



#[Community]strong: how commemorative slogans emerge following crises

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Abstract In the aftermath of a disaster or crisis, studies have long documented aid and support for the affected community, creating a therapeutic space for members to cope with the associated losses. This support can be expressed in a number of mediums including donation dollars, volunteer hours or through well-wishes offered online. One example of this support that has transcended virtual and geographic boundaries and emerged as material culture is the #strong slogan. Within the past 10 years, these slogans use the name of a disaster-affected community followed by “strong” (e.g. El Paso Strong, Boston Strong, Jersey Strong) both online and in material culture (e.g. stickers or Tshirts) to raise awareness and often funds following a tragic event. Using news media of #strong coverage over the past decade, this research investigates how these slogans represent therapeutic communities and contribute to the cultural identity of the affected community during recovery. Our findings reveal that the slogans contribute to community pride and social cohesion thus helping individuals cope with loss. Moreover, the strong slogans present in material culture reflect the unique cultures of each locale and often are associated with local events or iconic places. Importantly, these slogans can foster disaster resilience by maintaining a collective memory of hazards that impacted communities in the past.

Keywords Commemoration · Community identity · Disaster recovery · Material culture · Therapeutic communities

Introduction

On the morning of August 3, 2019, a man walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, opened fire, and killed 22 people while injuring 26 others (Romo, 2019; Romero et al., 2019). In the aftermath of the shooting event, residents of the city, as well as mourners and supporters across the United States, commemorated the violent tragedy by using the hashtag “El Paso Strong.” This example of using a hashtag with a community name followed by “strong” (#strong) highlights the continued, dominant role of the phrase in the post-disaster landscape. In the U.S., #[community]strong has emerged as a common commemorative slogan and become ingrained in the post-disaster vernacular (Marcelo, 2019). Today, the term #[community]strong maintains an online presence as a way to commemorate crisis events; yet it has also transcended from the virtual world to the physical world and is visible on clothing, stickers, and other merchandise.

The origins of the slogan are often attributed to “Livestrong,” the name of the foundation founded by Lance Armstrong in 1997 (MacLaggan, 2012; Marcelo, 2019). Armstrong’s foundation slogan became popular in mid-2004 when Nike began

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production on yellow silicone bracelets that said “Livestrong” as a sign of support for cancer patients (Simpson, 2013). Eighty million bracelets were sold between 2004 and 2013 (when Nike discontinued production on items with the slogan). The Livestrong slogan evolved and inspired the “Army Strong” slogan, which was used for recruitment to the United States Army from 2006 until they began phasing it out in 2015 (Haltiwanger, 2018; Tyson, 2006). The phrase evoked strong emotions by describing the tenacity and dedication of a soldier while reinforcing group identity:

Army Strong is more than an individual Soldier's strength; it's the teamwork of a well-trained squad executing actions on contact. In short, Army Strong is far more than two words; it's the underlying moral fiber, the deep-seated emotions and the total determination every Soldier carries. No one can stop this team - it's Army Strong (Shanks, 2006, np.).

Individuals and communities depend on similar traits, characteristics, and values in the wake of disasters and crises while relying on support from members within and beyond the impacted community (Phillips, 2015).

Although the use of the strong slogan for a disaster or crisis event first appeared in 2011, including after Hurricane Sandy, it was the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, where the slogan became embedded in community identity and as a rally cry for recovery (Marcelo, 2019).

This study focuses on how the strong slogan evolved beyond the virtual world and has become closely associated with community identity following disasters. Despite its prevalence in the post-disaster lexicon and transition into material goods, the use and impact of this commemorative slogan has not been studied in the context of community recovery from a disaster. Therefore, this study identifies #[community]strong as a commemorative slogan with recovery implications and investigates these slogans that emerged following crisis events in the United States from 2011–2019. Specifically, we analyze the evolution of the slogan, the use of the slogan in the physical world, and how these slogans impact the affected communities' identities thus influencing long-term disaster recovery.

Literature Review

The #strong slogan, both online and in material culture, can serve as commemorative activities. Commemoration can take many forms ranging from physical monuments (Zavar & Schumann, 2019) to performances including remembrance marches (John & Carlson, 2016), reciting names of those who perished (Christensen, 2017), or annual memorial marathons (Nelán et al., 2020). Of note, previously analyzed slogans usually commemorate war, political revolts or violence-induced displacements (John & Carlson, 2016) rather than recovery from disaster events. In addition to the variety of formats, commemoration also occurs across the recovery period including temporary, grass-root efforts in the immediate aftermath (Doss, 2008), semi-permanent markers in the ensuing months during short-term recovery efforts (McEwen et al., 2012), and permanent, often government-sanctioned structures, built years later during the long-term recovery period (Zavar & Schumann, 2019).

The growing body of literature on disaster commemoration highlights three key roles that commemoration plays in the recovery process: (1) a means for affected individuals to process the disaster/crisis, work through grief, and measure their recovery progress (e.g. Moulton, 2015); (2) an opportunity for both community members and visitors to remember the impacted place and mourn for a lost landscape (e.g. Zavar & Schumann, 2019; Zavar et al., 2020); and (3) as a risk communication tool to warn of hazards for future generations or those living beyond the impacted place (e.g. Cross, 2020; Eyre, 2007). An examination of these three interwoven roles of commemoration follows.

Commemoration as Resilience

Post-crisis memorials can offer survivors and community members an outlet to publicly express emotions while physically preserving the memory of those lost to the tragedy on the landscape. Commemoration following a disaster or tragic event offers impacted community members a way to grieve, remember, and process trauma (Moulton, 2015). As Doss (2008) argues, “rituals of memorialization are often prompted by emotional states of being such as grief, guilt, and gratitude” (p. 7). For these reasons, memorials

constructed in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy often feel “exorbitant, frenzied, and extreme- or manic” as material objects such as candles, flowers, and stuffed animals fill public spaces (Doss, 2008, p. 7). In this way, the memorial serves as a public space where strangers can share united feelings of grief and in some instances anger (Senie, 2006). Over the longer term, commemoration can become a touchstone to help those affected by the event mark their recovery progress rather than focus on the tragedies themselves (Eyre, 2007).

In addition to remembering loss, commemoration can preserve elements of the pre-disaster landscape including the sense of place. Described as the deep emotional connection to a physical location, sense of place contributes to community identity formation (Schein, 1997). Community identity is crafted by members through shared values, norms, and traditions. These community ties give meaning to how members interact with both people and their immediate environment. When disasters dismantle the built environment, they physically change the landscape, which can alter, or erase entirely, an established community identity thus affecting the recovery and reconstruction process (Zavar & Schumann, 2019). During periods of disruption and change, such as in the aftermath of a disaster, people seek community identity to maintain continuity (Chadirji, 1984). In this way, commemoration can be a tool to preserve community identity lost due to a disaster or crisis; however, often those in positions of power and/or privilege, choose what to remember and what to forget. Thus, potentially erasing community identity by excluding the histories and experiences of members outside the dominant group (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008; Eyre, 1999). This can then influence how the public, and those beyond the community, interpret responsibility, blame, and fault for crises (Simpson & De Alwis, 2008) as the language and images used in the commemoration influence how the audience views the disaster event (Sci, 2009).

Finally, commemoration can serve members both temporally and geographically beyond the affected community. Commemorative objects and performances act as a form of risk communication. By warning of the hazards and associated risks that caused the memorialized event, it can increase the awareness of future generations and those living outside the impacted communities to take mitigation

measures to reduce their own risk (Boret & Shibayama, 2018; Cross, 2020; Hunchunk, 2018; Zavar, 2018). Additionally, commemorations can communicate improvements made to reduce future risk or exposure to a hazard (Eyre, 2007; Paliewicz, 2017). In this way, commemoration can serve as an education tool that extends beyond those impacted by the initial disaster or crisis.

Therapeutic Communities during Recovery

Following disaster events, there is a period of time marked by an increase in altruism where neighborliness, good-will, and philanthropy contribute to collective projects that serve the greater good of the impacted community (Phillips, 2015). This post-disaster outpouring of collective support is termed therapeutic communities. The term is borrowed from the medical and psychology fields, where therapeutic communities are a method of group-participation treatment for individuals who faced a variety of chronic illnesses, addictions, and conditions (Bunt et al., 2008; Jones, 1953; Manning, 1989). Similarly, in a post-disaster setting, therapeutic communities “represent informal mass social and physical support; victims are rescued, sheltered and reassured by fellow community members” (Perry & Lindell, 2003, p. 110). Importantly, this research focuses on the mass social support that emerges following crisis events as represented by the use of the slogan.

Early researchers, such as Barton (1970), assumed that these communities were geographically confined to the location where the disaster happened (Phillips, 2015). However, Miller (2007) found that therapeutic communities emerged among the diaspora that settled away from the impacted areas following Hurricane Katrina, therefore proximity to the impacted area does not seem to be required for a therapeutic community to emerge. Further evidence emerged following the terrorist attacks on 9/11 when planes were grounded in Gander, Newfoundland, Canada. The local community responded by taking care of passengers until they were allowed entry into the United States (Defede, 2002). Additionally, while the emergence of therapeutic communities is generally confined to a specific time period in the aftermath of disaster events, these types of communities are also not always temporally restricted, as evidenced by a

therapeutic community that emerges annually at the Joplin Memorial Race (Nelán et al., 2020).

In contrast to a therapeutic community, corrosive communities may emerge in the aftermath of disaster events, although this is a rare occurrence. Corrosive communities are characterized by, “social disruption, a lack of consensus about environmental degradation, and general uncertainty.” (Miller, 2006, p. 71). Examples of a corrosive community can be seen after the Alaskan *Exxon Valdez* oil spill (Picou et al., 2004) and 9/11 when Muslims experienced an increase in hate crimes (Peek, 2011). Research has shown that technological or human-induced disasters are more likely to result in corrosive communities due to the propensity to seek someone to blame (Blocker & Sherkat, 1992; Picou et al., 2004), which can lead to an “emotional climate” of anger, bitterness, and anxiety (Cuthbertson and Nigg, 1987, p.480); however, corrosive communities are not universal following technological disasters. Hurricane Katrina is largely characterized as a disaster triggered by a natural hazard; however, a more accurate term would be a NaT-ech, given that the hurricane brought catastrophic flooding that led to the failure of the levy systems (Picou, 2009). Following this event there was an outpouring of support through volunteers, which created a therapeutic community that engaged in repairs to the community structure and created an atmosphere of hope for the future (Phillips, 2013). Gill (2007) suggests that these two contrasting types of post-disaster communities (i.e., therapeutic and corrosive) may exist on a continuum that has conflict on one end and consensus on the other. These communities may be present simultaneously or can exist in sequence.

In this paper, we propose that the use of commemorative slogans can create a therapeutic community by creating a sense of hope and support among community members that they are “strong” enough to return to pre-disaster capacities or better. This innovative research is a departure from the traditional framework of therapeutic communities, and the traditional focus on volunteers or altruistic behaviors. Previous research generally investigates the roles of volunteers in the response or short-term recovery stages, when there is an increase in persons traveling into a disaster area to help the community and decrease human suffering (Phillips, 2013). Rather we examine how the commemorative slogans are used across and beyond impacted communities, and how they may create the

same therapeutic effects by increasing community identity, and showing impacted communities the support that they may receive beyond the boundaries of a crisis. This may lead to an increase in community resilience to future events.

Crafting Community Identity in the wake of Disaster

Disasters greatly impact community identity both in the immediate aftermath of the event to years afterwards. Following a disaster event, there is an “euphoric identification with the damaged community” which “appears to observers as if a revival of neighborhood spirit has occurred” (Wallace, 1956, pp. 111).¹ During this stage, volunteers and community members converge on areas in the disaster zone to help with recovery from the disaster event.

However, a disaster’s impact on a community’s identity is evident long after the event itself. In some communities, sports teams and radio stations are named after the types of disasters that previously affected that community and could possibly occur again. For example, the National Hockey League team Carolina Hurricanes, the Major Soccer League team San Jose Quakes, and in Oklahoma City there is a radio station named “The Twister.” Additionally, communities may host annual commemoration events to memorialize those who died as a result of a disaster and serve as a reminder that these events may occur again (Nelán et al., 2020). For example, the Joplin Memorial Run remembers the deadly 2011 EF-5 tornado and the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon commemorates the 1995 domestic terrorist bombing of the Murrah Federal Building. Although these events are annual and may not play into the community’s day-to-day identity, they are consistent rituals within each community and tied to the collective memory of each place.

Post-Disaster Community Identity through Hashtags

Hashtags were initially created by Twitter to aggregate related posts and information through a “crowdsourcing tagging system.” (Giglietto & Lee, 2017) The uses evolved and now hashtags are increasingly used: (1) as a “shared conversation marker,” and (2) by posters to join established virtual discussions (Bruns, 2011). There is substantial research into social media and its relationship

to disaster events (see Palen & Hughes, 2018). This research is not focused on the virtual use of hashtags, but rather how the emergence of the #strong slogan has evolved beyond the virtual arena to become a slogan for community identity following disasters.

Although the #[community]strong slogan appears to be primarily a North American phenomenon, possibly confined to the United States, there are similar slogans that have occurred internationally. Specifically, #JeSuisCharlie (I am Charlie) emerged following the January 7, 2015 attacks in on the offices of Charlie Hebdo, a French satirical weekly magazine, in Paris (Giglietto & Lee, 2017). The hashtag ‘Je Suis Charlie’ was the top trending hashtag within hours of the attack, it was used over five million times within the first 48 h of the attack and was retweeted more than seven million times over that week (Wendling, 2015). Evans (2013) stated that the hashtag ‘Je Suis Charlie’ served the function of fostering or re-thinking of community as “a space(s) of hope and solidarity” (pp.79).

A continuation of the Je Suis hastag, ‘Je Suis Paris’ emerged after the November 13, 2015 coordinated attacks across Paris. Overall, 130 people were killed, 90 of those in the Bataclan theatre, and 413 people were injured (Reuters, 2015). Like the ‘Je Suis Charlie’ hashtag, ‘Je Suis Paris’ (I am Paris) started to trend globally as news of the attacks spread (Alvin, 2015). The phrase, without the hashtag, was used by the Paris Saint-Germain football team for two games in the weeks after the attacks. The press release put out by the club read: “Paris Saint-Germain will honour [sic] the victims with a message in unison with the vibrant solidarity expressed by the French and international football community during the past days” (Guardian Sport, 2015, np.).

While #[community]strong appears to be confined to the United States, there is evidence that commemorative slogans have emerged internationally and tie strongly to community identity. To better understand the growing use of commemorative slogans, this research investigates: (1) How are communities utilizing the slogan “#strong” following disaster or crisis events to frame their community identity? and (2) How do these terms evolve and become part of the common vernacular in everyday landscape?

Methods

To identify the uses of #strong following disaster events, the authors conducted a news article search in Google News and Access World News database for disaster events that resulted in a “strong” slogan following a disaster event or crisis. Focusing on major disaster and crises events, we used the search term “strong” in conjunction with the disaster or crises type (e.g., hurricane, fire, shooting, bombing). We identified major disasters and crises events based on scale, magnitude, and impact using the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)’s billion-dollar disaster list (NOAA, 2020) and the deadliest mass shoots in U.S. history (Lawler and Rummler, 2022). We bound the search dates from 2011, the reported first uses of the #strong (Marcelo, 2019), to 2019. The news articles often referenced other strong campaigns in communities impacted by disasters and crises; we expanded our sample using this snowball technique. The authors purposefully omitted the social media use of these slogans given this research focuses on how these slogans are used beyond their hashtag origins on social media. We selected Google News and Access World News as the search engines because they span a large timeframe, allowing for articles from the year of the event and years since the event, and coverage includes local, national, and international news outlets. Following the initial searches through Google News and Access World News where we identified the disaster events and associated usage of the strong slogan, we conducted a second search using Google search engine to see how these terms were used beyond official news sources. For this search, we used the specific strong slogans identified in the newspaper analysis and presented in Table 1. This aided in our understanding of the evolution and commodification of the slogan into the physical world.

The initial newspaper search yielded a sample of 55 articles from Google News and 420 articles from U.S. News Bank for a total sample of 475 articles; duplicates were omitted. The strong slogan was used across 15 separate events. In addition to this sample of news article, we collected 224 from our secondary Google search, these were primarily from sources such as storefront websites and press releases.

Additionally, the authors independently conducted fieldwork following six events where the

Table 1 Sampled Crisis events using #strong slogan

Year	Location of Event	Hazard Agent	“Strong” Slogan	n	
2012	Northeastern USA	Hurricane Sandy ²	Jersey Strong	6	
			Staten Island Strong	1	
	Newtown, CT	Active Shooter Event at Sandy Hook Elementary School	Sandy Hook Strong	1	
			Newtown Strong	4	
2013	Boston, MA	Boston Marathon Bombing	Boston Strong	263	
			Wicked Strong	1	
			Massachusetts Strong	1	
			Connecticut Strong	1	
	Moore, OK ³	Tornado	Oklahoma Strong	3	
			Student Strong	1	
2016	Orlando, FL	Active Shooter Event and Pulse Nightclub	Orlando Strong	6	
	East Coast of USA	Hurricane Matthew	VB Strong	1	
2017	Texas Gulf Coast	Hurricane Harvey	Texas Strong	50	
			Houston Strong	215	
			Rockport Strong	3	
			Kingwood Strong	1	
		Southeastern USA	Hurricane Irma	Florida Strong	10
				Puerto Rico	Hurricane Maria
		Fuerza Puerto Rico	4		
		Dominica Strong	1		
		Las Vegas, NV	Route 91 Music Festival	(Las) Vegas Strong	30
				North Las Vegas Strong	1
2018	California	Woolsey Wildfire	California Strong	13	
			Malibu Strong	1	
	California/Oregon	Camp Wildfire	Paradise/Butte Strong	34	
2019	El Paso, Texas	Active Shooter Event at a Walmart	El Paso Strong	17	
			915 Strong	1	
	Bahamas	Hurricane Dorian	Bahamas Strong	13	
			Total:	697	

commemorative slogan was used: (1) El Paso, Texas following the Walmart shooting event, (2) Rockport and Houston, Texas following Hurricane Harvey, (3) Moore, Oklahoma following the 2013 tornado, (4) New York City Boroughs following Hurricane Sandy, and (5) Newtown, Connecticut following the Sandy Hook School Shooting. The data from these field experiences, participant and non-participant observations, informed the subsequent data analysis especially coding and thematic analysis (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Where relevant, photographs taken by the authors during these research trips are included. There were no interviews conducted in the field for this research.

Events Represented in the Dataset

Given the search parameters of this study, events included reflect degree of hazard impact and national news coverage. The dataset includes a variety of hazard agents: environmental hazards (tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires) and conflict hazards (active shooter events). Additionally, the dataset includes a range of community characteristics (e.g., demographics, population size, physical characteristics) and geographic regions across the U.S. (Table 1).

Analysis

We analyzed the newspaper dataset using mixed-methods. First, a quantitative content analysis was performed on the newspaper dataset to identify frequencies of slogan use per hazard type and event (Krippendorff, 2013). This dataset was analyzed using descriptive statistics. We then conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to identify embedded themes, normative claims, and prominent uses of the slogan (Fairclough, 1995). Given that language is social practice and a reflection of the social structures and systems in place, the CDA allowed for in-depth analysis of the use, normalization, and evolution of the #strong slogan by the media. Together, these analyses identify how both the media and public engage with and repurpose the popular slogan across geography, time, and disaster events.

Findings

The earliest use of the strong slogan was following Hurricane Sandy, which made landfall in New Jersey in late 2012 (Nutt, 2013). Following this, the slogan appeared alongside major disasters and crises; many of which set records due to the physical characteristics of the hazard or the direct impacts and losses (this is in part reflective of our sampling techniques). For example, 2017's Hurricane Harvey holds the record for the highest tropical cyclone rainfall event recorded in the U.S. and 2017's Hurricane Maria became the deadliest tropical cyclone on record, a spot that was briefly held by Hurricane Harvey and 2012's Hurricane Sandy (NOAA 2020).

The deadliest modern mass shooting events also appeared in the strong slogan dataset including the 2017 Las Vegas music festival (59 killed), 2016 Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL (49 killed), 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT (26 killed) and 2019's Walmart in El Paso, TX (23 killed) (Lawler and Rummler, 2022). As the slogan transitioned from the virtual to physical world, we observed the use of the strong slogan across different mediums including t-shirts, signage, athletics, and art; described in-depth in the preceding paragraphs. We also observed the timelines of recovery related to the use of the strong slogan and consider how the strong slogan is embedded in community identity. Finally,

we discuss the commodification and evolution of the slogan and argue that the strong slogan helps to create therapeutic communities.

A Tangible Presence

The [Community]Strong slogan emerged in a variety of ways to commemorate significant crisis events across different mediums. Our findings indicate that the slogan was frequently found on tangible items such as clothing, artwork, and signage. With regards to clothing, the strong slogan was commonly used on t-shirts following disaster events. The iconic "Boston Strong" t-shirt featuring yellow font on a blue shirt, the colors of the Boston Marathon, was created by two Emerson College students, Christopher Dobens and Nicholas Reynolds as a fundraiser for survivors of the bombing. Raising over \$1 million (USD) the t-shirts became a symbol of resilience and the slogan embedded in disaster-recovery lexicon (Marcelo, 2019). One year after Hurricane Harvey made landfall near the community of Rockport, Texas, the popular tourism town sold "Rockport Strong" t-shirts in the visitors' center (Fig. 1), as observed by the authors. Additionally, the author's observed "El Paso Strong" t-shirts on employees at a local Subway sandwich restaurant in El Paso, Texas (Fig. 2). These t-shirts were sold at large by a local screen printer and proceeds supported the El Paso Community Foundation; as of September 2021, they donated \$160,000 to support survivors and their families (El Paso Business Strong, 2021). These examples spotlight how community members, including local businesses, used tangible commemorative artifacts with the slogan to both keep the crises event relevant in collective memory and foster a sense of community amongst survivors. By electing to wear these t-shirts, they physically displayed that they are members of the community thus reinforcing group identity and the shared values of assisting members in the aftermath of the disasters.

Other commemorative artifacts include the Orlando Strong rainbow pin in remembrance of Pulse Nightclub victims (The Orlando Ribbon Project, 2017) and the Vegas Strong license plates sold on the two-year anniversary of the Route 91 Music Festival as a fundraiser for the Vegas Strong Resiliency Center (Komenda, 2019). Further examples include Texas Strong decals made by fifth grader, Horacio Carreno, as a fundraiser for his classmates

Fig. 1 Rockport Strong t-shirt sold in local chamber of commerce building (Photo by Ron Hagelman 2018)



Fig. 2 El Paso Strong t-shirt on a subway employee. (Photo by author 1)

affected by Hurricane Harvey through the school district’s disaster relief fund (Callahan, 2017) and Saint Archer brewing company’s California Strong IPA, with 100 percent of proceeds going to the California Fire Foundation to help survivors, families of victims, and firefighters (Gusman, 2019). As shown in these examples, the sale of these tangible commemorative products often generated donations to help survivors.

By purchasing these products, people asserted normative value claims of the group and reinforced community identity by displaying the products.

Artwork was represented in many forms, but tattoos emerged as a type of commemoration utilizing the [community]Strong language. A tattoo shop in Liberty, Texas offered Texas themed tattoos with profits aiding local families affected by Hurricane Harvey. At least two of the limited designs featured the word ‘strong’ in the tattoo (one saying ‘Texas Strong’ and another with the word ‘Strong’ over the outline of Texas). The tattoos were offered to focus attention on community response following Harvey. In four days, they completed at least 50 tattoos (ABC13, 2017). Similar accounts emerged after other events. A tattoo artist at West Coast Tattoo Parlor in Las Vegas, “helped raise \$12 K for victims by inking a flurry of ‘Vegas Strong’ tattoos” in the aftermath of the shooting at the Route 91 Harvest festival (Crosby, 2019, np.). Following the Camp Fire in Paradise, California, Ink Majors Body Art created multiple tattoos “designs to memorialize the disaster, often with Ponderosa pines, or the words ‘Paradise Strong.’ The news article states that this slogan “[denotes] the enduring character of those who made it through” (Desert Sun, 2019). These commemorative tattoos offered individuals a sense of belonging and shared group identity (Frankel et al., 2022) while raising funds to support those impacted by crises.

As demonstrated in the preceding examples, many of these tangible strong products were fundraisers to aid in individual and community recovery. Often

tangible products of the slogan originated as fundraisers and then evolved into merchandise, defined as items sold for profit without proceeds contributing to the affected community. Overtime, merchandise frequently became unrelated to the actual disaster or crises event as observed in New York Strong t-shirts. In 2020, New York Strong t-shirts were available through different commercial entities; however, there were no ties to recovery groups, non-profits, or even New York City. The slogan New York Strong was not used in the aftermath of 9/11, rather this slogan was created many years after the event and was used retroactively for commercial products. Despite the time lag after the event, and the different uses of profits, these t-shirts still can promote a shared group identity as those wearing the products are symbolically asserted their connection to the affected community.

Athletics

One of the most visible displays and performances of the commemorative strong slogan was at athletic events. In much of the press coverage of the Red Sox baseball team's 2013–2014 season the slogan Boston Strong appeared, particularly after David Ortiz memorably spoke in the first home game after the Boston Marathon bombings. David Ortiz, the Red Sox hitter stated, "This is our [fucking] city! And nobody gonna dictate our freedom! Stay strong." (Weber, 2015, p. 25a). Additionally, a news article reporting on their championship season stated (Peoples and Melia, 2013):

For fans, players and political leaders who celebrated the Red Sox's World Series title with cries of 'Boston Strong,' the championship provided a jubilant finish to a season that was shadowed nearly from the start by the April bombings at the Boston Marathon.

The strong slogan in these cases expressed a strong connection to place and pride in their city. Given the international attendance of runners participating in the Boston Marathon, the strong connection to place is significant as the crisis event, and use of the strong slogan, expanded community identity beyond the geographical limits of the city. Marathon participants, many of which were only connected to Boston through participating in the marathon, became forever linked to the place through shared survivorship.

These ties were further strengthened when the rally-cry of Boston Strong was integrated into Red Sox games thus maintaining a shared sense of belonging amongst marathon survivors, team members, and fans with affected community members and place.

Athletic events using the strong slogan not only expanded commemoration and community identity beyond the geographic bounds but also temporally. Following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, a marathon team was created called, 'Team Newton Strong,' who participate in marathon events over the course of the year to raise support for survivors. While the marathon members can change annually, the marathon team was still participating in events and raising funds as of 2022 (City of Newton, 2023). The marathon itself holds significance as 26 people died in the shooting, the same number as the miles in the marathon. "After a moment of silence, Team Newton Strong will run each mile for each one of the victims of the Sandy Hook tragedy" (Palumbo, 2014, np.). One member, a pediatrician and parent of a student at Sandy Hook Elementary School during the shooting, explained that "we're going to sprint like we ran that day to get our children, and we're going to fly like those little kids flew out of that horror and to get to the firehouse" (Palumbo, 2014, np). While the marathon team is comprised of Newton-area residents, they travel to marathons to fund-raise thus sharing the commemorative slogan beyond the geographic bounds and preserving community identity for over 10 years after the devastating event.

Tangentially, sports overall utilized the strong slogans to raise awareness and commemorate crisis events. When the high school basketball team returned to the court in Newton, Connecticut following the school shooting event, 'Newton Strong' appeared under the scoreboard (Sullivan, 2012). Helmet decals appear to be a popular method of commemoration in American Football. Following Hurricane Harvey, the University of Houston Cougars football team wore 'Texas Strong' decals on their helmets for a game (Tsuji, 2017). The Ohio State Buckeyes and the Indiana Hoosiers also wore helmet decals with the words 'Houston Strong' with the outline of the state of Texas; both teams had players that were originally from Texas (Kercheval, 2017). Similarly, following Hurricane Irma, the University of Florida, the University of Tennessee, and Tennessee State wore 'Florida Strong' decals (Bacon, 2017).

Adding patches to uniforms was another commonly observed tribute. After Hurricane Maria, the Orlando City Soccer Club added patches on their uniforms that said “Fuerza Puerto Rico Friendly” which loosely translated to Puerto Rico Strong for their friendly match against the Puerto Rican national team. The patches had the flags of both the Orlando city team and Puerto Rico (Delgallo, 2017). Proceeds from the game and an auction of the jersey’s contributed to funds for Hurricane Maria relief. Meanwhile, in baseball, the Houston Astros unveiled a ‘Houston Strong’ uniform patch during their first home game after Hurricane Harvey, which they planned to wear for the rest of the 2017 season. Boyd (2017, n.p.) stated:

In desperate times, we take strength from anywhere we can find it. So perhaps more than we should have, many in Houston found a small bit of strength when our Astros – a group of men who, in many cases, have few other ties to our city than an apartment to keep their belongings – returned home for the first time after Hurricane Harvey with the words “Houston Strong” on their chests.

This is a significant point, as few collegiate and professional athletes hold personal connections to the communities they play for. Yet, the commemorative displays worn by team members generated a shared sense of belonging amongst affected residents, players, and spectators near and far from the site of loss. In this way, the strong slogan reinforced shared group identity and communicated normative values of supporting those impacted. By wearing the strong symbols, players communicated to fans that they themselves were members of the community despite in many cases, limited place attachment prior to the event.

Beyond decals and patches, sporting events were also created specifically to aid in recovery. In the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian, a Bahamas Strong Pro-Am golf tournament was held in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. Proceeds were donated to Hurricane Dorian relief in the Bahamas. Additionally, Justin Thomas, a professional golf player, donated \$1,000 for every birdie he made during the tournament and committed to wearing ‘Bahamas Strong’ golf shoes for the remainder of that golf season

(Wagner, 2019). In total, they raised \$1.8 million for the relief effort.

Moreover, some sporting venues actively involved the crowd in the commemorative activities. The El Paso Locomotives, a professional soccer team in El Paso, Texas, commemorated the victims of the Mass Shooting in August 2019 at their first home game. “Before the game, a 22-s moment of silence was observed while many fans held aloft the El Paso Strong flags they were given. A giant El Paso Strong banner hung over the [supporters club]” (Bloomquist, 2020, n.p.). Additionally, in the 22nd minute of play, the same number as those who died during the shooting event, fans silently waved their ‘El Paso Strong’ flags. This integration of fans into commemorative performances reinforced shared experiences, history and identities thus crafting a unified community. This is particularly significant after the El Paso mass shooting event which was racially- and ethnically-motivated and forced the community to face deeply entrenched white supremacy both locally and beyond (Aguilera, 2020).

Timelines of Recovery

The strong slogans, which appeared abundantly in news coverage in the immediate days and weeks after a disaster event or crisis, resurged at significant points in the recovery process. Specifically, the slogan reemerged at anniversary commemorations and during legal proceedings related to the mass shooting and bombing events. On the one-year anniversary of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting in Orlando, Florida, there was an event called “Orlando Strong: One Year Later: Funders Symposium.” The event was held to hear from the first responders and their memories of the event (Contigo Fund, 2017). This event offered not only commemorative activities to remember those lost but also therapeutic benefits to help reduce the associated traumas of responding to the mass shooting.

A different one-year anniversary also saw a resurgence of the term. At the 2014 Boston Marathon, the one-year anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombing, spectators lined the streets with Boston Strong t-shirts and many runners who were unable to finish the 2013 race due to the bombing, came back to “finish what [they] didn’t finish” and to “tak[e] back

[their] race...the finish line [too]” (Salsberg and Smith, 2014, p. P1B). One news article stated:

...they stepped out of the shadow of last year’s horror and began to heal. Each did so in their own way, as the step of every runner tells a unique tale. But there’s a common thread among all of them: their resilience to run. To stare adversity in the face and never blink an eye. They ran for each other and a glory greater than themselves, showing that triumph can overcome tragedy. Boston has never been so strong. (Weber, 2015, p. 25a).

We also observed a resurgence of the strong slogan at key points during the litigation and trial processes for those responsible for mass shoots and bombing events such as when Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was found guilty for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings and again when the death penalty was his sentence (Crilly, 2015).

The previous examples were all of human-made crisis events, however there is also evidence that these slogans emerge in the recovery stage for disasters triggered by environmental hazards as well. Kingwood Strong, a variant on the Houston and Texas Strong used after Hurricane Harvey, was used at a Texas restaurant chain to demarcate the recovery progress – which highlights a key aspect of commemoration, which is to reflect on how far people and places have come since the event. The commemoration, accompanied by the Hurricane Harvey flood marker

of approximately seven feet of inundation in the store reads in part, “this flood line marker is dedicated to everyone who showed that the passion and perseverance of Kingwood is truly unmatched. Kingwood Strong” (Fig. 3). This permanent graphic display both marks how far the community has recovered since the hurricane, as well as maintains community identity across time through the preserved use of the strong slogan.

Evolution of the term as part of Community Identity and Resilience

The strong slogans represented a symbol of community identity and resilience in the aftermath of disaster events. Following Hurricane Harvey, one reporter stated, “for those in Houston still rebuilding our lives one moment and one piece of drywall at a time, ‘Houston Strong’ isn’t just a slogan or a rallying cry. ‘Houston Strong’ is our burden. Houston is strong not because it comes easy, but because it is who we have to be” (Boyd, 2017, np.). In this case, the strong slogan became an identifier for the community, saying that the strong in that community responded when people were needed.

True strength is often revealed in our worst and weakest moments. Harvey showed us that about our Houston. When the floods rose above our doorsteps, the strong gathered those who mattered to them and waded out into the water – not

Fig. 3 Commemoration plaque (left) in Harris County, Texas restaurant describing the impact of Hurricane Harvey on the area including the “Kingwood Strong” phrase and a ruler showing flood levels (right) (Photos by Alex Greer, 2019)



because they knew what was ahead, but because they knew it was the only direction forward... When a needful hand reached out, the strong grabbed hold and carried it, not because they knew they could save it, but because the strong understood that lifting each other up was the only way to keep us all from being pulled down. (Boyd, 2017, np.).

The way ‘strong’ is used in this passage from the news article illustrates a community solidarity and resiliency following the impacts of Hurricane Harvey. Similarly, after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting event, a 16-year-old Girl Scout stated, “We were together when we were strong, and we’re going to stay together now that we’re Newtown Strong.” The news article stated that the emergent term was a sign of Newtown’s resilience (Sullivan, 2012).

Comparably, a resident of Rockport, Texas created a sign from a piece of plywood and blue spray paint that stated, ‘Texas Strong, Rockport Resilient,’ which became a rallying place in the community following Hurricane Harvey. It was placed near the highway and a year later was still seen as a symbol of hope in that community (Acosta, 2018). Across the community, ‘Rockport Strong’ was seen on t-shirts and signs that community members put up. One sign, on the side of a store, identified as “an unofficial landmark for the city,” (Sabawi, 2018), was stolen in June of 2018 and the community reacted strongly, claiming, “they stole it from the whole community” (Acosta, 2018). One resident stated, “This makes me so sad. Our daughter took her senior picture under [the] sign. It perfectly summed up a hard and crazy senior year.” A \$200 reward was offered by local businesses (Sabawi, 2018) and the sign was returned with a note apologizing for causing grief to the community. These

messages throughout the community are characterized as “sources of inspiration for the community in the months since Harvey wound it’s destructive path through the area” by the CEO of the Rockport-Fulton Chamber of Commerce (Acosta, 2018, np). The loss of the strong sign created a secondary trauma to those already in the midst of recovery. Affected residents developed deep emotional connections to these informal commemorations and drew inspiration and a sense of belonging from the strong slogan.

Beyond this informal commemorative of the strong slogan, one instance of ‘Oklahoma Strong’ emerged as a formal monument project “born after the May 2013 crisis.” Significantly, the monument is not in commemoration of the Moore Tornado itself, rather “it is designed to be a monumental celebration of community and the strength that results as our people come together, Oklahoma Strong” (Oklahoma Strong Monument, 2014, np). In this case, the community chose to not memorialize those who died in the event or the event itself, but rather their own community solidarity. This project has been stopped and the website for it has been taken down as of February 2024.

Following the El Paso shooting, the authors observed that there were multiple strong slogans beyond ‘El Paso Strong’. There were also instances of ‘915Strong’, denoting the area code of the city; ‘ElChucoStrong’, which is a local nickname for the city of El Paso, and ‘FronteraStrong’ (translating to border strong), highlighting El Paso’s strong connection to their location of the geographic border between the United States and Mexico. The various strong slogans spotlighted the different ways that the community identified within the same region. Businesses and city buses around town used the ‘El Paso Strong’ slogan prominently displayed to show their community spirit (Fig. 4). The evolution of the strong

Fig. 4 Images of the El Paso Strong slogan on city buses (left and center) and on a Chick-fil-A sign located on the West Side of El Paso (right). (Photo taken by author 1)



slogan showcased the emergence of sub-community identities especially related to ethnicity and shared cultural experiences. The ElChucoStrong slogan reinforced the presence and identity of the majority-Hispanic community in El Paso while the FronteraStrong slogan linked the experiences of residents of El Paso to residents across the entire U.S.-Mexico border. Given members of these groups were targeted during the mass shooting, the use of these slogans with their integration of Spanish into commemoration is an opportunity to claim identity, belonging, culture, and heritage while displaying resilience in the face of racism.

Another way in which the slogan evolved was geographically. There was evidence of ‘strong’ slogans moving beyond geographic boundaries that are usually associated with community identity. A volunteer that survived the Camp Fire in Paradise, California in 2018 traveled to the Bahamas to help following the impacts of Hurricane Dorian and wore a “Paradise Strong” hat while she worked. She found that while her experiences were geographically separated from those in the Bahamas, as well as a different type of hazard, she felt a kinship with the survivors of Hurricane Dorian (Lawson, 2019). She was able to identify with a broader community of disaster survivors, not just tied to a geographic region. Another example following the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, where the slogans ‘Orlando Strong’ and ‘Orlando Pride’ became part of a larger identity among the LGBTQIA+ community outside of Orlando and across the United States. Possibly the furthest distance of a memorial from the crisis location were two plaques placed on Mars in 2020 in commemoration of the Camp Fire in Paradise, CA. The two plaques will individually read ‘Paradise, California,’ and ‘Paradise Strong’ (CBS Sacramento, 2019). These examples show that not only are these slogans tied to the communities that they exist within, but they also create a bridge between disaster where people can find commonalities in their experiences with these different types of crises.

Discussion

This research focused on how communities utilize the strong slogans in the aftermath of disasters as reported by media, how this can help frame

community identity, and how these terms evolved in physical mediums and are part of the common vernacular. Overall, these slogans appear to cement a sense of community and belonging within the affected area. Strong slogans convey the strength of a community as it recovers from a disaster event and are an effective way for a community to mark their recovery progress on anniversary events, which corresponds with the broader commemoration literature (i.e. Eyre, 2007). As observed in the news media, the cities of Boston, Kingwood, Orlando, El Paso, and Las Vegas all utilized strong slogans on key anniversaries to commemorate the event.

One aspect of the strong slogans that differs from other examples of post-disaster commemoration is that it is not exclusionary (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008; Eyre, 1999). Since the slogan is abstract in nature (beyond the tangible products that it can be printed on), anyone in a community can access it as a way of solidifying their identity as a member of that community and as an individual affected by the disaster event. This inclusivity can contribute to community cohesion and creating a therapeutic community (Perry & Lindell, 2003).

Although this research focused on the strong slogan following disaster events, and their place in the community, these slogans reach beyond disasters and into the common vernacular. One example is “Oskar Strong,” which emerged in December 2019 to support Oskar Lindblom, who plays for the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team. He had been diagnosed with Ewings Sarcoma and the slogan emerged to raise awareness of the disease and to show support for Mr. Lindblom (Kimelman, 2019). This example signifies that strong slogans have moved beyond community identity following disasters and have emerged as a successful way to raise awareness and funds for a variety of causes.

However, while this term is greatly associated with raising funds and awareness, it has also been co-opted by private companies in order to turn a profit and benefit from individuals who identify with various strong slogans. One author noted two separate instances of t-shirt sales following Hurricanes Harvey and Sandy bearing “Texas Strong” and “New Jersey Strong” slogans. These products did not advertise proceeds being directed to any of the fundraising efforts following these storms. As a result, while this slogan seems to emerge after most major events in the United States

and is a significant symbol for community identity and resilience, it is also becoming diluted in our culture beyond disasters.

In this research, we found evidence of therapeutic communities attached to the strong slogan. Individuals characterized their communities as strong, resilient, and unique in their ability to work together to overcome the challenges of the disaster. While research has shown that this is not unique to one specific place, and is a common feature after disasters (Phillips, 2013), it is telling that these communities characterized their communal identity and motivation to help one another. There was no evidence of these slogans being used in corrosive communities, rather they could have potentially warded off corrosiveness that would have countered the message of community resilience and coming together.

Additionally, the research indicates that these therapeutic communities, defined as an “informal mass [of] social and physical support” (Perry & Lindell, 2003, p.110), are not confined to a geographic location. This finding corresponds with the literature that therapeutic communities can exist beyond the immediately impacted community (Miller, 2007). Our findings show that, while generally these slogans speak primarily to the impacted community, they can spread beyond one community and speak to a broader geographic area or those with similar disaster experiences. For example, the woman wearing a “Paradise Strong” hat in the Bahamas found a broader community of disaster survivors. This parallels past research that disaster volunteers can bond with other disaster volunteers, even if they have never served together or even after the same event (Nelán, 2021). It is the similar experiences that build a comradeship when they first meet. The fact that the strong slogans have emerged following a variety of events across the United States, and in some cases beyond its borders, creates a familiar term for survivors. These individuals can potentially find others who have experienced similar events in their lives and can identify common ground. Further evidence of a broader community emerging after a disaster is the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting where strong slogans became a rallying cry for the broader LGBTQI communities across the nation. These slogans not only convey community identity and resilience but speak to a broader message as well that bridge various types of crises and disaster events. While their primary role seems to be that

they create a slogan that connects members within an affected community, it is possible that a larger impact is the connection it creates across affected communities in the future.

Finally, these slogans can aid in building long-term disaster resilience through commemoration. The literature indicates that commemorative objects or performances can communicate hazard risk across space and time, by increasing awareness and maintaining a memory of the event in the collective memory (Boret & Shibayama, 2018; Cross, 2020; Hunchunk, 2018; Zavar, 2018). If these slogans remain in use for the impacted community, as demonstrated by the reprinting of strong slogans in news media during anniversaries, then this can preserve the collective memory and the recognition that if these hazards occurred before then they can occur again. This can potentially increase the resilience of a community by maintaining support for increased safety or mitigation measures. These hazards have the potential to repeat themselves, therefore if the impacted community remains aware then they can increase preparedness efforts for the long term.

Conclusion

This study addressed the use of strong slogans in news media following disaster events and their role in creating therapeutic communities and commemorations of those events. These slogans have emerged within the last 10 years and are a common way of facilitating community cohesion and a way of coping with the aftermath of disasters. They can also be used to create further resilience for a community by maintaining a collective memory of past hazards that have impacted the area and ultimately, effecting future risk mitigation decision-making. Overall, these slogans appear to have a positive impact on disaster affected communities and create a shared space where those affected can be proud of how their community came together and recovered from these events.

Although this initial research focused on the use of the strong slogan in material culture, a limitation of the study, additional research is needed to understand how individuals affected by the disaster/crisis event perceive and engage with the slogan related to community identity. Future work should also expand event types, scope of impact,

and geographic locations including an investigation in how the Strong slogan was repurposed and used during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest There are no conflicts of interest in this research and no interviews were conducted that would require informed consent.

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