions of Xanax with which they could relieve stress and anxiety.”

While local journalists painted a picture of tragedy during the recall, they also used interpretive framing to describe Blue Bell's return to the shelves. The Fort Worth (TX) Star-Telegram of July 14, 2015 explained Texas billionaire Sid Bass investing in Blue Bell, and thereby reviving its operations, as a "rescue." WFAA-TV, the ABC affiliate in Dallas, echoed these sentiments again months later on November 1, 2015, reporting, "Sid Bass rescued the 108-year old company from the brink of meltdown." KFOR-TV, the NBC affiliate in Oklahoma City, OK, reported on July 14, 2015 that Bass' investment will "get the company back on its feet." Painting Sid Bass as the hero Blue Bell needed, the Houston Chronicle of July 15, 2015 titled a headline, "Blue Bell finds its white knight." Local media overwhelmingly framed Bass as a savior. In fact, several sources used religious framing in their support of Blue Bell. The Galveston (TX) County Daily News of September 1, 2015 shared that the "faithful rejoice at Blue Bell's second coming," with the term "Blue Bell faithful" also showing up in the Dallas Morning News of November 2, 2015. Next came the waiting, with local news coverage focusing on a countdown for Blue Bell's return. The (Talladega, AL) Daily Home of August 28, 2015 reported, "Blue Bell comes home Monday," with many others publishing similar stories for Blue Bell's return in their local communities. Some local journalists celebrated Blue Bell's return near the holiday season. The Mount Pleasant (TX) Daily Tribune of November 18, 2015 wrote, "Holidays ring: sleigh bells, silver bells, jingle bells... and Blue Bell," cementing the relationship between Blue Bell and local life. The Corpus Christi (TX) Caller-Times of December 13, 2015 suggested that Blue Bell's return "gives local fans [a] Christmas gift" in time for the holidays. Although national journalists did not employ interpretive framing and instead opted for direct and expository styles, local journalists used interpretive utterances throughout each stage of the crisis, from recall to its return.

Distribution

Distribution analysis treats news coverage as part of a system of intertextual narratives, entered into a public narrative with other existing texts. News organizations tell stories through juxtaposition, relating other texts to the present story to create a grand narrative. The unique spin and editorializing imposed by journalists additionally creates contrast between pieces of text in an intertextual network. Therefore, intertextual analysis of distribution identifies the juxtaposed cases used to create a grand narrative and highlights the contrast between coexisting texts telling, at least factually, the same story in different ways.

Juxtapositions. News writing relies on maintaining connections between coexisting stories in the news cycle. Thus, it is not surprising that both national and local media used juxtapositions. National media juxtaposed other large-scale contamination events with Blue Bell's 2015 listeriosis crisis. Local media typically juxtaposed Blue Bell with other organizations when the other cases were more severe than Blue Bell's crisis. Media juxtaposed other cases of food crises and recalls, whether based on *Listeria* contaminations or not. Ohio-based Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams issued a voluntary recall after a positive test for *Listeria* bacteria in their production facilities, a case considered similar by many national media sources. ABC News of April 24, 2015, the New York Times of May 7, 2015, and CNNMoney of August 5, 2015 all described comparisons between Blue Bell and Jeni's. The case also showed up in the St. Louis Examiner of June 19, 2015, tying the "all-too-common bacteria" connection between the ice cream companies. *Listeria* bacteria were also found in Snoqualmie Ice Cream, produced in Washington, a case linked to Blue Bell by the Houston Chronicle of June 22, 2015. Interestingly, *Listeria* is not typically linked to ice creams. The (Conroe, TX) Courier of April 27, 2015 pointed out prior many *Listeria* contaminations that are common, though not derived from ice

cream: “Some years ago, a deadly outbreak was traced to cantaloupes. It can be found in processed meats and unpasteurized milk and cheese. Just last week, *Listeria* caused the recall of 30,000 cases of Hummus.” The Houston Chronicle of April 27, 2015 furthered this point, describing the nation’s most severe *Listeria* outbreak in 2011 which “killed 33 people with contaminated melons.” Even with other juxtaposed cases of *Listeria* outbreaks, the Austin American-Statesman of July 5, 2015 separated Blue Bell from others, explaining, “Many other plants had sanitation issues from [the Texas Department of Health Services] but none contained *Listeria* [besides Blue Bell].” Even when compared, journalists still constructed comparisons which depicted Blue Bell as having a uniquely difficult or unusual set of circumstances.

Beyond cases of *Listeria* outbreaks, Blue Bell was also compared with other contamination and recall events. The aforementioned Houston Chronicle article of April 27, 2015 drew the connection between a Salmonella outbreak ignored by a company, Peanut Corporation of America, driving the business into bankruptcy. In order to measure the legal consequences against corporations who fail to maintain safety standards that led to deaths, CNN expanded this comparison on January 2, 2016, reporting that the Peanut Corporation of America CEO received “28 years in prison for covering up [the Salmonella outbreak].” Although media sources juxtaposed these cases with Blue Bell, some cases—such as the Peanut Corporation of America—were used to make Blue Bell’s case seem less severe between the two.

Contrast. In an intertextual system, the contrast placed on each piece of intertext highlights editorial decisions between producers, taking the same story with a different spin. Local and national media shaped the narrative of Blue Bell’s crisis in different ways. National media framed the story as a public health risk, warning consumers of potential threats. The Washington Post of March 13, 2015 gave significant background on *Listeria* contaminations and

who may be at risk of developing listeriosis. CNN of April 4, 2015 emphasized the threat of listeriosis in calling it a “serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria*.” Notably, national media led with the deaths resulting from Blue Bell consumption. The Los Angeles Times of March 14, 2015 started coverage with the following headline: “Three deaths linked to tainted ice cream in Kansas.” Many national outlets also emphasized the loss of human life through quantifying the tragedy. On April 23, 2015, NPR reported “ten people in four different states” became ill from Blue Bell products and “three people...died.” Especially as compared to local media, national media attributed crisis responsibility to Blue Bell. US News and World Report of May 4, 2015 urged consumers to “hold companies accountable when they make mistakes.” Further, Fortune indicted Blue Bell on September 25, 2015 for not taking action when they “found *Listeria*...in a plant two years earlier but failed to solve the problem.” CBS News of October 13, 2015 interviewed a microbiologist to speak to the health risks of listeriosis who described Blue Bell’s lack of safety precautions as “unbelievable.”

Local media, in contrast, framed the story in terms of the public’s upset reaction to Blue Bell’s absence from stores. WFAF-TV, the FOX affiliate in Kansas City, MO, on March 13, 2015, as well as WREG-TV, the CBS affiliate in Memphis, TN, on May 15, 2015, failed to mention the three consumer deaths until the end of the story as a final note. Even when media sources discussed Blue Bell deaths, rarely was blame directed at the company itself. The Houston Chronicle of April 18, 2015 reported that “Texas health inspectors should be embarrassed that they weren’t the first ones to catch the problem.” This can be contrasted with national media, which often discussed the deaths in headlines and article leads at the hands of the corporation. Overwhelmingly, support for Blue Bell was expressed in local media reports. The (New Orleans, LA) Times-Picayune of April 21, 2015 quoted a local attorney who claimed that

Blue Bell's recall was "worse than the BP oil spill." The ABC affiliate in Dallas, TX, WFAA-TV, on April 21, 2015 reported that a "local shop says there's no substitute for Blue Bell." The Dallas Morning News of April 24, 2015 joined in support of Blue Bell with the headline, "Attaboy, Blue Bell," in the midst of their crisis. Although the Houston Chronicle was overwhelmed with letters to the editor in support of Blue Bell, the newspaper published an article on April 23, 2015 that shifted the narrative, claiming, "We want to trust when we go to the grocery store that we will buy food that will nourish us and not make us sick." In response to this article, the Huntsville (TX) Item of April 26, 2015 retorted, "The Chronicle's stance is nonsense, of course, and five writers of letters to the editor published in the newspaper Friday told the paper how wrong it'd been." Local media was nearly unanimous in its support of Blue Bell, and even when some diverged from this same framing of the crisis, other intertextual producers reacted negatively.

From the onset of the crisis, local media had both figurative and literal countdowns to Blue Bell's return. The (Bryan-College Station, TX) Eagle of April 25, 2015 exclaimed, "We can't wait for Blue Bell's safe return." Upon the so-called safe return of Blue Bell products, local media described the excitement among consumers. WFAA-TV, the ABC affiliate in Dallas, on October 27, 2015 announced that Blue Bell could now be delivered "straight to your doorstep." WFAA also published a lengthy article on their website on November 2, 2015 entitled, "Where can I find Blue Bell in North Texas?" The entirety of their article listed locations where Blue Bell products would be available upon the ice cream's return to stores, speaking to the public's support of the company even following the crisis. Customer reactions to Blue Bell's return showed through letters to the editor in local newspapers. The (Bryan-College Station, TX) Eagle of August 29, 2015, ran an editorial entitled, "Welcome back, Blue Bell! You were missed."

Across the state in Waco, the Tribune-Herald of November 2, 2015, reported that customers “applauded” Blue Bell’s return to stores. Making sense of these reactions by local consumers, The (Clute, TX) Facts of September 1, 2015 reported, “Consumers are forgiving when it comes to companies that remedy their mistakes and ask for second chances, especially when they’re selling something we hold dear.”

It is worth noting that all local coverage was not positive about Blue Bell. However, the articles that negatively addressed Blue Bell’s crisis were almost entirely published from letters to the editor. The Abilene (TX) Reporter-News of September 17, 2015 suggested that Blue Bell consumers were “too forgiving” of the corporation post-crisis. The Victoria (TX) Advocate of September 19, 2015 criticized Blue Bell spokesperson, Jenny Van Dorf: “I’m sure that [the spokesperson’s statement] is of little comfort to the families of the three persons who died.” Overwhelmingly, though, local news supported Blue Bell at each stage of the crisis. National news articles were directed at consumers’ potential health risks and assigned blame to Blue Bell for causing three deaths and several illnesses. Local media coverage, which was already greater in quantity than national media coverage, drew sharp contrast with national news in their coverage of Blue Bell’s crisis, and their unique spin shaped the public narrative of this event.

Consumption

Journalists produce and distribute text for the purpose of consumption by an audience. News, in particular, is appropriate for an intertextual analysis because it places the audience on a narrative time frame with other linking texts to tell the story. In an intertextual system, the audience connects these together to assume that a given text exists between its own historicity and further texts that will be formed. Antecedent texts find their way into the present and growing narrative either through journalist reference or, often, as the cultural knowledge of the

journalists unintentionally bleeds into the story. Anticipated texts look forward and predict both the place of the narrative in the society it serves, as well as wager a future effect of the narrative. Intertextual analysis of consumption simultaneously examines texts that informed Blue Bell's crisis coverage and identifies cues to subsequent texts.

Antecedent texts. News coverage is filled with antecedent text because journalists place stories within an existing intertextual narrative. Although Blue Bell's 2015 listeriosis crisis was the first product recall in company history, *Listeria* bacteria were found in production facilities in 2013. Although national media coverage and local outlets distanced from the crisis reported on this historical recurrence, local media turned to the history of Blue Bell products and their place in southern culture. Thus, in local coverage, the historicity was explained through the product, not the crisis. National media outlets emphasized Blue Bell's place in culture while also addressing their 2013 contamination. CNN of April 4, 2015 reported that the 2015 listeriosis crisis was the "first product recall in the 108-year history of Blue Bell Creameries." The New York Times picked up a similar narrative on April 21, 2015, in describing the listeriosis crisis as the "biggest crisis of its 108-year history." Local media followed suit, with over 100 articles in this study using the same language as WFTV-TV, the ABC affiliate in Orlando, FL, on March 13, 2015: "The first product recall in the Texas creamery's 108-year history." The Houston Chronicle of April 24, 2015 explained that, in their history as a company, Blue Bell "built a great reputation with their customers regarding quality and trust in their products." On top of the recall making news, Blue Bell also issued their first large-scale layoffs as a company in the wake of the listeriosis crisis. As the Orlando (FL) Examiner explained on May 16, 2015, Blue Bell was forced lay off one-third of its staff, deepening the loss felt by local communities where Blue Bell is a source of financial support. The (Bryan-College Station, TX) Eagle of April 25, 2015

reported that Blue Bell has historically been such a strong part of local culture that President (and former Governor of Texas) George W. Bush “was known to have it flown in for special events at the White House.” Speaking to its dominance in the ice cream market, the Waco (TX) Tribune-Herald of November 2, 2015 reported that, in 2014, Blue Bell “was the best-selling ice cream brand in the United States.”

National news outlets and local outlets distanced from the source of the crisis had a different take on the events of the crisis, with many citing Blue Bell’s failure to take precaution after an initial contamination scare in 2013. Local sources failed to acknowledge the historical antecedent text of this crisis in 2013 in favor of history of the product in southern culture. According to the Las Vegas Review-Journal of May 7, 2015, “Blue Bell knew about *Listeria* at ice cream plant as early as 2013.” The New York Times of May 7, 2015 explained that a report obtained from the FDA indicates the company “failed to demonstrate” it changed its sanitization practices to prevent future contaminations. The (Chicago) Daily Southtown of May 10, 2015, supported this same claim in stating that “Blue Bell delayed *Listeria* alerts.” The only local source close to the center of the crisis that covered Blue Bell’s 2013 *Listeria* blunder was the Dallas Morning News of May 16, 2015, in an article where Blue Bell “[explained] why it didn’t test its ice cream after first discovering *Listeria* [in 2013].” Even in this case, the local source attempted to explain away Blue Bell’s mistakes. ABC News of May 7, 2015, spoke to a food safety expert who claimed Blue Bell’s inspection reports were “among the worst [the inspector had seen] in his 20-year career.” The antecedent texts in the intertextual system of Blue Bell’s crisis varied depending on proximity to the crisis. In news coverage close to the heart of the crisis, news coverage lamented over Blue Bell’s pristine history as a company. In national

coverage or local stories further from Blue Bell's headquarters, stories focused on Blue Bell's 2013 *Listeria* problem and the preventability of the 2015 listeriosis crisis.

Anticipated texts. News coverage anticipated subsequent events in Blue Bell's grand narrative at multiple stages of the 2015 listeriosis outbreak. Unsurprisingly, local news sources remained hopeful and positive throughout the indefinite recall. National media coverage casted doubt on Blue Bell's *Listeria*-free future. Speaking to the gravity of the situation for many local consumers, The (Woodlands, TX) Villager of May 21, 2015 informed customers that "Blue Bell is in no way tied to Armageddon." The Victoria (TX) Advocate of April 21, 2015 interviewed a customer whose only concerns were on a changed flavor post-recall: "As long as it's still good and delicious when they bring it back, I don't mind." Describing Blue Bell's "near-cultlike following," the Fort Worth (TX) Star-Telegram of April 21, 2015 forecasted Blue Bell's post-crisis success "as long as they communicate going forward." Likewise, during the early stages of the voluntary recall, the Austin (TX) American-Statesman of April 23, 2015 claimed that the contamination and recall would "probably not" be "life-threatening for Blue Bell." The Waco (TX) Tribune-Herald of April 21, 2015 argued that Blue Bell would navigate the crisis successfully because "loyal fans of the treat will...not hold grudges against the company." The Tyler (TX) Morning Telegraph of April 24, 2015 quoted one such fan who was only concerned about which flavors would return to stores first, saying, "[I] hope vanilla and almond mocha fudge are first off the truck. I'll be faithfully waiting." Local media were nearly unanimous in their confidence that the company would bounce back from the *Listeria* contamination. KHOU-TV, the CBS affiliate in Houston, spoke with one customer on April 25, 2015, who claimed, "I have confidence that Blue Bell is going to come back in full force." Even Blue Bell CEO Paul Kruse focused on the company's bright future in the early stages of the recall, telling the

Houston Chronicle of April 24, 2015 that he wants to create “new systems to drive continuous improvement” for the company. KFOR-TV, the NBC affiliate in Oklahoma City, OK, reported on April 24, 2015 that Blue Bell had rebooted its social media, signaling a renewed commitment to customer relations during the recall. The ABC affiliate in Austin, TX, KVUE-TV, on April 21, 2015, commended Blue Bell for “handling the recall in an open, upfront manner,” which they suggested would help their crisis recovery. Fortune of September 25, 2015 noted that Blue Bell has managed to “[build] excitement over its return” while managing extremely harsh blows for corporation, including lawsuits and regulations, as well as the continued struggle to rid its production facilities of *Listeria* permanently.

However, Blue Bell was less often negatively forecasted with regards to their handling of the *Listeria* contamination. National media coverage dominated these types of stories. CBS News of January 11, 2016 interviewed a quality control expert who said, “It’s almost impossible to eliminate all of the bacteria that can cause *Listeria* at facilities with raw materials like those at Blue Bell.” Although Blue Bell had returned to stores in many areas at this point, this coverage from CBS News indicates that the *Listeria* struggle may not have ended. Indeed, in the long term, this quality control expert was correct; as noted by the Houston Chronicle of January 12, 2016, Blue Bell began attempting to calm their loyal customer base “after finding more possible *Listeria*” after their return to stores. Even beyond the health risks, The New York Times of August 12, 2015 claimed the company faced an “uphill battle to win over consumers” who decided to stop buying from the company after the first recall. However, the 2015 listeriosis crisis also had implications as to how Blue Bell operated going forward. WHAS-TV, the ABC affiliate in Louisville, KY, reported on May 14, 2015 that Blue Bell “[agreed] to new rules for selling ice cream.” The Austin (TX) American-Statesman of April 1, 2016 added that Blue Bell

has “upped” training and testing in their facilities. Across the ice cream industry, the Blue Bell recall “may spur reforms,” long-term, as reported by the Austin (TX) American-Statesman of May 3, 2015. Signaling its return to normalcy, the Dallas Morning News of June 3, 2016, headlined: “Blue Bell to reship more flavors, just in time for summer.”

Summary of Results

The research questions identified in this study examined the differences in contribution to Blue Bell’s public narrative as it varied between national and local media sources. The differences between national and local media coverage were analyzed in a threefold intertextual system of production, distribution, and consumption. Intertextual analysis of production indicated that national media gave primacy of voice to government agencies such as the CDC, FDA, and Department of Justice, while local media gave voice to Blue Bell’s loyal customer base. Local journalists implemented interpretive framing through utterances supporting Blue Bell’s image as a lifestyle product with attention to its emotional consumer ties, though national journalists relied on scientific and cautionary framing of the health crisis. Intertextual analysis of distribution showed local media’s treatment of Blue Bell as a unique crisis as compared to other *Listeria* contamination events, while national media juxtaposed other such crises with Blue Bell’s. The distribution analysis further identified the unique contrast of stories within the intertextual network, telling the same story in strategically different ways. Intertextual analysis of consumption, finally, showcased Blue Bell’s history as a 108-year old organization without a history of contamination events. National media and distanced local media sources also covered Blue Bell’s 2013 *Listeria* contamination and the company’s failure to change sanitization practices two years prior to the 2015 recall. An analysis of anticipated texts in the intertextual system showed a generally favorable outlook for Blue Bell because of their loyal customer base.

This analysis examined the ways in which producers (journalists), consumers (news audiences), and the intertextual system itself work together to construct the public narrative of Blue Bell Creameries' 2015 *Listeria* contamination crisis.

CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

This study explored the public narrative of a food crisis involving a lifestyle product in the southern United States. Intertextual narrative analysis of news coverage moves beyond simple frame analysis and instead views news as part of an intertextual system shaping an evolving public narrative. News coverage surrounding Blue Bell Creameries' 2015 listeriosis crisis revealed a vast difference between local and national media outlets' coverage of the story. The local news narrative that emerged from the data treated BB not as a contaminated food product, but as a symbol of local culture. Blue Bell is a top-ten selling ice cream in the U.S., with most of its sales localized in southern states (Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Alabama). As a brand, Blue Bell advertises with nostalgia and engenders consumer relationships based on an emotional connection to the brand. Thus, Blue Bell is a lifestyle product—a product deeply connected to social values and community. This explains the emotional, uncertain reaction of consumers upon the brand's indefinite recall.

Findings of this study suggest two theoretical considerations. First, this study expands understanding of the role of local cultural texts in the framing of crisis. The Blue Bell crisis involved a product with a deeply loyal customer base exposed to a lifetime of Blue Bell marketing and advertising situating the product as part of Southern lifestyle. Findings of this study suggest that when product loyalty is ingrained in culture, local news producers within an intertextual system reframe crisis in terms of social losses, relegating the narrative of danger, illness, and death to antenarrative. Second, findings suggest that in a social food product crisis, media use Aristotle's tragic form as a means of achieving resolution and catharsis among news consumers.

Reframing Crisis

Local media treated Blue Bell not as a contaminated food product, but as a symbol of local culture. The narrative of crisis, thus, was reframed, not in terms of illness, death, and danger to consumers, but as a crisis of loss of a piece of local tradition and customs. The intertextual analysis revealed Blue Bell's portrayal as a cultural symbol, and local media treated the loss of Blue Bell's product as the crisis itself. Thus, the actual crisis—a *Listeria* contamination harming consumers' health and causing loss of life—became the antenarrative, reported only by national media and sources distanced from the product.

The local media reframing of crisis may be, in large part, linked to the positioning of local journalists in the narrative. Boje (2001) treats news producers not as independent actors who bestow narrative upon a public, but as actors within an intertextual system that they both enact and act upon. The results of this study revealed a news narrative detailing Blue Bell's strong cultural connection to consumers where its products are enjoyed, especially in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Alabama. Blue Bell indisputably sells a lifestyle product, and when that product was indefinitely recalled, the public had an overwhelming emotional reaction to the loss of the product from their lives. News coverage in this study reframed Blue Bell's crisis in terms of the overwhelming public reaction—a reaction that Boje (2001) argues news producers also feel as members of the culture and actors in the intertextual system.

Overall, news coverage reframed the crisis as a disruption of consumers' lifestyles. Blue Bell's narrative played out in kitchens and at outdoor barbecues where media interviewed loyal customers not about potential illness, but about loss of Blue Bell's product. News coverage not only controls actors in the narrative, but it also predicts organizational outcomes post-crisis. This finding supports the conclusion of Kim and colleagues (2011) that local journalists have the

burden of shaping coverage based on local interests, but goes a step further to suggest that news producers are actors in an intertextual system, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the culture. Blue Bell's public narrative, as constructed by local media outlets, ignored the true crisis: *Listeria* contaminations and consumer health risks. Instead, local outlets lamented over the loss of the product from local communities and reframed what was newsworthy. In the production analysis, journalists gave primacy of voice to loyal customers and used emotional interpretive utterances to reframe Blue Bell's crisis in terms of the lifestyle disruption of consumers who could no longer buy Blue Bell's products, instead of the legitimate crisis brought on by serious health risks and loss of life resulting from Blue Bell's contamination.

The distribution analysis presents an interesting finding. Local media did not juxtapose other contamination or recall events with Blue Bell's case, suggesting the treatment of Blue Bell's crisis as an isolated incident unlike any other typical food crisis. Finally, the consumption analysis indicated local media did not address Blue Bell's 2013 *Listeria* contamination and instead chose to emphasize the company's status as a cultural icon in their 108-year history. Thus, the true crisis—illness and deaths from listeriosis—became the antenarrative. This suggests that when a lifestyle product is removed from consumers' lives, news media reframe the crisis in terms of the product loss and lifestyle disruption instead of the reasons for the recall itself. When crisis becomes the antenarrative, the public becomes uninformed about the actual crisis and health risks. Therefore, news framing can have impacts on the actual health of the consumer.

Local media's reframing of Blue Bell's crisis supports the findings of Castello (2010) that local media will frame potential rewards over costs if it supports local interests. Certainly, Blue Bell's *Listeria* contamination caused serious harm to consumers, even resulting in the loss

of life. Although logic might suggest that journalists would endeavor to warn consumers of health risks, instead, local media ignored illnesses, deaths, and “watchdog” style reporting in order to protect another local interest: Blue Bell’s products. Early news coverage of Blue Bell’s crisis followed a brief, informative structure. It wasn’t until the expanded, indefinite recall of Blue Bell products was announced that the coverage shifted and local media began reframing Blue Bell’s narrative in terms of a disruption to local lifestyles. Thus, this study suggests that when local interests come into conflict, local media will reframe the narrative in social terms.

The findings also support Entman’s (1989) claim about the persuasive efficacy of letters to the editor or editorial board commentary. Both letters to the editor and editorial board commentaries were prominent in the collected data for this study, and often, these articles were the most heavily framed in support of Blue Bell. However, this study revealed that letters to the editor themselves serve as dialogic intertext, communicating not only about the same issue, but in response to other letters to the editor previously published. Letters to the editor, then, are a significant component of blurring the line between a news producer and news consumer in an intertextual system. Further, letters to the editor helped support the reframing of the crisis as the loss of Blue Bell product from local communities, since they give voice directly to the consumers writing the piece for their local newspaper.

Tragic Form as Cultural Catharsis

Both the national narrative of crisis, and the local narrative of product loss that emerged from the news stories analyzed in this study reflected the emplotted (beginning, middle, end) structure Aristotle categorized as tragic, suggesting that news coverage of crisis is told in the Aristotelian tragic form. In *Poetics* (trans. 1911), Aristotle draws a contrast between epic and tragic form. Epic form, he suggests, is longer and more involved, spanning time and distance, as

compared to tragic form which invokes a short, emplotted structure focused on a single set of events. Designed to relate information about a particular event to an audience, individual news stories are constructed in tragic form. The nature of news writing makes it short and evolving over time, but it also follows a stable story structure.

The divided narratives that emerged from local and national news sources in the Blue Bell crisis represent a unique opportunity for analysis. While the events of the crisis unfolded over eight months, the narrative failed to develop into an Aristotelian epic. Where narrative research has suggested that crisis unfolding over a prolonged time period usually reflects epic form (Boje & Rosile, 2003), the listeriosis crisis framed in the national media and the cultural product loss narrative framed in local media both retained a narrowly focused tragic form. Local media presented a tragic narrative singularly focused on one issue: the loss of Blue Bell products from local communities. This reframing of the crisis lent itself particularly well to tragic form, allowing local media to narrate a focused story, complete with a tragic hero, Sid Bass. Early local news coverage of the crisis mirrored later national coverage in its focus on the finding of *Listeria* bacteria, illnesses, and deaths. In local narrative, however, this early coverage served as exposition to the tragic narrative of product loss. Serving as only exposition, the crisis itself was relegated to antenarrative in the emplotted structure that emerged. The plot structure of Blue Bell's public narrative through product loss involved the exposition (*Listeria* and product removal), rising action (uncertainty over Blue Bell's future), climax (Sid Bass saved Blue Bell with investment), and resolution (Blue Bell returns to market).

Aristotle claims that every tragedy has a tragic hero who saves the story's actors from potential devastation, and in Blue Bell's case, there was a definitive tragic hero. After months of financial losses and uncertainty about the future of the company, local news coverage began to

indicate that even Blue Bell's most loyal fans had lost hope that the company would see revival. Enter Texas billionaire, Sid Bass. Local news coverage framed Bass as tragic hero who single-handedly saved Blue Bell, and thus Southern lifestyles. The results of this study indicate the local media's coverage of the public's overwhelming gratitude of Bass. Thus, Sid Bass' investment in Blue Bell Creameries provided resolution to the reframed crisis of product loss. With Blue Bell back on the shelves, the local media's reframed crisis was resolved, and the local outlets' news coverage quickly evoked that feeling of resolution, praising Bass as the person who saved the company from remaining off the shelves permanently. Interestingly, Bass' emergence as the tragic hero for Blue Bell inspired a number of news articles with heavy undertones of religion and grieving. Coverage described Bass as a savior with the full support of the Blue Bell faithful, supporting the notion that Blue Bell's product loss deeply impacted communities. Additionally, the results indicated loyal customers were grieving and coping through the loss of Blue Bell's products like a member of the family, and unsurprisingly, its return was extremely well received.

Aristotle considered tragedy as the higher form of narration, as compared to the epic, because it holds audience attention to one single story, while epics may be composed of multiple overlapping tragedies. Tragedy plays out before an audience as a neatly emplotted and resolved story that reflects an outside view to the larger confusions and misfortunes audiences may face in their lives. In tragedy, audiences see mirrored a recipe for understanding their own tribulations. Audiences pity story actors, feel fear, and, in Aristotle's estimation, experience catharsis when action is resolved. It is upon the outlet of catharsis, the purging of pity, fear, and confusion, that Aristotle judged tragedy. A good tragic narrative resolves with emotional release.

The tragic framing of the Blue Bell crisis, particularly at the local level, suggests that where audiences are emotionally invested in a product, news narratives shift to offer catharsis. The listeriosis crisis framed in the national media can have no such catharsis, even upon resolution of the action. Audience emotions tied to deaths, illnesses, and fear of future contaminations are left unresolved. At the local level, news producers refrained from juxtapositions with other food contamination events, and avoided giving voice to authorities on food events. The narrative, thus, was packaged as a tragedy of loss of a beloved part of culture, and the emotions of grief over the product loss were resolved with a cathartic framing of the return of the product at the hands of tragic hero Sid Bass.

For food contamination crises, the Blue Bell narrative framing suggests that if audiences can achieve greater catharsis post-crisis through framing of the crisis as an Aristotelian tragedy, news producers can control and moderate audience concerns and feelings about the organization post-crisis. Devoted customers were distraught over the loss of Blue Bell products, but news coverage gave them an outlet to voice loyalty for the company during the crisis. The overwhelming support of Blue Bell in local news coverage helped intertextually sustain a loyal customer base, and through Bass' investment, provided catharsis to those with anxiety over Blue Bell's uncertain future. The ability to achieve this closure and resolution amongst consumers depends on news coverage which develops a narrative supporting Blue Bell through Aristotle's tragic form.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the current study suggest directions for future research. Data collection in this study was confined to news coverage of the 2015 listeriosis crisis. Therefore, this study did not include news coverage of the 2013 *Listeria* contamination event or news coverage of

2016 *Listeria* concerns in chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream. Customer loyalty evaluations as presented through news coverage were confined to reactions from the scope of the 2015 crisis only. Future research could examine longitudinal trends in news coverage of Blue Bell's past and continued contamination events, analyzing how the intertextual system nurtures the narrative of consumer loyalty over time.

This study, too, raises critical questions about crisis news coverage. Blue Bell's case shows an example of local media producing an entirely different narrative than the true crisis, which was only told by national media sources, resigned to antenarrative. News audiences rely on the press to inform them of consumer threats, but when local media reframed the story and avoided evaluating health risks, these news organizations put consumers' health at risk. Future critical research could investigate the ethical implications of reframing narratives of crisis. News coverage of crisis, as told through Aristotle's tragic form, gives substantial power to news producers to determine organizational fate post-crisis. Because Blue Bell was such an established component of southern culture, local news privileged Blue Bell's organizational status in communities and focused on the despair of product loss.

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