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Responding to a Rumor: How Crisis Response Strategies Influence Relationship Outcomes

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Responding to a Rumor:
How Crisis Response Strategies Influence Relationship Outcomes

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of crisis communication messaging strategies on the relationship between an organization and its key publics. This study found that none of the strategies tested had a significant impact on the relationship between an organization and its publics, however some strategies consistently influenced a relationship more than others.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Understanding an organization's relationship with its key publics is vital to that organization's prosperity (Grunig & Hon, 1999). Research attempted to link SCCT strategies to changes in relationship outcomes (Ki & Brown, 2013), but none have studied a rumor messaging strategies specifically. A rumor, much like a natural disaster, is mostly out of an organization's control (Coombs, 2007). Rumor is a crisis that may or may not have anything to do with organizational wrongdoing. A rumor disguises itself as another type of crisis, which if believed by the organization's key publics can disrupt public safety, profits, and reputation (Coombs, 2007).

The literature presents the development of the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and the possible link to the relationship between an organization and its publics. The root of SCCT lies within the image repair theory in which different responses to crises are suggested based on that organization's history, crisis responsibility, and crisis type (Coombs, 2007). This theory can be paired with the organizational-publics relationship model that measures relationship elements to uncover how SCCT message strategies influence publics' relationships with a given organization.

The purpose of this study was to show the effects of crisis communication message strategies on an organization's relationship with its key publics, and intended to further explore the changes in relationship outcomes (Ki & Brown, 2013) using suggested response strategies (Coombs, 2007) to battle a crisis resulting from rumor.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Coombs (2007) describes crisis management as a critical function for an organization, and he suggests that SCCT is the most in-depth way to prepare and deal with a threat. According to Coombs, failure to prepare can seriously harm stakeholders, result in losses for an organization, or ultimately mean the end of the organization (Coombs, 2007).

An organization's stakeholders can affect the achievement of an organization's objectives (Rawlins, 2006). Rawlins provides examples of stakeholders as: employees, customers, shareholders, communities, and suppliers. Publics, like stakeholders, are recipients of the organization's messages, but are separated by how they receive that message. Organizations choose stakeholders through their marketing strategies, recruiting, and investment plans, but publics choose the organization and provide their attention (Grunig, 1992).

Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as any significant threat to an organization that can have negative consequences. The threat is potential damage to the organization, its stakeholders, and the industry (Coombs, 2007). Coombs identifies three types of threats: public safety, financial loss, and reputation loss. These three threats are interrelated as one may cause another (Coombs, 2007).

A threat is the potential damage a crisis could inflict on the organization's reputation if the organization does not act (Coombs, 2007). Coombs (2007) argues that three factors shape the reputational threat: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior reputation.

In the mid-1990s, Coombs pioneered the use of the attribution theory, which was previously used by Heider (1958) and Weiner (1972), in crisis management and public relations (Coombs, 2007). His research into crisis communications paired certain image repair strategies with crisis situations, which later provided the framework for SCCT. The theory suggests crisis managers pair image repair strategies to the reputational threat of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). The majority of research relied on the link between attribution of crisis responsibility and the reputational threat. According to the theory, crisis communicators must follow a process with two steps to figure out the reputational threat posed by the crisis: understanding the attributed responsibility and examining the organization's prior reputation and crisis history (Coombs, 2007). According to Coombs, the theory presents a framework for understanding how to protect an organization's reputation. SCCT identifies important aspects of the crisis situation and how they influence attributions of responsibility and the reputations held by stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Crisis response strategies are used to repair the image or reputation and reduce negative effects. This theory lays out messaging strategies and responsibility attributes as a model for crisis communications.

The message strategies developed by Coombs are built from image repair theory strategies. According to William Benoit, the scholar credited with establishing image repair theory, the theory assumes that communication is goal-oriented and focuses on restoring or protecting reputation (Benoit, 1995). "Approaches to understanding verbal attempts designed to restore sullied reputations share assumptions concerning the importance of reputation or face, its susceptibility to attack, and the need for verbal means of redress," stated Benoit (p. 63). When our image or reputation is threatened, we are driven to alleviate the problem. The way these

image repair strategies function may be understood through analysis of the attacks or complaints (Benoit, 1995).

Benoit (1997) recognizes that attorneys may recommend that their companies deliberately avoid using certain image repair strategies to lessen the risk of litigation. He argues that the image repair theory is a viable approach in developing and understanding messages that respond to an organization's image crisis (Benoit, 1997). Image repair theory requires an understanding of two key components to the crisis or threat: (1) the accused is held responsible for an action, and (2) that act is considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). "Rather than describe the kinds of crisis situations or the stages in a crisis, the theory of image restoration discourse focuses on message options," stated Benoit (p. 64).

Benoit's (1995) image repair strategies are: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Denial strategy involves denying the offense took place or denying that he or she performed the offensive action. The evading responsibility strategy involves four variants: scapegoat by claiming provocation, defeasibility by pleading lack of information, by claiming the offense as an accident, and by claiming the offense may be justifiable. Reducing offensiveness strategy tries to reduce the level of negative feelings experienced by the audience by bolstering, minimizing the offense, and by placing the offense in a different context. Corrective action strategy promises to correct the problem that may have caused the offense. Mortification strategy involves an outright apology, admitted responsibility, and a request for forgiveness (Benoit, 1995).

Image is usually determined by the stakeholders' and publics' perceptions of the organization or brand as a result of words or actions of that organization or brand. An organization's reputation is normally damaged or threatened when the organization is held

accountable for an undesirable event. True or untrue, public perception is the only ingredient necessary to damage a reputation (Holtzhausen, 2007).

In 1996, Coombs and Holladay acknowledged the challenges crisis communication researchers faced in the previous several years, such as discovering the range of response strategies and finding the best response strategy for a given crisis type (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). They gave credit to Caillouet (1994), Benoit (1992), Hobbs (1995), and Ice (1991) for helping meet one of those challenges to find an appropriate range of crisis response strategies. Coombs and Holladay attempted to build on Benoit's (1995) research and meet the other challenge of finding the best response for different situations. This is where attribution theory first comes into play for crisis communications research. "One consistent theme in communication research is that situations influence the selection of communication strategies" (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p. 279).

According to Coombs (2004), people will attribute the cause of a crisis to an individual involved in the crisis or to an external force. These attributions of responsibility indicate if an individual believes the cause of the crisis could have been prevented or controlled (Coombs, 2004). "If stakeholders believe an organization could control a crisis, they will also hold the organization responsible for the crisis," stated Coombs (p. 265). Messages that people create explaining a crisis can shape attributions and feelings created by those attributions. According to Coombs (2004), crisis managers can use crisis response strategies to shape attributions of the crisis and perceptions of the organization itself (Coombs, 2004).

People naturally seek explications for why things happen (Rickard, 2014). Individuals weigh the contributions of various factors to a given outcome and then figure out the pattern with which such factors and effects relate to each other (Rickard, 2014). Stakeholders' observations

influence how they determine the cause of a crisis, whether it's from actions, or inactions, from an organization or someone outside the organization. "Causal attribution of a given event is based on two additional properties: (1) its controllability: the extent to which the cause is perceived to be under personal or situational control, and (2) its stability: the extent to which the cause is perceived to vary over time" (Rickard, 2014, p. 514). According to a study by Rickard (2014, p. 514), variations in attribution by risk perception, respondent attribute, and experience-related variables are "instructive from a practical perspective in that they reinforce the adage that communication to publics should not be envisioned as 'one-size-fits-all'."

Coombs and Holladay used three dimensions relating to attribution theory: stability, external control, and personal control (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Coombs and Holladay suggest three ways crisis strategies might affect an organizational image: (1) convince stakeholders there is no crisis, (2) have stakeholders see the crisis as less negative, or (3) have stakeholders see the organization more positively (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Their research developed a category system of crisis types. The four types are: (1) accidents [unintentional and internal], (2) transgressions [intentional and internal], (3) faux pas [unintentional and external], and (4) terrorism [intentional and external] (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). The study found that "crisis response strategies can lessen the reputational damage by mitigating the affective feelings generated by the attributions and/or altering the attributions themselves" (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

In 1999, Coombs noted that a significant part of crisis communications is devoted to detecting and preventing crises. "It is a mistake to believe an organization can avoid or prevent all possible crises" (Coombs, 1999, p. 125). He acknowledges building from the efforts of Benoit (1995) and his own research. At that time, crisis responses and crisis management were

still growing rapidly as an area of study. Literature was divided into form and content. Form referred to how a crisis response should be presented. The quicker the response, the quicker the information void is filled. This quick response limits speculation and misinformation (Coombs, 1999). Content involved the messages in the response. “Information and compassion are the two dominant message factors noted by crisis experts” (Coombs, 1999, p. 125).

According to Coombs (2004), previous research of SCCT suggests that an organization’s previous crises and history “affects the reputational threat posed by a current crisis when that crisis results from intentional acts by the organization” (Coombs, 2004, p. 265). Results from Coombs’ study show that a “history of similar crisis intensified the reputational threat of a current crisis even when the crisis arose from the victimization of the organization or from an accident, rather than from the organization’s intentional acts” (Coombs, 2004, p. 265).

After years of research, Coombs unveiled the SCCT in 2002. The purpose of the theory is to “explain a comprehensive, prescriptive, situational approach for responding to crises and protecting the organizational reputation” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 165). Figure 1 below represents the variables and relationships in SCCT.

Best practices for the initial crisis response according to Coombs are: be quick and respond within an hour; be accurate; consistently inform spokespeople; public safety is top priority; use all available communication channels; express concern; include employees; and prepare to provide stress counseling (Coombs, 2007).

According to Coombs, the theory lists nine message strategies, depending on the level of responsibility: (1) attack the accuser, (2) denial, (3) scapegoat, (4) excuse, provocation, defeasibility, accidental, good intentions, (5) justification, (6) reminder, (7) ingratiation, (8) compensation, and (9) apology (Coombs, 2007).

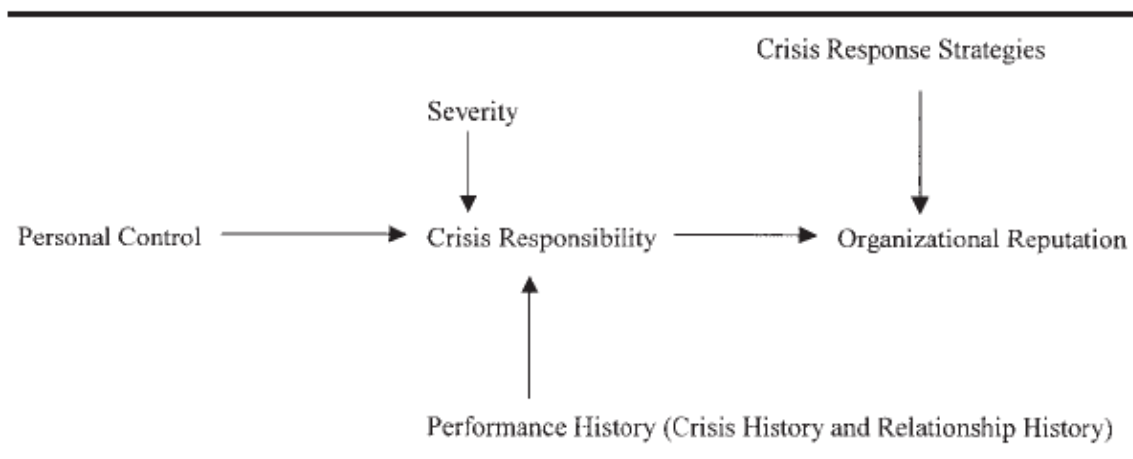


Figure 1: Variables and Relationships in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Source: Coombs & Holladay, 2002

There are three groups of crisis types by attribution of responsibility with a few crises in each group. Victim crises come with minimal crisis responsibility. Crises in the victim category include natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and product tampering or malevolence. Accident crises come with low crisis responsibility. Crises in the accident category include challenges by stakeholder, technical error accidents, and technical error product harm. Preventable crises come with a strong crisis responsibility. Crises in this category include human-error accidents, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeed (Coombs, 2007).

Coombs admits crisis communications is a vast field that covers many theories and it is a pragmatic field (Coombs, 2008). Coombs states “crisis communication theory needs to go beyond the explanatory function of theory to prediction and control functions.” To be predictable, one must anticipate outcomes and provide suggestions for appropriate actions (Coombs, 2008).

Others have used SCCT (SCCT) as a base for further research into crisis communication (Ki & Brown, 2013; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2011). With many

factors involved in the theory from crisis preparation and previous crisis history, to message strategies and post crisis communication, researchers have plenty of areas to focus on. Shortly after SCCT was developed, some researchers used the image repair theory to eventually find that timing and organizational history play large roles in public perception. These are items Coombs also acknowledges in SCCT.

A study by Holtzhausen and Roberts involves a content analysis of media releases and media reports relating to a series of sexual assaults at the Air Force Academy in 2002. This study investigates the effectiveness of image repair strategies and the usefulness of contingency theory perspectives in crisis management (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). The study found that “communicating during crisis is a dialectic process where the conflict of the situation serves to change the perspectives of the institution and the media as the crisis proceeds” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 165).

“Findings also suggested that a proactive approach was most effective in generating positive media coverage. Bolstering was the most effective image repair strategy while apologizing was ineffective.” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 165)

This study pointed to Benoit’s formulation of image repair theory and notes that most strategies in image repair studies deal with an organization’s context in the crisis and do not look at causal research on crisis response. Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) mention that this is one of the problems with most studies of image restoration. “Causal studies show multiple issues affect an organization’s ability to rescue its image after a crisis” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 165). Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) also mention that the “level of crisis responsibility and crisis type affect the reputation of an organization and should be considered when image repair

strategies are considered. Other factors impacting image repair are perceptions of crisis responsibility, crisis type and organizational reputation.” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 165)

The study lists Benoit’s five image repair strategies as denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. A communicator can use denial as simple denial by claiming it did not perform the act, or just shift blame saying another party is responsible (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). One can use evasion to argue that the critical action was provoked, argue defeasibility due to lack of information or ability, claim it was an accident or claim good intentions. Communicators can reduce offensiveness by bolstering and stressing its good traits, minimization, differentiation by pointing out similar issues by another organization that may be more offensive, transcendence, attacking the accuser or compensating the victim (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Corrective action offers a plan to solve or prevent a problem. Finally, mortification is basically being apologetic. The study also touches on contingency theory as it relates to strategic intent and complexity. (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009)

In conclusion, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) determined that studying image repair strategies remains problematic. They pointed out weaknesses such as the inability to correlate strategies used in media releases and news reports because of the difficulty to determine what news coverage resulted from specific news releases. “At no time is communication more important for an organization than in time of crisis” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 165).

“Reputation might well be a key concept, which means that the foundations for weathering a crisis might have been laid many decades before the crisis took place. Embracing complexity might provide more adaptability to weather the crisis than a fixed approach that does not address the unique issues raised during every crisis.” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 165)

Claeys and Cauberghe (2011) lay out two types of crisis communication strategies: crisis response strategies and crisis timing strategies. According to SCCT, organizations should select a response strategy based on the responsibility attributed to the organization or public figure. “Research has confirmed that in case of a preventable crisis (a crisis that could be prevented by the organization which therefore holds a high degree of responsibility for the crisis), crisis managers should use accommodating rebuild strategies (e.g., apology)” (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2011, p. 83). A timing strategy, or stealing thunder, is a proactive strategy defined as “when an organization steals thunder, it breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties” (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425). The goal of this strategy is to reduce the crisis damage, because if an organization does not disclose incriminating information, its opponents will, with twice as much impact (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2011). This study finds explanations in other theories and hypotheses for reasons behind this strategy’s effectiveness.

Claeys and Cauberghe (2011) state these are some of the explanations: “According to the inoculation theory, stealing thunder offers organizations the opportunity to warn stakeholders about an upcoming attack, and inoculate them with a weaker version of the attack. The change of meaning hypothesis on the other hand proposes that when organizations reveal negative information, stakeholders will attempt to reconcile the apparent paradox by changing the meaning of the disclosure in order to make it consistent with their existing beliefs about the organization. Other possible explanations that have received attention are the framing hypothesis, according to which an ex-ante crisis timing strategy works because it allows organizations to frame the crisis in their own terms and downplay its severity, and the

commodity theory, according to which an external attack loses its value after an organization has self-disclosed the same information first.” (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2011, p. 83)

Further analysis of SCCT is needed on a micro-level, similar to Claeys and Cauberghe (2011), as well as Holtzhausen (2009). Coombs (2007) alluded to the theory advancing to possibly include other predictable categories, or being used to advance related theories. Throughout the years, it is evident that this theory continues to grow. The use of social media provides a whole new arena to test the theory. Similar to studying the timing of response strategies, research into specific message strategies is needed. Although rare, situations do arise where very little information is known about the crisis, other than the fact that one occurred. The Attribution Theory gives insight to an organization’s reputation with stakeholders during these times. Crisis attributes may change when more information is known, thus making the initial response even more important. As Coombs (2007) and Benoit (1997) state, the initial crisis response is crucial to the organization’s livelihood. It is detrimental to the organization and its stakeholders to respond incorrectly.

According to Coombs (2007), SCCT argues that crisis managers match their reputation repair strategies to the reputational threat of the crisis situation. Crisis managers should use increasingly accommodative strategies as the threat intensifies (Coombs, 2007). SCCT offers many messaging strategies depending on the level and type of crisis. Coombs (2007) categorizes rumor as "Minimal Crisis Responsibility" and lists four messaging strategies for that category (Coombs, 2007). He suggests denial and attack the accuser strategies are best used only for rumor crises (Coombs, 2007). Stealing the thunder method would help in crises situations, but in the case of a rumor, being transparent and having a clean organizational slate may be the organization’s best hope. Coombs defines a rumor as "false and damaging information being

circulated about your organization" (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). Depending on the organization's ethical approach or its loyalty to a legal team's influence, a rumor could also be categorized as damaging information that has not or will not be proven as fact, rather than simply false information.

Oh, Agrawal, and Rao (2013) claim a rumor comes from collective and improvised information seeking and exchanging behavior between people to control tension and solve a problem. Rumors spread when a collaborative transaction occurs in which community members offer, evaluate, and interpret information to reach a common understanding of uncertain situations (Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2013). People tend to seek information initially from reliable channels such as the mainstream media to make sense of uncertain situations. According to Oh, Agrawal, and Rao (2013), "At this initial stage, if people in the affected community fail to obtain relevant and timely information, they begin to mobilize informal social networks such as friends, neighbors, local news, and other possible sources" (p. 407). From a social psychological perspective, a rumor functions as an effort to reach a common understanding of an uncertain situation and relieve tension (Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2013). Spreading a rumor is intended to help the community adapt to an unclear situation, while the level of tension is reduced (Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2013).

Oh, Agrawal, and Rao (2013) reference research by Allport and Postman (1947) throughout their study. Allport and Postman (1947) show that the theme of a rumor must be important to both the message sender and receiver. The truthfulness of the story must be masked with ambiguity (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 501). If the message is not important, there is no incentive to pass it along. If the message is not ambiguous to a degree, then it is seen as fact that

does not need to be interpreted or elaborated on (Allport & Postman, 1947). “It is true that rumor thrives on lack of news,” Allport and Postman (1947) state.

Organizational-Publics Relationship

Grunig and Hon (1999) created a set of guidelines that public relations professionals can use to measure relationships. Through their research they found that outcomes of an organization’s long-term relationships with its stakeholders could be measured by focusing on six elements of relationships. These six elements are: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship (Grunig & Hon, 1999). Control mutuality is the “degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another” (Grunig & Hon, 1999, p. 18). Trust is defined as one party’s confidence level and the willingness to open oneself to the other party (Grunig & Hon, 1999). Satisfaction is the “extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced” (Grunig & Hon, 1999, p. 18). According to Grunig and Hon (1999), commitment is the extent of each party’s belief that their relationship is worth spending energy and effort to promote and maintain. “In an exchange relationship, one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future” (Grunig & Hon, 1999). Finally, Grunig and Hon (1999) describe communal relationships as one in which “both parties provide benefits to the other because they are genuinely concerned for the welfare of the other, even when they get nothing in return” (Grunig & Hon, 1999, p. 18). To measure the relationship outcomes with stakeholders, Grunig and Hon (1999) suggest using a questionnaire with a 1-to-9 scale to indicate the extent to which a stakeholder agrees or disagrees

with each statement. A short list of suggested statements according to Grunig and Hon (1999) for each element can be found in the Instrumentation section of this study.

Grunig and Hon (1999) warn against measuring reputations on a sample of the general population. “Many of the people who completed the questionnaire might not actually have had much involvement with the organizations they were asked about” (Grunig & Hon, 1999). The best way to collect a sample is to administer the questionnaire to known publics. Examples of known publics include employees of an organization in question or residents of a community in question (Grunig & Hon, 1999). “By measuring the perceived quality of relationships, we can measure the relational forces that usually explain why organizations have good or bad reputations” (Grunig & Hon, 1999).

Grunig and Hon (1999) give an example of Maryland researchers attempting to measure its relationship to active and passive publics. Active and passive publics are part of Grunig’s (1990) Situational Theory of Publics (STP). STP states active publics must identify an issue as a problem, believe that it affects them personally, and believe there are no constraints on their ability to act regarding the issue. In the example, researchers segmented respondents into active and passive publics for each organization to see if the different types of publics rated their relationships with the organization differently. Grunig and Hon (1999) do not include the results of the Maryland study. They acknowledge their attempt to show the usage of the OPR questionnaire and preparation of the study only.

As Grunig and Hon (1999) suggest, future research should correlate the use of successful strategies for maintaining relationships with the developed relationship indicators. Further research should be used to uncover evidence on which strategies are most effective in building good long-term relationships with strategic publics (Grunig & Hon, 1999). An example of

further research could include SCCT message strategies with the use of an OPR questionnaire to measure effects of these strategies.

Ki and Brown (2013) admit that since the development of SCCT, researchers have tried to explore the relational approach to crisis communications. Organizations try to cultivate relationships with their publics. This cultivation plays a large role in how those publics perceive the crisis and the organization (Coombs, 2007; Ki & Brown, 2013). These cultivated relationships between an organization and its publics shape how the organization should respond during a crisis (Coombs, 2000). According to Ki and Brown (2013), “ Although research has linked relationship outcomes and crisis communication with a specific focus on crisis response strategies, no effort has been made to explore which of the relationship quality outcomes—satisfaction, trust, and commitment—are most influenced by certain crisis response strategies.”

Ki and Brown (2013) measured OPR using the scale developed by Hon and Grunig (1999) to determine the effects of crisis response strategies on relationship quality outcomes, and the links to relationship quality outcome indicators. Ki and Brown (2013) note that effects of a crisis on attributes of OPR and relationship links have not been tested. Two of their study’s hypotheses were proposed from a crisis communications perspective: (1) The degree of satisfaction will positively influence the degree of trust; (2) The degree of trust will positively influence the degree of commitment (Ki & Brown, 2013).

According to Ki and Brown (2013), “Crisis communications researchers are moving away from using case studies and adopting experimental designs due to the control they provide researchers over several factors” (p. 363). Ki and Brown used a between-subject experimental design through a questionnaire on a website. In total, 352 students from two universities participated in the experiment. Each student was randomly assigned to each stimuli and one

manipulation material. Each student was given one of five websites with one of five questionnaires (Ki & Brown, 2013). Ki and Brown's study (2013) included crisis response strategy, attribution of crisis responsibility, and relationship quality outcomes as the three variables.

In the Ki and Brown study (2013), the crisis response strategy variable was an article about a financial crisis that threatened to cancel classes for the upcoming semester and delay graduation. This crisis type was chosen due to its direct impact on the students. "The stories were manipulated using statements from a university spokesperson that used one of four SCCT crisis response strategies chosen from each posture," according to Ki and Brown (2013, p. 363). The control consisted of information from all four articles without the crisis response strategy. To measure the relationship quality outcome variable, Ki and Brown (2013) used a short OPR scale with just 16 items and four dimensions of control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment. These items were measured with a 7-point Likert scale (Ki & Brown, 2013). Ki and Brown (2013) measured this variable before and after exposing the participants to the stimuli and it was used as a dependent variable.

After performing an ANOVA test on the five groups, the analysis of their study did not find any significant difference in the attribution mean scores across those five groups (Ki & Brown, 2013). The relationship score from the OPR questionnaires was based on the difference between the pre- and post-relationship mean scores for each of the four relationship indicators. The crisis response strategies had no significant impact on the relationship quality outcomes (Ki & Brown, 2013). According to their studies findings, all post-measure mean scores of relationship outcomes were lower than the pre-measure scores (Ki & Brown, 2013).

“This indicates that after participants learned about the existence of a crisis in the organization, their perceptions of their relationship with organization were more likely to be negatively affected. However, the correlation analysis between pre- and post-measures of relationship outcomes across the four indicators showed a strong positive association” (Ki & Brown, 2013, p. 363).

Purpose and Hypotheses

The review of literature identified a gap in our understanding of the impact of rumors and rumor responses on the organizational-public relationship. The purpose of this study was to uncover how SCCT message strategies influence publics’ relationships with a given organization by pairing SCCT message strategies with the organizational-publics relationship model that measures relationship elements.

Literature in SCCT, as well as OPR, suggests the target audiences are stakeholders determined by the organization in crisis. These stakeholders may be individuals or groups that drive the bottom line for the organization. An organization should value its relationship with key stakeholders due to the direct influence stakeholders have on the outcome and recovery from a crisis. Pairing SCCT with OPR could connect messaging strategies with measurement of key components of stakeholder relationships. Understanding how an individual processes a crisis communication message from a rumor-based crisis is vital to the crisis response efforts. Equally important is how the same individual processes the rumor. Coombs found that message timing plays an important role in crisis communications. It may be difficult to beat a rumor in timing as a rumor goes largely unknown to an organization until it has circulated.

H1: The use of the denial strategy will result in a higher relationship quality outcome mean than the other strategies.

H2: The use of the attack-the-accuser strategy will result in a higher relationship quality outcome mean than the control.

H3: The use of the excuse strategy will result in a lower relationship quality outcome mean than the control.

H4: The use of the justification strategy will result in a lower relationship quality outcome mean than the control.

The following sections present the methodology, procedure, experimental treatments, participants, and instrumentation in an attempt to test these hypotheses. Methodology details the experimental design and the different groups. The procedure describes a type of rumor and includes a visualization of the four-part process. The experimental treatments section introduces sample material used in the experiment. The participant section gives reasons for the sample and the participation goal. Instrumentation explains how the platforms and material will be used to complete the experiment.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

To show the effects of crisis communication message strategies for rumor on an organization-public relationship, this study measured relationship quality outcomes after strategies are implemented to treat a rumor. To test these hypotheses, a post-test only experimental design with a control was used to present a rumor and message strategies to different groups according to strategy used, and then measured the difference in relationship quality outcomes.

The 1(crisis type) X 4(crisis response) plus control post-test only experimental design was used to determine the effect certain crisis response message strategies for a rumor have on relationship quality outcomes. This design eliminated threats to the internal validity by not using a pre-test. The design also limited experimental mortality by shortening the study. This experiment benefited from the narrowing of message strategies and crisis type based on the Coombs and Holladay (2002) study that grouped crises according to their reputational threat. According to Coombs and Holladay (2002), rumor crises fall into the minimal crisis responsibility category. Strategies in the minimal crisis responsibility category include denial, attack the accuser, excuse, and justification (Coombs, 2007). The control group will account for the threat of differing history, attributed responsibility, and organizational reputation.

Procedure

For this study, the rumor included information that was unproven, important to the participants, and ambiguous. The flier containing the rumor resembled that of a flier used as an

example by Fearn-Banks (2007). The fliers mentioned the potential threat of a shooter on campus from the perspective of an anonymous source. This crisis was selected due to the nature of the rumor and the control it provides the study. These fliers did not present unreasonably graphic or harsh imagery, and is not intended to present the university as holding anything more than minimal responsibility. This crisis example was meant to represent a rumor in the truest form. This particular example is also vital to the study due to student proximity and involvement in such cases.

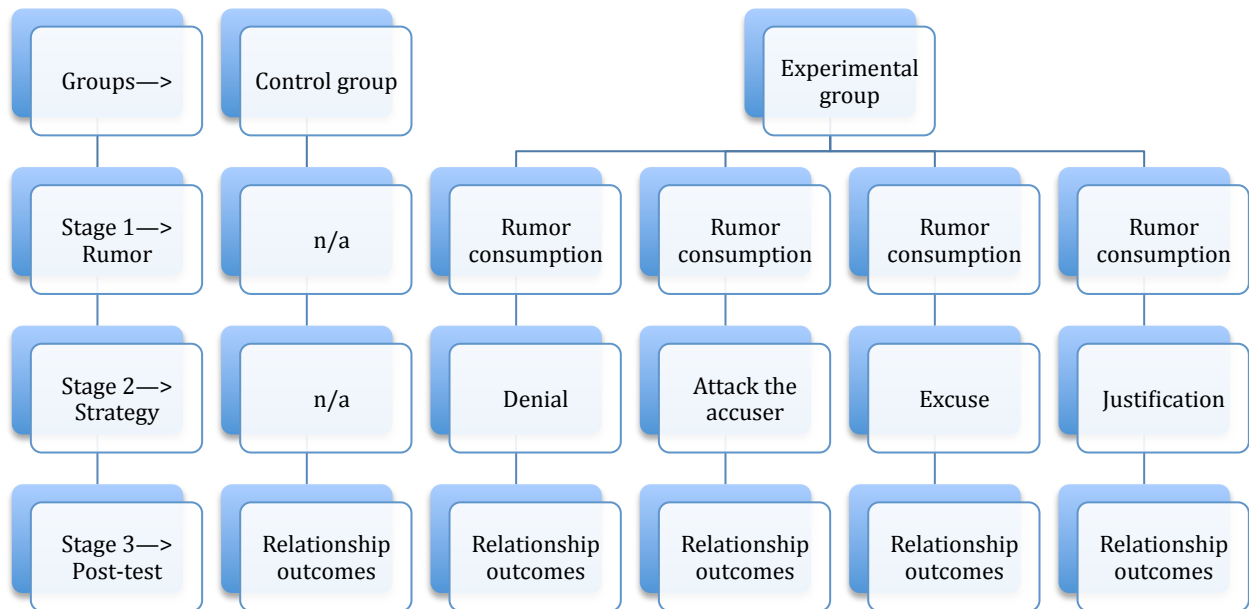


Figure 2. Post-test Only Experimental Design

The procedure was broken into four parts. Participants were assigned to one of five groups, four experimental groups and a control group. In stage one, all participants, except the control group, were exposed to fliers that contain the same rumor.

Experimental Treatments

Rumor flier

I'VE HAD IT WITH THIS PLACE!! IF I'M GOING DOWN I'M TAKING EVERYONE WITH ME!!! I'M GOING TO SHOOT UP THIS BUILDING AND EVERYONE IN IT!!!!

In stage two, one of the four response strategies were presented, outside the control group. The responses were manipulated using statements from a university spokesperson that uses one of the four SCCT response strategies for minimal responsibility. These four strategies were denial, attack the accuser, excuse, and justification. “Denial” asserts there is not a crisis (Coombs, 2007). “Attack the accuser” confronts the person claiming there is a crisis (Coombs, 2007). “Excuse” minimizes the organization’s responsibility by either claiming the lack of control over events that caused the crisis, or denying harmful intent (Coombs, 2007). “Justification” is intended to minimize the perceived damage from the crisis (Coombs, 2007). This stage presented very little or no risk to the participants.

The third stage evaluated trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment measures. To measure the relationship quality outcomes, this study used a version of the OPR scale. This was measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, similar to Ki and Brown (2013). This variable was measured after the students are exposed to the stimuli and will be used as the dependant variable. This stage also presented little or no risk to participants.

Finally, stage four debriefed the participants and informed them that the flier and responses are a fabrication of this study and are completely false. This was a very important part of the procedure and ensured the participants fully understand: (1) the reason for the study, (2) the fake flier was created for this study, and (3) the University of South Florida takes measures to prevent this specific crisis.

Responses with SCCT Strategies

Denial (denied there is a real threat):

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students. The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this flier. There is no evidence confirming the accuracy of the threat,” said a USF security official. “The building in question is safe and will remain open. There is no threat to students.”

Attack the accuser (confronted group or individual circulating the threat):

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students. The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this threat. The person distributing this flier should cease immediately,” said a USF security official. “The distribution of

threatening or disturbing information is strongly discouraged and may only cause harm to students.”

The official went on to say, “We understand everyone deals with stress differently. Individuals posting threats like this may need assistance from the university’s health services.”

Excuse (no control over the threat):

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students. The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this threat. We aren’t sure how this idea originated, unfortunately,” said a USF security official. “The flier was posted before we could contain it. It is difficult to stop someone from leaving such fliers.”

The official went on to say, “Unfortunately, there is no real way of knowing if this is legitimate. We can only deal with threats as they come up.”

Justification (the threat is not that bad):

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students. The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this flier. However, many different fliers are posted throughout campus about various topics,” said a USF security official.

“Thankfully, the flier in question has been isolated and removed. Fortunately, we haven’t seen it distributed anywhere else.”

The official went on to say, “There are plenty of better avenues this individual can take. Stress is a common occurrence among students and as a result university health services are well equipped for such cases.”

Participants

Due to access and availability, this study used students of the University of South Florida. The students selected were randomly assigned to each of four stimuli and one manipulation material. Each of the students, outside the control group, were presented a flier with a rumor, and then shown one of five SCCT responses before filling out the questionnaire. The participation goal for this experiment was 150 students.

Participants were selected as a convenience sample from students enrolled in fall courses at the University of South Florida. While convenient, this subject pool reflected the population selected for the study. All students from the selected course will be requested to participate at their discretion. Participants were 18 years old or older and selected randomly with each course’s professor approval. This process was continued until the study neared the participation goal.

Instrumentation

A packet including a flier, questionnaire, and debriefing was given to each participant at the beginning of their class. These packets were randomized among participants to ensure an equal distribution throughout each group.

Once the participants were exposed to the stimuli, they completed a questionnaire to measure the variables of interest to this study. Printed packets were used to administer the experiment and collect data to test the hypotheses of interest. The following statements measured relationship quality outcomes using a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This short list of suggested statements (Grunig & Hon, 1999; Ki & Brown, 2013; Lee & Jun, 2013; Ki & Hon, 2007) for each element were used:

Control Mutuality

1. The University of South Florida (USF) and students like me are attentive to what each other say.
2. USF believes the opinions of students like me are legitimate.
3. In dealing with students like me, USF has a tendency to throw its weight around. (Reversed)
4. USF really listens to what students like me have to say.
5. The management of USF gives students like me enough say in the decision-making process.

Trust

1. USF treats students like me fairly and justly.
2. Whenever USF makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about students like me.

3. USF can be relied on to keep its promises.
4. I believe that USF takes the opinions of students like me into account when making decisions.
5. I feel very confident about USF's expertise as an educational institution.
6. USF has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.

Commitment

1. I feel that USF is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to students like me.
2. I can see that USF wants to maintain a relationship with students like me.
3. There is a long-lasting bond between USF and students like me.
4. Compared to other organizations I interact with, I value my relationship with USF more.
5. I would rather work together with USF than not.

Satisfaction

1. I am happy with USF.
2. Both USF and students like me benefit from our relationship.
3. Most students like me are happy in their interactions with USF.
4. Generally speaking I am pleased with the relationship USF has established with students like me.
5. Most students enjoy dealing with USF.

Participants were also asked to rate their overall attitude toward the university. The scale used for this question was a 7-point semantic differential scale with three items ranging from

negative to positive, bad to good, and unfavorable to favorable. The order of these statements were randomized within the packet.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 22 for Mac. An alpha level of .05 was required for significance in all statistical tests. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the multi-term scales used to measure control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. The item total correlations were also examined to ensure they were greater than .50, and the inter-item correlations were examined to ensure they were greater than .30. Scales that demonstrated strong internal constancy were collapsed to create a composite measure for hypothesis testing.

To test Hypothesis 1, a series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine if SCCT message strategies against a rumor influence control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. The dependent variables were the four relational outcomes and the independent variable was message strategy type. This procedure was repeated to test Hypothesis 2, Hypothesis 3, and Hypothesis 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study and methodology were implemented in an attempt to discover the message strategy to use during a rumor crisis that influenced relationship outcomes most positively. Descriptive statistics were examined for each of the 21 items contained on the questionnaire.

Data analysis began with examination of 126 participants for this study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 48, with an average age of 22.17. Of those participants, 31% (n = 39) were male and 68.3% (n = 86) were female, while 0.8% (n = 1) were sophomores, 33.3% (n = 42) were juniors, 82% (n = 65.1) were seniors, and 0.8% (n = 1) were graduate level. Participants' ethnicities were 61.1% (n = 77) Caucasian, 19% (n = 24) Hispanic, 10.3% (n = 13) African-American, 6.3% (n = 8) other, 1.6% (n = 2) Asian, 0.8% (n = 1) Native American, and 0.8% (n = 1) Pacific Islander. Next, descriptive statistics were used to examine the mean scores for each of the items used to measure the variables of interest of this study.

Table 1 shows the raw data on individual items in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Descriptives of Raw Data

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Commitment 5	126	6.03	1.088
Commitment 4	126	4.67	1.580
Satisfaction 1	126	5.49	1.407
Satisfaction 5	126	4.34	1.465
Commitment 3	126	4.51	1.604
Trust 6	126	5.04	1.455
Trust 4	126	4.25	1.667
Trust 5	126	5.50	1.218
Satisfaction 4	126	4.99	1.434
Commitment 2	126	4.83	1.532
Control Mutuality 4	126	4.19	1.589

Table 1 (continued)

Control Mutuality 5	126	3.63	1.489
Commitment 1	126	4.52	1.553
Satisfaction 3	126	4.76	1.388
Trust 2	126	4.40	1.438
Trust 1	126	5.05	1.373
Trust 3	126	4.67	1.385
Satisfaction 2	126	5.15	1.253
Control Mutuality 2	125	4.59	1.415
Valid N (listwise)	125		

Scale Reliabilities

Reliability analysis indicated that the multi-item scales used to measure trust ($\alpha = .897$), commitment ($\alpha = .838$), satisfaction ($\alpha = .896$), and control mutuality ($\alpha = .872$) demonstrated strong internal consistency. Table 2 provides the scale reliabilities for the four items.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Mean for Relational Outcomes

	N	α	Composite Mean
Trust	5	.897	4.819
Commitment	5	.838	4.911
Satisfaction	5	.896	4.947
Control Mutuality	5	.872	4.144

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 posited that the use of the denial strategy results in a higher relationship quality outcome mean than other strategies. Results of one-way ANOVAs indicated that no significant differences existed in trust, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .899$; commitment, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .728$; satisfaction, $F(4, 121) = .552, p = .698$; or control mutuality, $F(4, 120) = .367, p = .832$;

and ultimately the relationship quality outcome, due to message strategy type. These results do not support Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 posited that the use of the attack-the-accuser strategy results in a higher relationship quality outcome mean than the control. Results of one-way ANOVAs indicated that no significant differences existed in trust, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .899$; commitment, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .728$; satisfaction, $F(4, 121) = .552, p = .698$; control mutuality, $F(4, 120) = .367, p = .832$; and ultimately the relationship quality outcome, due to message strategy type. These results do not support Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 posited that the use of the excuse strategy results in a lower relationship quality outcome mean than the control. Results of one-way ANOVAs indicated that no significant differences existed in trust, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .899$; commitment, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .728$; satisfaction, $F(4, 121) = .552, p = .698$; or control mutuality, $F(4, 120) = .367, p = .832$, and ultimately the relationship quality outcome, due to message strategy type. These results do not support Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 posited that the use of the justification strategy results in a lower relationship quality outcome mean than the control. Results of one-way ANOVAs indicated that no significant differences existed in trust, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .899$; commitment, $F(4, 121) = .266, p = .728$; satisfaction, $F(4, 121) = .552, p = .698$; control mutuality, $F(4, 120) = .367, p = .832$; and ultimately the relationship quality outcome, due to message strategy type. These results do not support Hypothesis 4.

Table 3 provides the mean and standard deviation for these items.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation for Relational Outcomes and Attitude Toward Organization Across Response Strategies

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
ATTITUDE	Control	26	5.0897	1.36156	.26702
	Denial	24	5.2500	1.34864	.27529
	Attack-the-accuser	25	5.3867	1.43914	.28783
	Excuse	24	5.5556	1.10189	.22492
	Justification	25	5.5467	1.30128	.26026
	Total	124	5.3629	1.30803	.11746
TRUST	Control	26	4.6859	1.25462	.24605
	Denial	25	4.8600	1.15036	.23007
	Attack-the-accuser	25	4.8467	1.07035	.21407
	Excuse	25	4.9867	1.24714	.24943
	Justification	25	4.7200	1.13623	.22725
	Total	126	4.8188	1.16065	.10340
COMMITMENT	Control	26	4.7769	1.36859	.26840
	Denial	25	4.9440	1.10230	.22046
	Attack-the-accuser	25	4.8640	1.17292	.23458
	Excuse	25	5.1840	1.02131	.20426
	Justification	25	4.7920	1.11875	.22375
	Total	126	4.9111	1.15532	.10292
SATISFACTION	Control	26	4.8154	1.26481	.24805
	Denial	25	4.8800	1.20277	.24055
	Attack-the-accuser	25	4.8320	1.27891	.25578
	Excuse	25	5.2400	.98658	.19732
	Justification	25	4.9760	1.12446	.22489
	Total	126	4.9476	1.16871	.10412
CONTROL MUTUALITY	Control	26	3.9487	1.29166	.25331
	Denial	25	4.0533	1.34605	.26921
	Attack-the-accuser	25	4.1867	1.28409	.25682
	Excuse	24	4.3889	1.60815	.32826
	Justification	25	4.1600	1.21762	.24352
	Total	125	4.1440	1.33959	.11982

Table 4 includes descriptive and ANOVA results for hypotheses testing.

Table 4. ANOVA Results for Effect of Crisis Response Type on Relational Outcomes and Attitude Toward Organization

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
ATTITUDE	Between Groups	3.995	4	.999	.576	.681
	Within Groups	206.452	119	1.735		
	Total	210.447	123			
TRUST	Between Groups	1.470	4	.367	.266	.899
	Within Groups	166.920	121	1.380		
	Total	168.390	125			
COMMITMENT	Between Groups	2.767	4	.692	.510	.728
	Within Groups	164.077	121	1.356		
	Total	166.844	125			
SATISFACTION	Between Groups	3.060	4	.765	.552	.698
	Within Groups	167.674	121	1.386		
	Total	170.734	125			
CONTROL MUTUALITY	Between Groups	2.688	4	.672	.367	.832
	Within Groups	219.831	120	1.832		
	Total	222.519	124			

The following section describes observations and findings that do not pertain to the hypotheses. While none of the hypotheses were supported, many insights were derived from the results.

Discussion

Table 5 shows the rank of strategies across relationship outcomes and attitude.

Table 5. Ranking of Strategies Across Relational Outcomes and Attitude

Rank	Control Mutuality	Trust	Commitment	Satisfaction	Attitude
1st	Excuse	Excuse	Excuse	Excuse	Excuse
2nd	Denial	Denial	Denial	Justification	Justification
3rd	Attack-the-accuser	Attack-the-accuser	Attack-the-accuser	Denial	Attack-the-accuser
4th	Justification	Justification	Justification	Attack-the-accuser	Denial
5th	Control	Control	Control	Control	Control

Excuse strategy consistently resulted in higher relationship outcome and attitude means than the other strategies among the sample population. The control group, which did not undergo a treatment, received the lowest relational outcome mean. This may indicate that any response to a rumor will result in a higher relational outcome than no response at all. Because the strategies showed no significant difference, it cannot be inferred that the excuse strategy is best. However, it can be said, that Coombs' (2007) suggestion to use these four strategies for minimal crisis responsibility is accurate. Without testing the influence of other response strategies on relationship outcomes, such as those in the low crisis responsibility and strong crisis responsibility clusters, it cannot be confirmed.

It is important to reiterate that this study was intended to measure relationships, not image. SCCT, which has its roots in the theory of image repair SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), was used to test the relationships between the sample population and USF. Literature in SCCT suggests the use of certain message strategies for certain types of crises, levels of responsibility, and crisis history to recover one's image and reputation SCCT (Coombs &

Holladay, 2002). This study does not measure image and reputation; therefore these results do not conflict with SCCT strategy suggestions to counter a rumor crisis.

Relationships are developed over a long period of time. They are not instant results of one interaction but rather many interactions that also depend on proximity (Grunig & Hon, 1999). The OPR questionnaire measures are results of long-term, consistent interactions between an organization and its publics. Knowing this may help us to understand why the relational outcome and attitude means did not show a significant difference across response strategies. Participants had developed their relationship with USF long before this experiment, so it would be difficult to change it. If we were to perform another study to test USF's image or reputation, we would be able to use participants that may not have a relationship with USF.

Limitations

There are several limitations that could help future research in this area. This study needed more, in-depth analysis of the organization's crisis history, crisis severity, and organizational reputation. Previous research shows these factors as an important measure when using SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Another limitation involves the creation and development of the organizational response across strategies. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what the organization will say in a given situation. Response strategies are meant to restore reputation or image (Benoit, 1997). Perhaps varying responses using the same message strategy would ensure there is a more balanced approach. The channel that a critical message like this is distributed through would not be an in-class hand-out.

The necessary contrived nature of experiments made it difficult to design a viable research method. The students may have recognized the crisis was not real. Rumor, in particular, was difficult to frame. The lack of a treatment receiving only the rumor, without a response, made it more difficult to determine the effects of the strategies. The experimental setting also limited the way the rumor could be transmitted. This could have been a large hindrance to the rumor's believability. Rumors gain strength through widespread social transmission and repetition (Fine & Ellis, 2010). The rumor used in this study lacked social transmission and lacked credibility because participants did not know if other people believed the rumor to be true (Sunstein, 2009).

The use of a convenience sample may have limited this study. Timing and distribution of the treatments also may have hindered the experiment.

Future Research

More valuable information can be gathered if additional message strategies are tested. This can happen multiple ways. The first of which would test strategies in the minimal crisis responsibility cluster, such as the ones used in this study, against the strategies from other clusters, such as low and strong crisis responsibilities. This could potentially confirm the strategies used in the minimal crisis responsibility cluster have a greater, positive influence on a relationship. The second of which would test the use of multiple strategies within a single response from an organization. Using a combination may provide a greater significant difference in the results and ultimately have a greater influence on the relationship outcomes.

Future research may also include a treatment consisting of only the rumor. This may provide a better measure against the various message strategies. It would also give us an idea of the potential damage a rumor has on prior relationships when measured against the control.

Another research opportunity using an experimental method can test the possible damage to relationship outcomes across various types of crises, without the use of any response strategies.

More research is needed to determine which message strategies work best to positively influence these relationships. As stated, since relationships are developed over time, it may be insightful to repeat this study to test differences of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors to see if the relationships are more easily affected among lower classifications.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The notion that an organization should stay silent against a rumor is also put to the test after this study. A rumor is much more than just false information. A rumor, being ambiguous in nature, is information that has not been confirmed, therefore, a rumor can easily turn into another crisis type. During a rumor, crisis responsibility is difficult to attribute. A proactive approach during a crisis that addresses the issue as soon as possible is good practice.

With further research, there is a possibility of implementing relationship outcomes as an element of SCCT. Relationships are what separate public relations from other disciplines. Theories such as SCCT and Image Repair have focused on short-term outcomes for image and reputation. Implementing a long-term, measurable device in these theories, while admittedly more difficult to obtain, could provide a greater, long-lasting impact.

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APPENDIX

Rumor Flier

I'VE HAD IT WITH
THIS PLACE!! IF
I'M GOING DOWN
I'M TAKING
EVERYONE WITH
ME!!! I'M GOING
TO SHOOT UP
THIS BUILDING
AND EVERYONE IN
IT!!!!

Denial Strategy

Below is a statement from the University of South Florida about the previous flier:

For Immediate Release

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students.

The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this flier. There is no evidence confirming the accuracy of the threat,” said a USF security official. “The building in question is safe and will remain open. There is no threat to students.”

Attack-the-Accuser Strategy

Below is a statement from the University of South Florida about the previous flier:

For Immediate Release

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students.

The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this threat. The person distributing this flier should cease immediately,” said a USF security official. “The distribution of threatening or disturbing information is strongly discouraged and may only cause harm to students.”

The official went on to say, “We understand everyone deals with stress differently. Individuals posting threats like this may need assistance from the university’s health services.”

Excuse Strategy

Below is a statement from the University of South Florida about the previous flier:

For Immediate Release

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students.

The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this threat. We aren’t sure how this idea originated, unfortunately,” said a USF security official. “The flier was posted before we could contain it. It is difficult to stop someone from leaving such fliers.”

The official went on to say, “Unfortunately, there is no real way of knowing if this is legitimate. We can only deal with threats as they come up.”

Justification Strategy

Below is a statement from the University of South Florida about the previous flier:

For Immediate Release

TAMPA, Fla.—Students have informed University of South Florida officials today of a flier that was left in a building on campus regarding a shooting threat to students. The flier was noticed this morning and the matter is being investigated.

“The University of South Florida is troubled by this flier. However, many different fliers are posted throughout campus about various topics,” said a USF security official. “Thankfully, the flier in question has been isolated and removed. Fortunately, we haven’t seen it distributed anywhere else.”

The official went on to say, “There are plenty of better avenues this individual can take. Stress is a common occurrence among students and as a result university health services are well equipped for such cases.”

QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Using the scale below, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by writing the appropriate number in the blank provided.

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>
<i>Strongly</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Slightly</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Slightly</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly</i>
<i>Disagree</i>		<i>Disagree</i>		<i>Agree</i>		<i>Agree</i>

- ___ 1. The University of South Florida (USF) and students like me are attentive to what each other say.
- ___ 2. I would rather work together with USF than not.
- ___ 3. Compared to other organizations I interact with, I value my relationship with USF more.
- ___ 4. I am happy with USF.
- ___ 5. Most students enjoy dealing with USF.
- ___ 6. There is a long-lasting bond between USF and students like me.
- ___ 7. USF has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.
- ___ 8. I believe that USF takes the opinions of students like me into account when making decisions.
- ___ 9. I feel confident about USF's expertise as an educational institution.
- ___ 10. Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship USF has established with students like me.
- ___ 11. I can see that USF wants to maintain a relationship with students like me.
- ___ 12. USF really listens to what students like me have to say.
- ___ 13. The management of USF gives students like me enough say in the decision-making process.
- ___ 14. I feel that USF is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to students like me.
- ___ 15. In dealing with students like me, USF has a tendency to throw its weight around.
- ___ 16. Most students like me are happy in their interactions with USF.
- ___ 17. Whenever USF makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about students like me.
- ___ 18. USF treats students like me fairly and justly.
- ___ 19. USF can be relied on to keep its promises.
- ___ 20. Both USF and students like me benefit from our relationship.
- ___ 21. USF believes the opinions of students like me are legitimate.

