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## Managing a food health crisis: Perceptions and reactions to different response strategies

Yifei Ren

University of South Florida, [yifei@mail.usf.edu](mailto:yifei@mail.usf.edu)

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Managing a food health crisis: Perceptions and reactions to different response strategies

by

Yifei Ren

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
The Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications  
College of Arts & Science  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Kimberly Walker, Ph.D.  
Scott S. Liu, Ph.D.  
Roxanne Watson, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

Dedicate to my parents.

I always feel that I was the luckiest one in the world because of you, I know the year 2017 was a tough year, and it was same for me. I just want to say that I love you so much, I wish that diseases and accident will be far away from both of you in the future.

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Thanks to my fiancé, thank you for taking care of me these years, thank you to be the one who will be with me to spend the rest of our life.

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## **Abstract**

Brand crisis could threaten a company with declining public trust and decreased brand reputation (Greyser, 2009). When confronting with a crisis, the organization should respond immediately and properly so that the crisis can be stopped from escalate into a catastrophe (Davies and Walters, 1998). Crisis type can be divided into the victim, the accident or the intentional clusters according to perceived responsibilities the company should shoulder. Based on these factors, the company should select the most appropriate response strategy or a combination of different response strategies to address the crisis situation. In other words, a match between crisis type and response strategy is effective for companies to survive crisis situations (Cheong and Morrison, 2008).

Food-related crisis tend to become rampant in recent years and require more in-depth studies. In the face of a food-related crisis, the affected company are compelled to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders, including employees, stockholders, retailers, suppliers and consumers to manage and survive the crisis (Massey, 2001). There are four options for companies in a product-harm crisis to choose from: denying the defect, involuntary recall, voluntary recall and improvement campaign (Souiden and Pons, 2009).

This study took the issue of Blue Bell ice cream recalls as an example of product-harm crisis for case analysis and proposed three different kinds of strategies or hypotheses based on the

Image Repair Theory (Benoit and Pang, 2008) covering the denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events, corrective action and mortification aspects.

This study intends to deliver an empirical research to systematically identify how to best restore brand reputation and minimize the impacts of a food-related crisis public crisis on attitude, normative beliefs and thus purchase intentions indirectly.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

This chapter indicates the audiences with the background of the research topic of crisis. It will provide the introduction to the problem at the broader perspective, followed by the proposed research objectives. The thesis structure will be indicated as well in the last section.

### **Background**

In the contemporary dynamic world, the quality and safety issues are concerned frequently. The crisis commonly caused by quality and safety issues therefore is appeared regarding to all components of the society. There are various articles and news highlight the daily crisis, including financial crisis, corporate crisis, products crisis, service crisis, environmental crisis and political crisis. Crisis management is the advanced movement for society to manage the crises and the measurements companies can apply to reduce the damage for them. A crisis is a critical situation that requires immediate attention and efforts from the organizations involved to handle it properly in order to avoid any serious damage that may inflict on the organization (Vassilikopoulou et al., 2009). In most cases, the outbreak of brand crisis could threaten a company with declining public trust and significantly jeopardize the brand image and reputation of specific organization (Greysen, 2009). For instance, defective products that cause safety, health or environmental concerns, the improper behaviour of executives in the public space, bribery scandals or child labour abuse are all possible incidents resulting in the brand crisis. In order to minimize the negative impacts on brand

reputation imposed by brand crises, image recovery efforts are rendered, especially the intervention measurements are required to protect the health of consumers when the products can damage customers' health. Therefore, when confronting with a crisis, the organization should respond immediately and properly so that the crisis does not escalate into a catastrophe (Davies and Walters, 1998).

Product-harm crisis is one particular crisis that many companies might encounter wherein their products are found to be defective, unsafe or even dangerous. In recent decades, the incidents of the outbreak of product-harm crises keep rising and attract more and more attentions. The reason behind this rising can be attributed by the increasing complexity of products and higher expectations from consumers (Laufer and Jung, 2010). More seriously, according to Laufer and Coombs (2006), it is only a matter of time for any company to face one or more product-harm crises. As a result, product-harm crisis should be assigned with sufficient attention. In most cases when a product-harm crisis emerges, product recalls are initiated. Generally, there are passive as well as proactive responding actions for a company to choose from and they often result in opposite outcomes (Chen et al, 2009). As a result, it is worthwhile for this study to focus on product-harm crisis due to its growing occurrence and importance to companies.

Crises around the world is inevitable to occur. In the majority of cases, how organization deal with such crises dominately determine how the public will respond, especially will significantly impact how customers perceive the organization. If organization ignore the crises and its effects toward the humans, environment, economy and public, they will faced challenges regarding to their

operation. Hence, it is the organization's responsibility to respond such crises responsibly to prevent the long-term damages to organization. However, although organizations know the best preparations can offer the organizational efficiency for crises, the possibilities of reputation and image damage still cannot be eliminated. At the same time, Benoit and Pang (2008) have reminded that affected companies could select appropriate response strategies to minimize the negative the impacts of a crisis. Effective communication during a crisis can make the difference between quickly resolving the situation and it becoming a nightmare. Crisis communication under this scenario is in the field of public relations that is important to the achievement process of organizational success.

Crisis is a phenomenon that appears all the time and everywhere around human beings. This study particularly focuses on the Blue Bell recall event in 2015 and 2016 due to listeria contamination identified in two flavours of its cookie dough ice cream(chocolate chip cookie dough, cookie two step) within Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. Blue Bell Creameries is a Brenham-based ice cream in the U.S. and it is the highest-selling ice cream brand. With over 250 frozen products, the major product Blue Bell relies on is ice cream with different flavors. Over the last 100 years, Blue Bell is a trusted and famous brand among many Americans due to its distinct flavors and high-quality.

The Blue Bell ice cream recalls in April, 2015 and September 2016 are food related crisis. In the year of 2015, a system-wide recall was initiated due to possible listeria contamination to all of its products. In this recall, three deaths and ten sickness were reported. Illness onset dates ranged from

January 2010 through January 2015. In late August of 2015, Blue Bell began to return to the market. However, Blue Bell is now voluntarily recalling two flavors of its ice cream out of an abundance of caution. The seriousness of the recalls resulted from the potential healthy threat *Listeria* could impose on and the popularity of Blue Bell ice cream. *Listeria* can cause fatal infections, particularly with vulnerable populations including people who are elderly, children and people with underlying medical conditions. Concerning a possible *Listeria* contamination, Blue Bell initiated recalls in both 2015 and 2016. At the same time, the company also cooperated closely with since the recall in 2015 Texas Department of State Health Services and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry with a series of steps and actions to bring Blue Bell ice cream products back to market, including root cause analysis, retaining an independent microbiology expert to establish and review controls and notifying the two departments with any presumptive positive test result for *Listeria monocytogenes* found in ingredients or finished product samples. During the 2016 recall, it is reported by Blue Bell that the origin of *Listeria* came from one of its suppliers. Under such circumstance, response strategies were and will be applied to restore brand image.

The public of the US require the information about the situation naturally, which identifies who was in charge, what was being done and the severity of the threat, how organization respond such crisis on the mass communication. According to US disease data(2016), there are nearly 1600 illness and approximately 259 deaths from *Listeriosis* bacteria in the US each year among young, elderly individuals. Since this is the adverse event that may potentially impact customers' purchase behaviors. The crisis communication should take control of the message, inform the public about

what and when organization know about crisis and employment treatment crucial responses.

### **Problem discussion**

In the excessively stressful situations, human beings are more willing to explore the answers and believe the first published information, regardless where the information from. “an organization in crisis should prove to its publics that prevailing negative opinion is not factual”(Jin et al,2011). Hence, the crisis communication strategies of organization become vital for maintain the reasonable level of corporate reputation and control the adverse opinions of public.

In order to develop a more appropriate and effective image repair strategy package, therefore, the necessity to clarify how different response strategies affect purchase intentions is justified. Therefore, it is necessary to re-evaluate how publics would respond to different response strategies in the case study of Blue Bell recall.

### **Research objectives**

Based upon the research purpose, three research objectives are developed for this study accordingly.

- (1) To investigate the primary communication strategies that be applied efficiently for organizational crisis management.
- (2) To examine the combinational impacts of corrective action and ‘shifting the blame’ strategy on attitude and subjective norm of Blue Bell ice cream.
- (3) To identify the combinational impacts of corrective action and accident strategies on attitude and subjective norm of Blue Bell ice cream.

(4) To critically evaluate the combinational impacts of corrective action and bolstering strategies on attitude and subjective norm of Blue Bell ice cream.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter is mainly to conduct the literature review relevant for the crisis communication. The sources reviewed by this literature review are mainly from academic journals, reports, books and magazines that are relevant to crisis management. First, this section tries to figure out the definition of the crisis, category of the crisis, and characteristics of a product-harm crisis, food-related crisis in particular. Moreover, the thoughts about communication, crisis communication are presented as well. Additionally, this section also intends to review Image repair strategy, theory of reasoned action, ssituational crises communication theory and contingency theory to gain more valid insights about crisis communication and as guiding frameworks for this study to establish hypotheses as well.

#### **Crisis definition**

Organizations are required to understand the definition of the crisis to engage the crisis communication better. According to Coombs(2014), the crisis is the unpredictable event that potential threats the stakeholders' expectations and adversely impacts the performance of corporation through reputation damages. Regarding the literature about the crisis, there is no universal definition of the crisis. However, most of the researchers demonstrate the involved uncertainties about the way it appears and what the consequences it causes. Three essential words

are proposed by Coombs and Holladay(1996) to illustrate the crisis, which includes unexpected, negative and overwhelming. From this point of view, the crisis happened in the situation that individuals cannot predict and has excessively negative effects toward the performance of the organization. Seeger(2006) adds the perspective that crisis is seen as the event that impedes the process of organizational goals achieving. Additionally, According to Pearson and Clair(1998), the crisis is the circumstance that extends to the utmost tough peak, the period with conflicts, risks, and painfulness. This definition concerns more about the essence of negativeness during the crisis. Moreover, Mitroff and Pearson(1993) define the crisis as the critical or decisive point at which the organization's response to the issue, accident or emergency threatens the reputation or the future standing of the organization. Hence, the situation that experience the threatened values, the limited available time and risky condition are both crucial parts of crisis. Additionally, Coombs(2014) emphasizes that the crisis breaks off the business operation through reputation damages and financial livelihood loss, therefore affecting the ultimate organizational performance. Lastly, the definition of crisis proposed by Seeger(2006) integrates the required organizational changes, which implies that crisis as the point of the great challenge to the organization potentially threatening its existence and continuity, therefore requires decisive change. This means that organization under the crisis should respond it promptly and proactively. However, crises from Booth(2015) view are not only the threats for the organization but also could be an opportunity or turning point that help the organization to avoid such risks in the future business cycle. From reviewing all sets of definitions of the crisis, organizational measurements for the crisis become

dominate determinant for their future capability toward crisis and recoverability from the negative results.

### **Product-harm crisis**

Product-harm crisis belongs to one kind of brand crisis. Brand crisis refers to those unexpected events that negatively affect a brand's ability to deliver expected benefits (Dutta and Pullig, 2011). That is, the emergence of crisis might disrupt the normal courses of activities a company is engaged in. According to Pullig et al (2006), brand crisis can be divided into performance-related crisis and values-related crisis. Generally speaking, performance-related crisis often involves defective products which fail to deliver functional benefits to consumers (Roehm and Brady, 2007). For instance, the mass automobile recall by Toyota in 2009 is a performance-related crisis in which many of its manufactured cars failed to function properly (Heller and Darling, 2012). On the other hand, values-related crisis indicates the social or ethical issues surrounding the values that the organization espouses (Dutta and Pullig, 2011). Instead of failure to deliver functional benefits, companies suffering from values-related crisis have problems to render symbolic or psychological benefits. Abuse of child labour or racially insensitive remarks by top executives are all examples of such crisis. Based upon this categorization of crisis types, product-harm crisis belongs to performance-related crisis wherein products are found to be defective, unsafe or even dangerous (Dawar and Pillutla, 2000).

Product-harm crisis can be attributed by various causes. Negligence by manufacturers and misuse

of products are all possible causes that could lead to serious survival problems to the company (Vassilikopoulou et al, 2009). The same as other kinds of brand crisis, companies in face of product-harm crisis might suffer from negative organizational performance, especially including vast financial costs (Vassilikopoulou et al, 2009), public crisis emotions (Liu et al, 2011), distribution of negative word-of-mouth (Schultz et al, 2011) and weakening brand reputations (Greyser, 2009). That is, during a product-harm crisis, consumer attitudes toward the product and the company would modify negatively. In order to minimize these negative impacts, immediate actions, such as voluntary product recall and compensation, should be taken. On the other hand, however, the complexity and distinctiveness of each product recall make these outcomes less predictable. For instance, consumers experiencing automobile recall are in favour of the same brand and even the same model (Souiden and Pons, 2009). Moreover, the extent to which these negative outcomes develop also depends on organizational response strategies as well as the length and strength of the media campaigns it initiates. Therefore, it is more practical for companies to focus on how to best respond to these product-harm crises in order to minimize the impacts of these negative outcomes.

In particular, food-related crisis arouses widespread public concern as it relates closely to individuals' daily life. According to Lee (2008), several characteristics of food-related crisis can be identified and bear significance. First, it is usually difficult to track the original source of the accident. It might be easy to identify the product or the brand responsible for the crisis but the underlying reason and original source usually remain unknown. Second, it is closely related to

individuals' daily life so that no one can get free from it. Third, food-related crisis can be unpredictable since a new source with no history of contamination can emerge. Last, the impacts of such crisis are pervasive with usually affected hundreds or thousands of people. Concerning these special characteristics of food-related crisis, it is worthwhile for more research efforts directing to investigate how organization establish the effective response strategies of encountered crisis. Therefore, this research intends to investigate how different response strategies affect consumer perceptions in related to food health crisis.

### **Communication, crisis communication**

How to design the effective and efficient communication strategies is not only the responsibilities of the PR department but also essential for their marketing component of the organization. In my research case, the different contents published on the websites or some media is the way organization communicates with the public.

The communication is the complicate concepts evolve through the period of time, which generates a variety of approaches to understand the communication. According to Griffin(2006), communication theory integrates several different fields and can be explained from the different perspective.

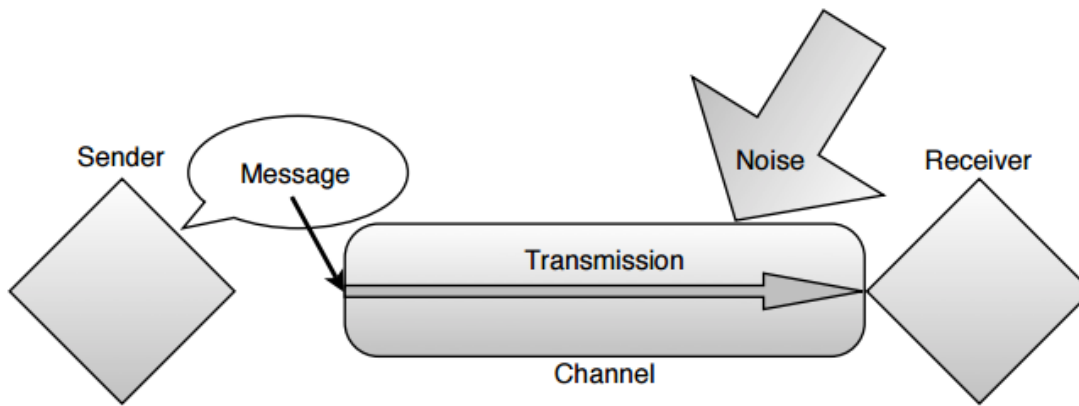


Fig. 1. Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication (1949)

Figure 1: Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication(1949)

The Shannon-Weaver Model of communication(Al-Fedaghi,2012) is proposed firstly to know better how communication execute their effects on targeted parties: the messages are transmitted through the channel from the sender to the receiver, which also affected by the noise on the way. This definition simply clarify the involved elements of the communication.

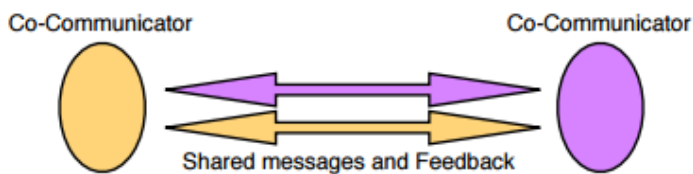


Figure 2: Shared Messages and Feedback

A further theory such as the systems theory in the cybernetic tradition of communication states that communication is the two-way process, which means the sender and receiver share the messages with each other. Moreover, the feedback is added in this model to regulate the communication system(McQuail,1994).

Additionally, Griffin(2006) defines the communication as the process of sharing content from the sender to receiver utilize the proper expression through the medium under the environment for the specific purposes and functions. Consequently, the cognitive communication process from this view should include sender, receiver, expression(presented content), medium, environment(context) and purposes(why communication is conducted). Apart from the technical aspect, communication is also defined as the representative, informative, interactional, logical procedure in which individuals generate the distributed meanings(Littlejohn and Foss,2010), the representative means the intended delivery purposes of communication, informative means audiences are easy to understand the meaning and know the intended meaning, interactional implies the message is facilitated and sustained by both sender and receiver, which affects each other, logic means the deliver messages are required to have reasonable relationship.

When referring to the crisis communication through the definition of the communication, it can be claimed as the process of messages delivery during the lifecycle of the crisis. However, this description about crisis communication may ignore a variety of factors. The crisis communication is not only the communication process, but it also involves the dynamics and functions of the organization, which affects the organization through the ongoing and sustainable approach(Coombs,2014). This raises the issue when understanding the crisis communication, as this may serve as the center of the crisis management, therefore requiring the more comprehensive considerations. As the Seeger(2006) points that crisis management and crisis communication have relatively interacted, the nature of the crisis management process, thereby consist the corporate

communication and external communication control. According to Reynolds(2005), crisis communication not only dealing with the messaging, but also establishing and implementing the system of media response, administrative process and behavior guidance primarily to persuade the key stakeholders. So it is challenging to search the right response strategies for crisis management. “Public relations-based messages are persuasive at heart. Whereas in most cases not overtly attempting to modify an audience’s attitude in an extreme way, public relations messages are written with the goals of the organization in mind and with an intention of improving or maintaining favorable impressions or beliefs about the organization”(Littlejohn and Foss,2010). From this point of view, unethical behaviors and information may be published to help organization achieve their purpose, which may excessively impacts the customers’ perception, including attack of the accuser, denial, scapegoating, justification, compensation, ingratiation, victimage, evasion of responsibility, framing, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, mortification and staged apology.

Moreover, Ulmer.et.al(2013) argue that the serve level of the crisis is determined by how well the information is controlled and managed since the negative information spread rapidly. As the results, control the information within the crisis process is the key to achieve reasonable crisis management. The causes of the importance of the crisis communication within the crisis management are varied: for one, how the crisis communication process perform better in minimize the incidence and reduce the crisis time, which able to accomplish the purpose of crisis weaken(Covello,2003). Secondly, the relationship with stakeholders can be productive and



positive through the reasonable crisis communication. Lee(2004) states “If corporations aim to achieve the higher performance, they should identify the related-interests beyond the stockholders and expand for other critical relationships. Hence, the well-prepared PR plan that establishes the necessary strategic relationships should reasonably define the corporate communication either with the internal or external environment. Lastly, through the procedures of the crisis, communication is the main component enables the corporate to overcome challenges in the acute crisis period and should be documented well in the crisis planning(Seeger,2006). Under this condition, the considerable communication supports the corporations to meet established crisis objectives, and whereas the poor communication maximizes the adverse impacts of crisis and more damaging toward the corporation. As the results, the corporate embedded attitudes about the crisis in the culture is proven to be related to the outcomes of crisis(Liu.et.al,2001). From the research case, the corporate culture determine how corporation propose the crisis response contents.

Reynolds(2005) claims that the crisis communication is necessary followed by the crisis, which forms the components for crisis management. Crisis management from Mitroff(1988) is defined as the various components designed to respond crises and to reduce the damages for the organization and its stakeholders. Through the crisis management literature, the established preventative actions, comprehensive and valid crisis management plans, and evaluations after crisis time, are emphasized as essential sections for crisis management through the phases of the crisis, including pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages(Seeger,2006). From this point of view, the crisis communication is considered as the component at the three stages of crisis with the actions

of publishing and obtaining information. The definition of crisis communication under this view is the gathering, analyzing, and transmission of the indispensable information to cope with the specific crisis(Benoit,1997). Different functions of the crisis communication in each stage of crisis management can be understood: for the pre-crisis, the crisis communication is the process being anticipatory and preventative in nature to gather the information about screening potential risks, decide the way to respond crisis. When the actual crisis occurred, crisis communication is mainly about proposing actions to bring back the organization and deliver the messages to the public for the situation. The crisis communication in the post-crisis stage is about communicating necessary modifications to related-stakeholders and offer the messages of crisis followed by the urgent and serve period(Littlejohn and Foss,2010). Moreover, the reflective continuation of crisis communication, reputation repair, and organizational evaluation and learning are conducted(Reynolds,2005). The public media therefore is needed to continuously informed and the manner in which the crisis was handled is scrutinized and evaluated during the post-crisis stage.

Booth(2015) in their research claims the crisis communication as the process to make sense for individuals in which the reality is communicated and implemented in the specific cultural contexts and situations, which associates the reality of the objects with the cultural contexts and customers. For another, Coombs(2008) categorizes the crisis communication as two goals: the one is to identify the active information delivery strategies to enhance the corporate reputation and image during the crisis, whereas another is to investigate the measurements and risks management after the crisis. Crisis communication thereby containing every element of communication to

stakeholders, ensure the confidence level of information delivery to the public, how they deliver and share the crisis messages, and how much adverse messages will be published on the organization's responsibilities(Coombs,2008). The information can grow fast during the crisis, so comprehensive respond strategies are necessary for the organization.

### **Image Repair Theory**

A crisis usually involves two basic elements: the occurrence of an offensive act and the involvement of the accused for responsibility (Benoit and Pang, 2008). Specifically, image could possibly suffer from potential threat if something bad has happened. Even though an offensive act has been taken, a company are still not subject to threat unless it is responsible for this given act. In particular, the company can be blamed for performing, encouraging, facilitating, permitting or poorly performing the act. In this regard, the extent to the responsibility the company should take is different across different situations. Hence, it is important to know the adapted situations for diverse response strategies for crisis.

In order to direct how to respond to a crisis situation, many theories and frameworks are developed. Image Repair Theory is developed and among one of the most frequently applied theory with the purpose to identify how possibly different response strategies could affect the crisis-image relationship (Benoit and Pang, 2008). This theory focuses on possible response strategies one company or one person can select from in face of a crisis situation.

According to Jin et al (2011), Image Repair Theory mainly illustrates response strategy options. Moreover, it also emphasizes the importance of crisis origin and crisis type. Crisis origin refers to whether the crisis emerges internally or externally and thus the attribution of responsibility is higher or lower. Crisis type can be divided into the victim, the accident or the intentional clusters according to perceived responsibilities the company should undertake. Based on these factors, the company then should select the most appropriate response strategy or a combination of different response strategies to address the crisis situation. In other words, a match between crisis type and response strategy is effective for companies to survive crisis situations (Cheong and Morrison, 2008).

In the face of a food-related crisis, the affected company are compelled to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders, including employees, stockholders, retailers, suppliers and consumers to manage and survive the crisis (Massey, 2001). According to Jin and Liu (2010), the key publics who would pay close attention to a brand incident are those who are most affected by the event, who have shared interests to see the crisis resolved and those who have long-term interests and influences on the organization's reputation and operation. Particularly, determination on how to respond to these defective or unsafe products bears great significance to a company. In other words, the choice of response strategy directly relates to what messages the affected company wants to deliver to the public and thus is able to limit or even repair the reputational damage and minimize the impacts of other negative outcomes (Coombs and Holladay, 2002). As a matter of fact, most of previous studies on crisis communication have concentrated on

responding strategies due to their direct impacts on organizational reputations, anger and negative word-of-mouth. Therefore, it is necessary to first concentrate on responding messages a company could choose from.

There are many variations of the categorization of different crisis response strategies. According to Dutta and Pullig (2011), two dimensions could be applied to differentiate them: the level of explanation given to the crisis and whether the response intends to prevent the crisis. Generally speaking, there are four options for companies in a product-harm crisis to choose from: denying the defect, involuntary recall, voluntary recall and improvement campaign (Souiden and Pons, 2009). Regardless of voluntary or involuntary, recalls are usually expensive due to the financial loss by physically retrieving the products and the reputational damage accompanies if not handled properly (Copeland et al., 2004).

In a broader sense, Benoit and Pang (2008) offered five general options based on Image Repair Theory: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events, corrective action and mortification.

### **Denial strategy**

By adopting denial strategy, the company or the person intends to claim that there is no crisis at all or it is not responsible for the offensive act (Coombs, 1995). Generally, there are two forms of denial strategy: one refers to simple denial and another refers to shifting the blame to another entity (Benoit and Pang, 2008). Companies adopting simple denial would claim that the act is not performed by them while companies would also deny the responsibility by claiming that

someone else is responsible (Holtzhausen and Roberts, 2009). According to Dutta and Pullig (2011), the level of explanation available to a crisis is a key indicator of a successful response. It indicates that people would seek information about the crisis and information to explain the situation is more likely to yield favourable evaluation than no explanation (Coombs, 2007a). As a result, the denial strategy implying no explanation is not supposed to be an effective response strategy than apology or other response strategies delivering explanation.

The same as denial strategy in broader brand crisis communication, denying the defect indicates that the company denies the defects and refuse to recall the products. In terms of involuntary recall, it implies that the recall is required by governmental or regulatory agencies. In this regard, both denying the defect and involuntary recall belong to passive response strategies (Chen et al, 2009). For the most cases, these passive responses are regarded as stonewalling and avoiding responsibilities (Copeland et al, 2004). As a result, both denying the defect and involuntary recall are negatively related to brand reputations, may arouse public anger and encourage the distribution of negative WOM (Souiden and Pons, 2009).

### **Evasion of responsibility**

Holtzhausen and Roberts (2004) illustrated evasion of responsibility as the communicative entity can argue it was provoked by the offensive act of another, argue defeasibility due to a lack of information or ability, or claim the event was an accident, or that it had the reasonable intentions but lack of attentions when implementing.

According to Benoit and Pang (2008), provocation implies that the offensive act is a

response to a previous offensive act and thus showing evasion of crisis responsibility to another entity. In terms of defeasibility, it refers to the attribution of a crisis to a lack of important information or control over key aspects of the situation. Concerning the claim that the event was an accident, the company or the person involved tries to respond to the public that the offensive act is done by accident instead of purposefully. This response strategy is based on the assumption that inadvertently offensive act would suffer less from image damage. Last, putting an emphasis on the reasonable intentions is another way to evade responsibility. The same as the ‘accident’ claim, stressing the reasonable previous intentions are expected to reduce the blame.

### **Reducing offensiveness of events**

In the face of the accusation, the third option for companies or individuals to respond is to reduce the offensiveness of the act. Unlike denial or evasion of responsibility, this cluster of response strategy focuses on offensiveness reduction by shouldering responsibility in the act(Benoit and Pang, 2008).

The first option in this cluster is bolstering. By applying this strategy, the company or the individual tries to strengthen positive feelings with the expectation to counterbalance the negative impacts brought about by the crisis( Jin et al,2011). The second option is minimization intending to directly reduce offensiveness. For instance, an automobile manufacturer intends to minimize the negative impacts on its reputation by claiming that the defect of its engine is not a widespread pattern with the majority of the cars functioning well. The third form of reducing offensiveness is differentiation, trying to distinguish the offensive act from similar but more offensive acts(Jin et

al,2011). An appropriate case of differentiation would be the defence by a tobacco company that cigarette smoking is more like drinking coffee instead of using cocaine. By differentiation from more offensive, the negative impacts on involved companies or individuals are expected to be reduced. The forth form is compensation. It is based on the assumption that if the compensation is accepted by the victim, the image would be improved (Jin et al,2011).

### **Corrective action**

Companies adopting corrective action promise to correct the problem and offer a plan to solve or prevent the problem. It is supported by many researchers and practitioners as one of the most effective response strategies(Holtzhausen and Roberts, 2009). This is based on the assumption that resolving the problem is preferred by stakeholders than identifying and punishing the guilty (Benoit and Pang, 2008). Moreover, Sellnow et al (1998) also suggested that corrective action would enhance the effects of other restoration strategies.

In product-harm crisis, contrary to involuntary recall, a company in crisis adopts voluntary recall to declare that they accept the accountability and concerns the clients. In this regard, it belongs to the corrective action strategy. Therefore, voluntary recall tends to lessen perceptions of danger and may even improve brand reputation (Souiden and Pons, 2009). In terms of improvement campaign, it originates from internal decisions to recall products with minor defects. By doing this, companies aims to delivering products with superior quality and further improve brand reputation. As a result, it can be proposed that both of these two kinds of voluntary recalls are more preferred by consumers due to the tendency that many consumers would prefer the



company to act immediately and take full responsibilities in all product-harm situations (Copeland et al, 2004). Consequently, these two response strategies are less likely to jeopardize the brand reputation, trigger anger and negative WOM.

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

According to the attribution theory, it targets to indicate the way individuals perceive the events and the reasons why events happened (Coombs, 2007), which illustrates how responsibilities can attach blame to the person. Applying this theory to the crisis communication case, the stakeholders based on the attribution theory blame crisis responsibilities on internal or external factors, which guide their behaviors to respond to the public. Claeys et al (2010) state that in crisis situations, "the nature of the crisis influences the effectiveness of the response." The public recognizes the less socially needed crises as the high level of forgiveness from this thought. The situational crisis communication theory originates from the attribution theory, indicating that attributions from stakeholders can impact how they interact with the organization (Claeys et al, 2010). Moreover, it listed the factors that public should concern when approving the organizational crisis management, and the level of attributions of crisis responsibility consists of victim (low crisis responsibility/threat), accident (minimal crisis responsibility/threat), and intentional (strong crisis responsibility/threat) are related to how they respond to the strategies. Additionally, the situation crisis communication should pay attention to the previous crisis events and reputation (Coombs, 2007). It means that if the corporation has the history for the reputation damage from the crisis, the audiences' attitudes and perceptions will be

adversely impacted. Moreover, situation crisis communication theory further illustrates the audiences' behavioral intentions and emotional willingness act the essential role toward the results of crisis, which determine how the public perceive the crisis communication efforts from the organization perspective (Coombs,2007). From this point of view, the negative word-of-mouth was seen as behavioral intentions source. When the audiences feel disappointed with the crisis management efforts of the organization, individuals highly rely on the negative messages, therefore damaging the brand reputation. Lastly, situation crisis communication theory also proposes four main crisis response strategies, containing denial, diminishing, rebuilding, and reinforcing, which adds more in-depth understanding compared with image repair theory(Coombs,2007). The denial strategies are to show the responsibility is not mainly on organization, diminishing strategies are to indicate the organization should undertake some responsibilities but aims to minimize their responsibility, which reduces the adverse impacts, rebuilding strategies are to explore the enhanced perception of the organization through compensation or apologies, reinforcing strategies establish more positive information about organization to cover up the negative crisis.

### **Contingency Theory**

The contingency theory concentrates to indicates the crisis communication from organization perspective rather than the public perceptions and attitudes during the crisis events. According to Pang.et.al(2010), the contingency theory assumes the organization's way to respond the conflicts determine the effects of strategies. Under this situation, the advocacy and

accommodation strategies are included, depending on the circumstance(Coombs,2014). Hence, the advocacy is mainly about the time that organization argues for their interests, whereas accommodation is the time that corporation establishes the concessions to the other parties. However, Pang.et.al(2010) assert that contingency theory ignores the relationships between the involved variables to understand the strategies and actions of the crisis.

### **Apologia**

Apologia is the rhetorical guidance that form the basis of the crisis communication strategies, which applied to restore the damaged reputation when corporation make apologies to the public and announce to undertake the responsibilities (Claeys.et.al,2010). Corporate apologia therefore is defined as the way they defend their brand image and recover their legitimacy for society, which to maintain the balance between corporate value and stakeholder values(Coombs 2010). According to the Crisis Management by Apology, an ethical apology is required to be truthful, sincere, timely, voluntary, address all stakeholders interests and requirements, and is performed in an appropriate institutional context(Coombs 2010). From this point of view, the crisis is seen as to be more serve when the damage is likely to impact the stakeholders' goals.

### **The application of Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to examine public attitudes**

It is almost unavoidable for any company to encounter brand-related adverse events. In most cases, the outbreak of brand crisis could threaten a company with multitudes of negative

outcomes. According to Coombs (2007a), a brand crisis can impact organizational performance and result in negative outcomes, including declining public trust, jeopardized brand reputation (Greyser, 2009), brand attitude, brand choice (Pullig et al, 2006), brand loyalty, brand reputation and purchase intentions (Souiden and Pons, 2009). In order to test the effects of different response messages, previous studies have selected many different dependent variables, including organizational reputation (Coombs and Holladay, 2002; Choi and Lin, 2009), public emotions (Kim and Cameron, 2011) and negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Dens et al, 2015). In terms of this research, the TRA framework is adopted as guidance to test the impacts of different restoration messages on the cognitive behavioural process. Within this framework, behavioural decisions are made on the basis of a reasoned consideration of the available information. Concerning its application, most of the previous studies focused on testing the theory, exploring additional constructs and predicting behaviours (Lee, 2008). For this study, it is applied to predicting behaviours via the assessment of the antecedents of purchase behaviour. In particular, dependent variables including attitude and subjective norm within TRA are checked in this study. In TRA, behavioural intention is the single best predictor of behaviour (Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2005). In determining behavioural intention, attitude and subjective norm are two important constructs.

First, attitude in the TRA framework refers to *'the degree to which a person has a favourable or unfavourable evaluation or appraisal of the behaviour in question'* (Ajzen, 1991). It is assessed by the individual's beliefs about outcomes or attributes of performing the behaviour (Montano and

Kasprzyk, 2008). A person with strong belief that performing the behaviour will result in positive outcomes has a positive attitude toward the behaviours and vice versa.

Second, subjective norm is rated by normative beliefs, whether important referent others approve or disapprove the action weighted by the motivation of the individual to comply with those referents. It reflects the social pressure imposed on an individual to make a purchase or not (Bagozzi et al, 2000). Among these referent others, family members, friends, physicians or advertisements should be considered. In this regard, the impact of subjective norm is similar to word-of-mouth (WOM). According to Schultz et al (2011), WOM refers to those comments stakeholders made about the organization via the Internet or face-to-face communication. Generally speaking, WOM is very important to companies because the potential benefits positive WOM could bring and the harm negative WOM could inflict (Laczniak et al, 2001). That is, WOM is a double-sword for companies to capitalize on. Particularly in a crisis situation, the distribution of positive WOM could help companies to survive the crisis and recover from it more quickly. However, the distribution of negative WOM is rather detrimental to a company in crisis and sadly it is one of the common outcomes in a crisis situation (Coombs and Holladay, 2008). In other words, the approval of important referent others in a crisis situation would encourage enhanced purchase intentions while disapproval would lead to reduced purchase intentions. As a result, one purpose of crisis response strategies is to prevent the distribution of negative WOM and cultivate positive WOM among stakeholders (Laczniak et al, 2001).

In comparison of positive and negative WOM, it has been argued that more attention be assigned

to negative WOM due to its greater influence on crisis-related perceptions and reactions.

Depending on TRA, this study intends to test the effects of different restoration strategies in the case of Blue Bell ice cream on two dependent variables, attitude toward purchase Blue Bell ice cream and normative beliefs about purchasing Blue Bell ice cream, thus indirectly assessing purchase intentions among affected populations.

### **Crisis response of organization**

Before deciding which response strategies to apply, companies are suggested to clarify how much they are responsible for the crisis and then adopt accordingly appropriate response strategies. According to Jin et al (2011), there are generally three crisis types: (1) the victim cluster in which very little responsibilities are attributed to the company, including natural disasters or rumour; (2) the accidental cluster in which minimum responsibilities are attributed to the company because it is unintentional or uncontrollable, such as technical-error product harm; (3) the intentional cluster in which the company should bear most of the responsibility, such as human-error product harm or organization misbehaviour (Coombs, 2007b). In the case of a product-harm crisis, food-related crisis in particular, the attribution of responsibility is usually a complex issue and takes time to investigate (Laufer and Coombs, 2006). However, it has been emphasized by Benoit and Pang (2008) that it is the perception of responsibility or damage to image that matters most to companies or individuals. In other words, consumers' perceived attribution of responsibility can be formed immediately after the news is taken. Therefore, crisis managers should focus on how consumers perceive the crisis responsibility in order to adopt appropriate response strategies immediately and

effectively.

Myriad of previous studies have endeavored to explore and identify the most effective response strategies via case studies or experiment and some conclusions were achieved (Coombs, 2000). Apology, sympathy and compensation are commonly applied as more effective response strategies than denial strategy. That is, accommodative strategies are generally more acceptable and effective than defensive strategies. Actually, apology has been identified by many researchers as the best response strategies (Benoit and Drew, 1997). Depending on the core characteristics of an apology, it indicates that the company in crisis acknowledges and accepts the responsibility and ask forgiveness from the public (Fuchs-Burnett, 2002). It has been supported by Benoit (1997) that apology can effectively protect an organization's reputation when held responsible for the crisis. As a matter of fact, apology is also the most frequently adopted response strategy by companies listed on Fortune 500 (Ki and Nekmat, 2014). However, despite the frequently supported idea that apology is the best response strategy than denial to restore image, Coombs and Holladay (2002) have pointed out that an apology makes substantial financial burden on the company. That is, adopting an apology leaves excuses for more lawsuits and financial loss. In this regard, organizations are generally reluctant to release apologetic statements when there are other alternatives. As a matter of fact, the perceived best for an apology as a response strategy is achieved with comparison with less accommodative strategies including giving no comment, denial or excuse. Nonetheless, other accommodative response strategies including compensation and sympathy might also achieve similar effects of an apology on post-crisis brand evaluations without

triggering the same amount of lawsuits and financial loss (Coombs and Holladay, 2002). Specifically, a sympathy response is marked concerns to victims while responding in a compensation manner means to offer something to offset the suffering. In other words, both sympathy and compensation are more economical strategies and their effects on post-crisis brand reputations are as strong as an apology does based upon the empirical study by Coombs and Holladay (2008).

Instead of depending on one single restoration strategy, however, many companies or individuals apply more than one strategy in practical and the strategies would even be changed as the crisis evolves (Len-Rios and Benoit, 2004). In the case of Blue Bell ice cream, a corrective action was firstly employed in the form of voluntary product recall. In fact, the experiment conducted by Snellnow et al (1998) revealed that a corrective action strategy can enhance the effects of other restoration strategies. According to Coombs (2000), the corrective action strategy should always be applied in a product recall or product tampering case since removing any dangerous product from market is a top priority and thus most urgent than any other restoration strategies. Based on previous studies, the empirical tests of single response strategy are multitude(Chen et al, 2009) while the investigation of combinational effects of more than one message strategies is rare except for Lee (2008) and Coombs (2000). Therefore, this research intends to assess the combinational effects of corrective action and another single restoration strategy from each cluster to identify the most effective one.

With all these previous studies, this literature review is able to identify several research gaps that



require to be bridged by this study. According to Jin et al (2011), the selection of most appropriate and effective response strategies remains vital for any company or individual involved. At the same time, food-related crises tend to become rampant in recent years and require more in-depth studies. In most of previous studies, however, most of the previous research focuses on the broader brand-crisis management or only focuses on tests of single response strategy in the face of a food-related crisis. Moreover, the effects of these responses strategies on both attitude and normative beliefs, which are two of the most important determinants in purchase intentions according to TRA, remain unclear.

As a result, this research particularly checks the combined impacts of different response strategies on attitude toward purchase the issued products and normative beliefs about purchasing Blue Bell ice cream. Therefore, this study intends to deliver an empirical research to systematically identify how to best restore brand reputation and minimize the impacts of a food-related crisis public crisis on attitude, normative beliefs and thus purchase intentions indirectly. Accordingly, three research questions are developed and specified.

(1) What are the impacts of “shifting the blame” strategy on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream?

(2) What are accident strategies on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream?

(3) What are the bolstering strategies on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream?

(4) What are the differences of the three stimulus conditions on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention?

In the case of Blue Bell ice cream recall, three deaths and many sickness have been reported. Therefore, it is assumed that reducing offensives of events would be most preferred while denial and evasion of responsibility are less favoured. At the same time, three hypotheses are also developed based upon the literature review and required to be tested in the following experiments.

Hypothesis 1: The combinational impacts of corrective action and ‘shifting the blame’ strategy on attitude and subjective norm of Blue Bell ice cream are the lowest.

Hypothesis 2: The combinational impacts of corrective action and accident strategies on attitude, subjective norm and consumers’ purchase intentions of Blue Bell ice cream are the second most effective strategy package.

Hypothesis 3: The combinational impacts of corrective action and bolstering strategies on attitude and subjective norm of Blue Bell ice cream are the strongest.

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## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This chapter focuses on the illustration of research philosophy, approach, objectives, questions, hypothesis, research choice, strategy, time horizon, techniques and procedures, research ethics and validity research design. Three hypotheses were developed in the literature review stage and will be tested.

#### **Research design**

In order to explore how to apply response strategies to handle a food-related crisis, this research specifically explores consumers' perceptions and reactions including attitude and normative beliefs. Based upon the substantial literature review, three hypotheses are developed and required to be tested. With this purpose, a post-test only experiment with one control group is delivered in which different product recall strategies are presented to respondents in the case of Blue Bell ice cream recall. As a matter of fact, conducting experiment is one of the most popular methods in testing best and most effective response strategies (Len-Rios and Benoit, 2004; Liu et al, 2011). At the same time, questionnaire is the major data collection tool for this study since a relatively

large sample is required for the test.

This study employs a three-dimension (correction action combining shifting the blame, correction action combining accident strategy, correction action combining bolstering strategy) experimental design to test these three hypotheses. According to Jones et al (2000), a well-known brand can more effectively and easily survive a product-harm crisis due to the protection of a reasonable reputation prior to the crisis. Therefore, this experiment only compares the effects of these restoration strategies in a single brand, the Blue Bell ice cream.

In order to test their effects on attitudes, subjective norm and buying intentions, measurement of these three constructs is adapted from existing TRA scales (Lee, 2008; Benoit and Pang, 2008).

Concerning attitude, seven seven-point scales measure it. Participants will be asked to rate their attitudes toward one question: for me, purchasing the Blue Bell ice cream is (a) Extremely bad(1)/Extremely good(7); (b) Extremely undesirable (1)/Extremely desirable(7); (c) Extremely unpleasant(1)/ Extremely pleasant(7); (d) Extremely foolish(1)/ Extremely wise(7); (e) Extremely unfavourable (1)/ Extremely favourable; (f) Extremely unenjoyably (1)/ Extremely enjoyable (7); (g) Extremely negative(1)/ Extremely positive(7).

In terms of subjective norm, three seven-point scales will rate it. Participants are asked in the following three questions with attitudes ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7): (a) Most people who are important to me think I should make a purchase of the Blue Bell ice cream. (b) Most people who are important to me would want me to make a purchase of the Blue Bell ice cream. (c) Most people who are important to me would prefer that I make a purchase of

the Blue Bell ice cream.

The buying intentions will be rated by five-point scales range from very likely to very unlikely (very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, very unlikely), which is asked by the question of “how likely you will buy the products of Blue Bell ice cream?”

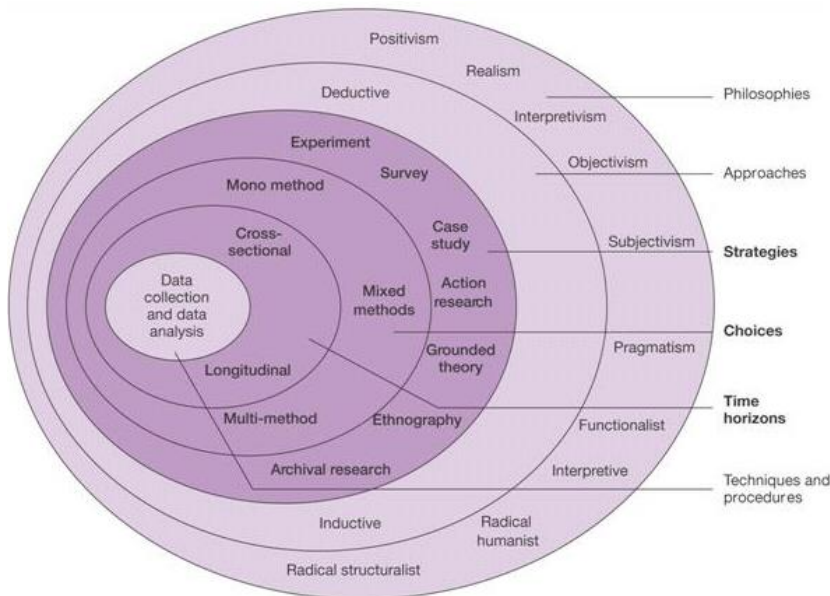


Figure 3: Data Collection and Data Analysis

Source:Saunders.et.al(2015)

### Research Approach

According to Lewis(2015), research approach is the detailed and comprehensive plan for conducting the research. Since it will examine the hypothesis regarding to relationship between customer purchase and different crisis communication strategies, the deductive research approach therefore is most adopted in this research. Whereas inductive research approach is adapted when there are no previous research efforts.

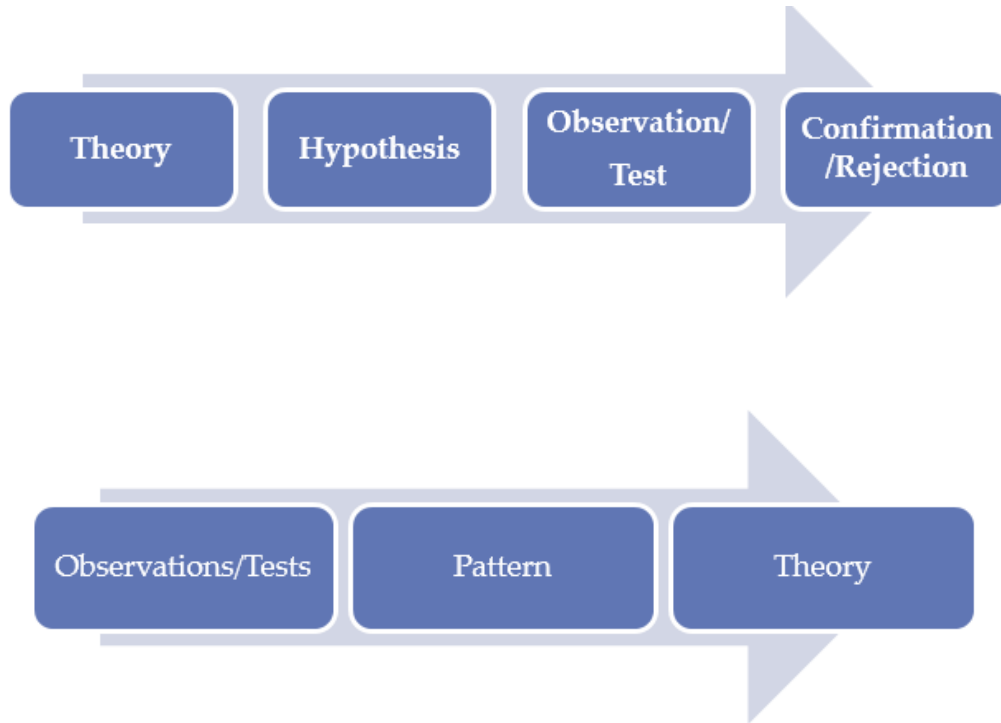


Figure 4: Research Flow Chart

### **Research procedure**

The participants are invited to undertake questionnaires when read different information with involvement of diverse crisis communication strategies.

Two steps are involved apparently.

First, those qualified participants are randomly and equally distributed in the three groups. All of them first read stimuli from a newspaper account in description of the food-related crisis and subsequent product recall. (App)

Under this same scenario, each of the three groups are then asked to rate their feelings toward this crisis right after being informed with the recall or right after no further measures are

taken toward image restoration. The purpose of this first step is to evaluate original attitude and normative beliefs right after the emergence of the crisis and to compare them with the following different response situations to identify their respective effects.

At step two, participants from these three group are presented with different response messages which are both combined with corrective actions: (1) the first experimental group is presented with a voluntary recall message from the official website of brand Blue Bell and a statement of claiming another entity in responsible for this accident, (2) the second experimental group is presented with an voluntary recall message from the official account of brand Blue Bell and a statement of claiming the crisis as an accident with no further and wide-spread threats, (3) the third experimental group is presented with a voluntary recall message from the official account of brand Blue Bell and a statement of claiming the high-quality of Blue Bell ice cream and its benefits to American families.

Table 1: Responses

Group	Response strategy 1	Response strategy 2
1	a voluntary recall message	a statement of claiming another entity in responsible for this accident
2	a voluntary recall message	a statement of claiming the crisis as an accident with no further and wide-spread threats
3	a voluntary recall message	a statement of claiming the high-quality of Blue Bell ice cream and its benefits to American families

(1) A voluntary recall message from Blue Bell ice cream.

(2) A statement of claiming another entity in responsible for this accident

- (3) A statement of claiming the crisis as an accident with no further and wide-spread threats
- (4) A statement of claiming the high-quality of Blue Bell ice cream and its benefits to American families

At stage three, after all these participants are presented with different response strategies, a survey is handed out to them in order to evaluate their perceptions concerning the recall, including attitudes and perceived normative beliefs.

The design of the questionnaire is as following:

The questions regarding to the demographic information are firstly asked to gain general understanding of the participants. Followed demographic information questions, three set of questions that recognize the specific relationship between targeted variables are proposed to answer.

This study employs a three-dimension (correction action combining shifting the blame, correction action combining accident strategy, correction action combining bolstering strategy) experimental design to test these three hypotheses. According to Jones et al (2000), a well-known brand can more effectively and easily survive a product-harm crisis due to the protection of a good reputation prior to the crisis. Therefore, this experiment only compares the effects of these restoration strategies in a single brand, the Blue Bell ice cream.

In order to test their effects on attitudes, subjective norm and buying intentions, measurement of these three constructs is adapted from existing TRA scales (Lee, 2008; Benoit and Pang, 2008).



Concerning attitude, seven seven-point scales measure it. Participants will be asked to rate their attitudes toward one question: for me, purchasing the Blue Bell ice cream is (a) Extremely bad(1)/Extremely good(7); (b) Extremely undesirable (1)/Extremely desirable(7); (c) Extremely unpleasant(1)/ Extremely pleasant(7); (d) Extremely foolish(1)/ Extremely wise(7); (e) Extremely unfavourable (1)/ Extremely favourable; (f) Extremely unenjoyably (1)/ Extremely enjoyable (7); (g) Extremely negative(1)/ Extremely positive(7).

In terms of subjective norm, three five-point scales will rate it. Participants are asked in the following three questions with attitudes ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7): (a) Most people who are important to me think I should make a purchase of the Blue Bell ice cream. (b) Most people who are important to me would want me to make a purchase of the Blue Bell ice cream. (c) Most people who are important to me would prefer that I make a purchase of the Blue Bell ice cream.

The buying intentions will be rated by five-point scales range from very likely to very unlikely (very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, very unlikely), which is asked by the question of “how likely you will buy the products of Blue Bell ice cream?”

### **Participants and sampling method**

Due to limited time and resources, the recruitment of participants in this study mainly comes from students at University of South Florida and the residents shopping in the markets around the university. Moreover, residents at Florida are ideal targeted sampling base for this study

since Florida is an affected state in the Blue Bell ice cream recalls. By contacting students with emails or texts, this study aims at recruiting about 65 participants with about 22 or 23 students in each of the three experimental groups. The sample will be selected randomly, which ensure the subjectivity of the research. According to Saunders.et.al (2015), the sampling is the process of applying the representative number of items or parts of larger population to draw the conclusions about the whole population. The sampling is the valid alternative to the census when the survey of entire population is not practicable, time and budget restrict in data collection and analysis are obvious, the quick response for the research results of data collection and analysis. These four criteria are all reach my research situation. The probability sampling is known and non-zero probability for each element whereas non-probability sampling is selecting particular unknown number (Day and understand,1991). In my research, the simple random sampling will be applied since it will ensures each element in population will equip with the same level of chance to be include in the sample.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research objectives and questions**

Based upon the research purpose, three research objectives are developed for this study accordingly.

- (1) To investigate the primary communication strategies that be applied efficiently for organizational crisis management.
- (2) To examine the effect of ‘shifting the blame’ strategy on attitude and subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream.
- (3) To identify the effect of accident strategies on attitude and subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream.
- (4) To critically evaluate the effect of bolstering strategies on attitude and subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream.

The research questions are proposed:

- (1) What are the effect of ‘shifting the blame’ strategy on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream?
- (2) What are the effect of accident strategies on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream?
- (3) What are the effect of bolstering strategies on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention of Blue Bell ice cream?
- 4) What is the differences of the strategy of shifting blame, accident, bolstering in the three stimulus conditions on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention?

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis for quantitative research involve critical analysis and interpretation of figures and numbers and attempts to find rationale behind the emergence of the main findings (Pierce and Sawyer,2013). Moreover, According to Corominas.et.al(2014), the numerical representation and manipulation of observations for the purpose of describing and explaining the phenomenon that those observation reflect. The crisis communication strategies and how its utilized in the business will be concluded from the results of numerical reflection. After all these finished surveys are collected, quantitative data will be keyed into SPSS for an in-depth analysis. The data analysis procedures will follow the editing, missing data, coding and data entry and data transformation. The descriptive analysis results will be firstly presented to obtain the initial demographic information, Spearman’s correlation and Chi-square test will be applied combinatory to obtain the

research findings about relationship between different crisis communication strategies and the customers' perception and their purchase intention. Other analysis will be the supported components that better explain the collected data. The proposed strategies with significant high score in statistic levels will prove one of our hypotheses that this strategy can be able to work well in recalling the products and repair the wound healing.

### **Research ethics**

Research ethics is a diver set of values, norms and institutional regulations that support constitute and regulate the research activity(Sekaran&Bougie,2016), which mainly protect participants, ensure the research is conducted in the way that serves interests of individuals, groups and society as the whole, examine the specific research activities and projects for their ethical soundness, protect the confidentiality and the process of informed consent. For this research, I will firstly maintain the objectivity of the collected data and perceive every participant with same level of significance and opportunities without any discrimination. Regarding to the anonymity and confidential, I will attach the statement with the questionnaire that clarify anonymity of the respondents, ensure the collected information will not reveal to another people and email other sample to respondents. For confidentiality, I will only distribute the questionnaire for the participants, the collected information will not inform other individuals.

## Chapter Five

### Analysis and discussion of research results

#### Sample demographics and characteristics

The demographic data is shown in the appendix.

#### Purchase attitudes, subjective norm and purchase intention of strategy about shifting blame

Table 2: Purchase Attitude

		purchaseattitude			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	extremely bad	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
	very bad	4	20.0	20.0	85.0
	bad	1	5.0	5.0	90.0
	netural	1	5.0	5.0	95.0
	good	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total		20	100.0	100.0

When implement the shift blame strategy, 13 of 30 of participants think it is extremely bad to purchase Bull Bell ice cream; 4 of 30 participants think it is very bad to purchase Bull Bell ice cream, fewer participants think it is good to purchase Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that people have the relatively negative purchase attitudes when implement the shift blame strategy of communication.

Table 3: Subjective norm

		<b>subjectivenorm</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strong disagree	15	75.0	75.0	75.0
	very disagree	3	15.0	15.0	90.0
	disagree	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

When implement the shift blame strategy, 15 of 30 of participants strong disagree their close friends or relatives purchase Bull Bell ice cream; there is no participant agree their close friends or relatives purchase Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that people have the disagreed subjective norms when implement the shift blame strategy.

Table 4: Purchase Intention

		<b>purchaseintention</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very unlikely	15	75.0	75.0	75.0
	unlikely	2	10.0	10.0	85.0
	netural	1	5.0	5.0	90.0
	likely	1	5.0	5.0	95.0
	very likely	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

When implement the shift blame strategy, 15 of 30 of participants are very unlikely to purchase Bull Bell ice cream; only 1 participant are likely to purchase the Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that people have the low purchase intention when implement the shift blame strategy.

Table 5: Purchase attitudes, subjective norm and purchase intention of accident strategy

		<b>purchaseattitude</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	extremely bad	7	35.0	35.0	35.0
	very bad	7	35.0	35.0	70.0
	bad	3	15.0	15.0	85.0
	netural	1	5.0	5.0	90.0
	good	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

When implement the accident strategy, 7 of 30 of participants think it is extremely bad to purchase Bull Bell ice cream and 7 of 30 of participants think it is very bad to purchase Bull Bell ice cream; the fewer participants think it is good and neural to purchase Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that people have the relatively negative purchase attitudes when implement the accident strategy of communication. However, it seems more participants think it is not extremely bad to purchase Bull Bell ice cream when implement accident strategy.

Table 6: Subjective Norm

		<b>subjectivenorm</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strong disagree	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
	disagree	4	20.0	20.0	50.0
	netural	5	25.0	25.0	75.0
	agree	4	20.0	20.0	95.0
	strong agree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	



When implement the accident strategy, 6 of 30 of participants strong disagree their close friends or relatives purchase Bull Bell ice cream; there is 4 of 30 participant agree their close friends or relatives purchase Bull Bell ice cream, which is low number. It is clearly that people have the disagreed subjective norms when implement the accident strategy.

Table 7: Purchase Intention

		<b>purchaseintention</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very unlikely	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	unlikely	7	35.0	35.0	50.0
	netural	7	35.0	35.0	85.0
	likely	2	10.0	10.0	95.0
	very likely	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

When implement the accident strategy, 3 of 30 of participants are very unlikely to purchase Bull Bell ice cream; each 7 participants unlikely and neural to purchase Bull Bell ice cream; still there is only 1 participants are likely to purchase the Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that people have the low purchase intention when implement the accident strategy.

Table 8: Purchase attitudes, subjective norm and purchase intention of bolstering strategy

		<b>purchaseattitude</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	extremely bad	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	bad	6	30.0	30.0	40.0
	netural	9	45.0	45.0	85.0
	good	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

When implement the bolstering strategy, 2 of 30 of participants think it is extremely bad to

purchase Bull Bell ice cream and 6 of 30 of participants think it is bad to purchase Bull Bell ice cream; the 9 of 30 participants hold neutral attitude to purchase Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that people still have the relatively negative purchase attitudes when implement the accident strategy of communication. However, it seems more participants think it is not bad to purchase Bull Bell ice cream when implement bolstering strategy.

Table 9: Subjective Norm

		<b>subjectivenorm</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strong disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	disagree	1	5.0	5.0	10.0
	neutral	3	15.0	15.0	25.0
	agree	11	55.0	55.0	80.0
	strong agree	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

When implement the accident strategy, 11 of 30 of participants agree their close friends or relatives purchase Bull Bell ice cream; there is 4 of 30 participant strong agree their close friends or relatives purchase Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that the most of people have the agreed subjective norms when implement the bolstering strategy.

Table 10: Purchase Intention

		<b>purchaseintention</b>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very unlikely	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	unlikely	2	10.0	10.0	20.0
	netural	4	20.0	20.0	40.0
	likely	6	30.0	30.0	70.0
	very likely	6	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

When implement the bolstering strategy, each 6 of 30 of participants are very likely and likely to purchase Bull Bell ice cream. It is clearly that people have the higher purchase intention when implement the bolstering strategy.

**Differences of the strategy of shifting blame, accident, bolstering in the three stimulus conditions on attitude, subjective norm and purchase intention**

Table 11: Item Statistics

<b>Reliability Statistics</b>	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
<b>.972</b>	<b>7</b>

**Item Statistics**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
PA1	2.2308	1.12873	65
PA2	2.5385	1.26339	65
PA3	2.7385	1.34950	65
PA4	2.7692	1.36667	65
PA5	2.7538	1.36966	65
PA6	2.3077	1.36843	65
PA7	2.6462	1.52511	65

From these two tables, we can know the Alpha show is enough high and the mean number for all of the 7 questions of testing attitude.

Table 12: Reliability Statistics & Item Statistics

**Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's	
Alpha	N of Items
.927	3

**Item Statistics**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
SN1	2.7846	1.28078	65
SN2	2.5077	1.34772	65
SN3	2.6462	1.30421	65

These two tables show the data for the 3 question of testing subjective norm.

## Oneway

Table 13: Descriptives

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
PI	Shifting blame	20	1.4500	.99868
	Accident	23	1.3913	.78272
	Bolstering	22	2.9091	1.68775
	Total	65	1.9231	1.39539
PA	Shifting blame	20	1.5000	.72177
	Accident	23	3.0124	1.20598
	Bolstering	22	3.0779	1.06971
	Total	65	2.5692	1.24373
SN	Shifting blame	20	1.7000	.69164
	Accident	23	2.7101	1.25249
	Bolstering	22	3.4394	.98875
	Total	65	2.6462	1.22457

Table 14: ANOVA

### ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
PI	Between Groups	32.369	2	16.184	10.878	.000
	Within Groups	92.246	62	1.488		
	Total	124.615	64			
PA	Between Groups	33.076	2	16.538	15.553	.000
	Within Groups	65.924	62	1.063		
	Total	99.000	64			
SN	Between Groups	31.841	2	15.921	15.392	.000
	Within Groups	64.131	62	1.034		
	Total	95.973	64			

## Post Hoc Tests

### Multiple Comparisons

#### Tukey HSD

Dependent Variable	(I) GROUP	(J) GROUP	Mean	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
			Difference (I-J)			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
PI	1.00	2.00	.05870	.37294	.986	-.8368	.9542
		3.00	-1.45909*	.37686	.001	-2.3640	-.5542
	2.00	1.00	-.05870	.37294	.986	-.9542	.8368
		3.00	-1.51779*	.36376	.000	-2.3913	-.6443
	3.00	1.00	1.45909*	.37686	.001	.5542	2.3640
		2.00	1.51779*	.36376	.000	.6443	2.3913
PA	1.00	2.00	-1.51242*	.31527	.000	-2.2695	-.7554
		3.00	-1.57792*	.31858	.000	-2.3429	-.8129
	2.00	1.00	1.51242*	.31527	.000	.7554	2.2695
		3.00	-.06550	.30751	.975	-.8039	.6729
	3.00	1.00	1.57792*	.31858	.000	.8129	2.3429
		2.00	.06550	.30751	.975	-.6729	.8039
SN	1.00	2.00	-1.01014*	.31095	.005	-1.7568	-.2635
		3.00	-1.73939*	.31422	.000	-2.4939	-.9849
	2.00	1.00	1.01014*	.31095	.005	.2635	1.7568
		3.00	-.72925*	.30330	.050	-1.4575	-.0010
	3.00	1.00	1.73939*	.31422	.000	.9849	2.4939
		2.00	.72925*	.30330	.050	.0010	1.4575

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

From the tables from spss software, for purchase intention , the participants in group 3 who got the statement for bolstering strategy got most effective. For purchase attitude, group 2 and 3 don't have significantly different, but it's obvious to know that group 1 got the most effective. For subjective norm, group 1 got the minimum influence compare with group 2 and 3.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

In order to an organization or assigned to an external target, is socially constructed through messages. Persuaders can use persuasive messages to attempt to change the audience's perceptions—exactly what image repair is about. Communication is the goal-drive, so identity maintenance is a key goal of communication, and a list of strategies for repairing a damaged reputation is developed. An analysis of attacks as comprising blame and offensiveness is advanced to explain how strategies function. Consequently, different strategies target to accomplish different communicative goals for organization.

In the face of a food-related crisis, the affected company are compelled to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders, including employees, stockholders, retailers, suppliers and consumers to manage and survive the crisis (Massey, 2001). According to Jin and Liu (2010), the key publics who would pay close attention to a brand incident are those who are most affected by the event, who have shared interests to see the crisis resolved and those who have long-term interests and influences on the organization's reputation and operation. Particularly, determination on how to respond to these defective or unsafe products bears great significance to a company. In other words, the choice of response strategy directly relates to what messages the affected company wants to deliver to the public and thus is able to limit or even repair the

reputational damage and minimize the impacts of other negative outcomes (Coombs and Holladay, 2002). As a matter of fact, most of previous studies on crisis communication have concentrated on responding strategies due to their direct impacts on organizational reputations, anger and negative word-of-mouth. The audiences' behavioral intentions and emotional willingness act the essential role toward the results of crisis, which determine how the public perceives the crisis communication efforts from the organization perspective. Therefore, it is necessary to first concentrate on responding messages a company could choose from.

According to the above analysis of the collected data, it is concluded that the bolstering strategies are the most effective crisis communication strategies with various positive indicators to cope with food-related crisis, whereas shifting the blame strategy and accident strategy are less effective regarding to both purchase attitudes, subjective norms and buying intentions.

For research limitations, Sekaran&Bougie(2016) claim that research limitations are the restrictions for getting the valid data and information, therefore generating the research conclusions.

The limitations of this research are identified as following:

- The process of testing proposed hypothesis will just examine the efficiency of the communication strategies, which will not involve any in-depth analysis about hinder reasons for its efficiency.
- The time and budget constraints.



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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

#### Section A Basic information

1. Your gender

a. Female

b. Male

2. Your age

a. Less than 20

b. From 20 to 29

3. Your monthly income level

a. Less than \$3,000

b. from \$3,000 to \$6,000

c. from \$6,001 to \$10,000

d. from \$10,001 to \$ 20,000

e. More than \$20,000

4. Your educational level

a. High school diploma

b. Graduate

c. Post-graduate

d. Doctorate

**Section B**

5. For me, purchasing Blue Bell ice cream is:

(Please rate the following statements with seven-point scales)

(a) Extremely bad (1) to Extremely good(7)

6. Please rate the following statement from strong disagree (SD) to strongly agree (SA).

Most people who are important to me think I should make a purchase of Blue Bell ice cream.	1	2	3	4	5	NA
--	---	---	---	---	---	----

7. how likely you will purchase the products of Blue Bell ice cream?

(Please rate with five-point scales,very likely, likely, neutral, unlikely, very unlikely)

A voluntary recall message from Blue Bell ice cream

*We have noticed that some of our products sold in the US market might contain Listeria monocytogenes which could cause health-related problems to people, especially among vulnerable populations including people who are elderly, children and people with underlying medical conditions. In response, we immediately made some sample tests and found that two flavours of our product could contain. Concerning the fact that Listeria monocytogenes is toxic if ingested and can cause adverse health effects, we decide to immediately recall all the defective products. Consumers are strongly advised to immediately check their Blue Bell ice creams at home to determine whether they are the recalled ice creams and not to eat them. Please contact us if any*

*sickness is caused after eating the ice cream. For more information, our contact number is ××××-××××.*

*In response to the crisis, the company is also endeavoured to cooperate closely with Texas Department of State Health Services and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry with a series of steps and actions to bring Blue Bell ice cream products back to market, including root cause analysis, Retaining an independent microbiology expert to establish and review controls and notifying the two departments with any presumptive positive test result for *Listeria monocytogenes* found in ingredients or finished product samples. We will make our efforts to improve our product quality and ensure this will not happen again.*

A statement of claiming another entity in responsible for this accident

*After the outbreak of possible contamination of *Listeria monocytogenes* in many of our products, we immediately and proactively reacted to the crisis with a voluntary recall. At the same time, we also made our efforts to conduct root cause analysis in order to locate exactly which step went wrong. After many times of intensified internal test, luckily, we have been able to identity that the origin of *listeria monocytogenes* came from one of our suppliers, Aspen Hills Inc.. We have immediately notified our finding to Aspen and Aspen have decided to recall all of its products supplied to our company.*

A statement of claiming the crisis as an accident with no further and widespread threats

*With an abundance of caution, we have decided to recall two of our products due to possible*

*listeria monocytogenes* contamination. Unlike the outbreak in 2015, no illness has been reported in connection with the recalled ice cream until now. For any other ice cream flavours, we can reassure that no healthy risks be concerned. Except for the recalled ice cream, most of our products have been produced with strict quality-check procedures and are enjoyed by many consumers as they have always been.

A statement of claiming the high-quality of Blue Bell ice cream and its benefits to American families

*With an abundance of caution, we have decided to recall two of our products due to possible listeria monocytogenes contamination. No illness has been reported in connection with the recalled ice cream until now. For the last 100 years, Blue Bell ice cream has been endeavoured to deliver unique flavours of ice cream with high quality to all American families no matter you are together with your family, you are having fun with your friends or you are having party with your colleagues. As the fourth highest-selling ice cream manufacturer across the United States, we assure you that we be more careful with our products and be more strict with our production procedures. At any time anywhere, we hope you can have a great time with the companionship of Blue Bell ice cream.*



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
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13901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33613-4799  
(813) 974-5639 • FAX(813)974-7091

March 20, 2018

Yifei Ren  
School of Advertising and Mass Communications  
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Exempt Certification**

IRB#: Pro00034472

Title: **Managing a food health crisis: Perceptions and reactions to different response strategies**

Dear Ms. Ren:

On 3/20/2018, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that your research meets criteria for exemption from the federal regulations as outlined by 45CFR46.101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:  
(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF HRPP policies and procedures.

Please note, as per USF HRPP Policy, once the Exempt determination is made, the application is closed in ARC. Any proposed or anticipated changes to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB review must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant an amendment or new application.

Given the determination of exemption, this application is being closed in ARC. This does not limit your ability to conduct your research project.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have

any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and 'S'.

**John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board**