

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kenon A. Brown entitled “The Impact of Organization-Public Relationships on Choosing Crisis Response Strategies.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communication and Information.

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The Impact of Organization-Public Relationships on Choosing Crisis Response Strategies

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the public's perception of an organization-public relationship and crisis response strategies affect the attribution of crisis responsibility. Using Coombs' (2007) SCCT theory, this study will contribute insight into which crisis response strategies work for certain types of organization-public relationships. This thesis is the initial investigation of an attempt to determine how several factors, including crisis type, crisis history, relationship type, relationship history, and crisis response strategy, can affect the perception of a crisis.

A large, southeastern university was chosen as the organization under study, and its student population was the stakeholder group studied. A financial challenge was chosen as the crisis. Four different crisis response strategies were manipulated through news articles. The study measured the perception of the organization-public relationship, and after the participants were exposed to one of the four manipulation articles, their attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization was measured. Four hundred students were chosen for the study.

Data analysis showed that the reminding manipulation produced the lowest attribution scores overall, for participants with a negative relationship, and participants with a negative relationship. Three of the four crisis response manipulations produced significant differences in attribution scores for participants with a positive relationship with the university and participants with a negative relationship with the university. Correlations were also found between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility. No significant differences were found among the four crisis response strategies in terms of attribution scores or correlation between relationship scores and attribution scores.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Crisis management, although evident in earlier case studies and research, has only been studied at a scholarly level from a public relations perspective for the last 25 years (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Organizations realize how crucial the preparation for, response to, and aftermath of a crisis are to their financial and reputational success. A crisis, if not handled properly, can single-handedly destroy an organization and the people involved. With the rapid growth of technology, the existence of a global marketplace, and increased activism among stakeholders, the importance of successful crisis management is evident now more than ever (Coombs, 2007; Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007).

One of the most important aspects of crisis management is communication. Effective crisis communication is a key factor in reducing the effects of a crisis; however, neglecting the importance of crisis communication can lead to the devastation of an organization's reputation (Ogrizek & Guillery, 1999). Too often, organizations do not consider using crisis communication until their reputation is on the verge of becoming tarnished (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Part of the success or failure of crisis communications is what the organization says and does after the crisis has evolved (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). The crisis response is critical to the reputation of the organization. The right response can help keep customer and employee loyalty. The wrong response can sabotage relationships with the public, the media and the employees and can damage an organization beyond repair.

Crisis response has its roots in Ware and Linkugel's (1973) apologia theory. Several typologies of crisis responses have been created, from Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies to Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), but they all

stress the same concept: the right response in the right crisis situation can be the difference in the success or failure of the organization.

Around the same time crisis management became a prevalent topic in scholarly research, a call was made by Ferguson (1984) to make relationships the central concept of public relations scholarship. Relationship management has become one of the prominent paradigms in public relations (Gower, 2006). The focus on relationships has been applied to several areas in public relations, including issues management (Bridges & Nelson, 2000), cyber-communication (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) and global public relations (Kruckeberg, 2000). Practitioners and scholars generally realize that in order to communicate effectively, relationships must be created and maintained.

Coombs (2000) suggested that a relational approach can produce new insights into the crisis management process, and Coombs and Holladay (2001) placed relationship history into their crisis situation model. The need to establish pre-crisis relationships has always been evident in crisis literature, but the organization-public relationship has rarely been discussed in detail in crisis communication literature (Coombs, 2000). The issue is that while relationship management has developed as a theory, crisis communication, like public relations in general, is a heavily applied field. It is not sufficient to decide that relationship management can be applied to crisis communication. Evidence must continue to be established and theoretical claims must be tested in order to provide tools that can be used by practitioners (Coombs, 2000). One area that the relational perspective can be utilized is crisis response strategies. There is little empirical evidence that shows the importance of relationships on an organization's response to a crisis,

even though the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders can impact the perception and management of the crisis (Coombs & Holliday, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the public's perception of an organization-public relationship and crisis response strategies affect the attribution of crisis responsibility. Using Coombs' (2007) SCCT theory, this study will contribute insight into which crisis response strategies work for certain types of organization-public relationships. This thesis is the initial investigation of an attempt to determine how several factors, including crisis type, crisis history, relationship type, relationship history, and crisis response strategy, can affect the perception of a crisis. Chapter 2 will provide the theoretical basis, including insight into crisis communication and relationship management, a detailed evolution of crisis response, and an overview of the relational approach to crisis management. The chapter will end with a look at attribution theory and SCCT theory, which will be the basis of the study. Chapter 3 will provide a detailed look at the experimental method that will be used to conduct this study, as well as an overview of the design, definition of the variables, and the hypotheses being tested. Chapter 4 will provide a report of the results of the experiment. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the results and their impact of the link between relationship management and crisis communication, and will provide insight into the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Applying the relational approach to selecting crisis response strategies involves a look into the theories of both crisis communications and relationship management. Part 1 will look into crisis communications, beginning with a brief background of the terms “crisis” and “crisis communication”, and will conclude with an examination of the evolution of the theory behind crisis response strategies. Part 2 will examine relationship management by providing a brief background and a look into the theoretical approach to relationship management. Part 3 will examine past research devoted to applying the relational approach to crisis communication, and will conclude with a look into attribution theory and its use in Coombs’ (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to approach this perspective.

Crisis Communication Management

Crisis communication management has evolved well beyond the classic public relations crises of Tylenol and Exxon Valdez. More organizations realize that failure to plan for crises can result in damage to their reputation, stability and finances. Failure to plan for a crisis can also be costly for an organization’s employees, investors and customers. Although crisis communication management is an applied field, theoretical research has been devoted to the field. In order to understand the importance of crisis communication, one must begin with defining the term “crisis”.

Definition of Crises and Crisis Communication

Coombs (2007) synthesized several definitions and perspectives of the term “crisis” and defined it as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative

outcomes” (pp. 2-3). There are three key elements to this definition. First, a crisis is a perception. Even if an organization does not believe that a crisis exists, ultimately the public’s perception is the reality of the situation, and if the stakeholders believe a crisis exists, then a crisis exists (Seeger, 2006; Coombs, 2007). Penrose (2000) studied the role of perception and concluded that the public’s perception of the crisis is a critical element in crisis planning and will affect crisis outcomes. Second, while a crisis is unpredictable, it is not unexpected (Coombs, 2007; Cloudman and Hallahan, 2006). Organizations that effectively plan for crises can better anticipate when a crisis will hit, and therefore can lessen the damage of a crisis (Penrose, 2000). Finally, a crisis can, and almost always will, generate negative outcomes. However, if handled effectively, quickly and systematically, a crisis can generate positive outcomes for the organization and its stakeholders (Heath, 2006). Approaching a crisis as an opportunity can uncover new leaders and new business practices that can ultimately improve the organization, and can assist, rejuvenate and restore confidence, goodwill and stability for their stakeholders (Penrose, 2000).

Crisis communication, like crisis, has several definitions and perspectives. Fearn-Banks (2007) defined crisis communication as “the [dialogue] between the organization and its public, prior to, during and after the negative occurrence” (p. 9). Crisis communication is typically associated with public relations and stresses the need for organizations to repair their damaged image after a crisis (Seeger, 2006). Reynolds and Seeger (2005) placed crisis communication in the larger concept of risk and emergency management, while Fearn-Banks (2007) placed crisis communication in the larger concept of crisis management. Communicating effectively in a

crisis is a daunting task due to the chaotic nature of a crisis. The ability to communicate well can determine the state of the organization afterwards (Reynolds, 2006).

Coombs (2007) and Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007) define crisis communication as a process. Coombs (2007) gave four factors to crisis communication: prevention, preparation, response and revision. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007) also describe crisis communication as a four-step process: managing uncertainty, responding to a crisis, resolving a crisis, and learning from a crisis. Although Fearn-Banks (2007) presented crisis communication as a smaller concept of crisis management, she gives five steps to crisis communication: detection, prevention or preparation, containment, recovery and learning. Although all of these processes and stages are worthy of examination, for the purpose of this study, only crisis response will be examined.

The Crisis Response

The way an organization responds to a crisis is critical to the success of managing the crisis situation. If the response is accepted by the public, the reputation of the company can be minimally damaged, and financial and personal losses can be kept to a minimum. If the organization's response is ineffective, it can lead to major damage for the organization's image, financial success, and ultimately, its survival (Seeger, 2006).

Researchers have looked at several strategies about how to approach crisis response. Seeger (2006) stressed the need for honesty, candor and openness during a crisis. Honesty and openness are need before, during and after a crisis to build and maintain trust and credibility. He defined candor as "communicating the entire truth as it is known, even when the truth may reflect negatively on the ... organization" (p. 239). The willingness not to withhold any

information from the public that may affect them is critical in a crisis situation and can help maintain a positive reputation.

Coombs (2007) stressed the need for timely and consistent information among the crisis team. Technology has enabled the rapid delivery of information, which can hurt an organization if it does not respond quickly. Organizations must respond as soon as possible to avoid false, misleading or damaging information from being reported by someone other than a credible source. Researchers stress the need for a consistent message because it helps keep control of the crisis and can ease the tension among the stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2007; Fink, 1986). A consistent and timely message will also reduce the media's need for information, which keeps them from relying on sources that are not credible (Coombs, 2007, Seeger, 2006).

Evolution of Crisis Response Strategies

Marsh (2006) stated that most research on crisis response strategies has its origins in apologia theory, which was influenced by the work of Ware and Linkugel (1973). Benoit (1995) builds on apologia theory with his image restoration theory (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Impression management, based on the work of Allen and Caillouet (1994) has also provided a theoretical approach to crisis response. Finally, the work of Coombs (2007) gives us the SCCT theory that will be the basis of this study.

Apologia theory is based on the idea of apology, or an organization's reaction to the public after it has been accused of a misdeed (Fearn-Banks, 2007). One of the first investigations of apologia theory was the work of Ware and Linkugel (1973). Ware and Linkugel (1973) believed that a person speaking in his or her own defense is a significant and distinct form of public address and saw the need for examination, and therefore examined, several apologetic

political speeches. Their study discovered four “modes of resolution” that were utilized by the speakers. This can be argued as being the first true list of crisis response strategies.

Ware and Linkugel (1973) argued that there are four strategies used by speakers when giving apologetic speeches: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. *Denial* consists of a speaker denying the facts of the accusations. The speaker dismisses any participation in, relationship to, or positive feelings towards the crisis (Marsh, 2006; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). *Bolstering* consists of the speaker identifying himself or herself with something positive to the audience. *Differentiation* consists of the speaker separating an action or attribute from the larger context that the public views it, and is often used when the accused wants the public to not judge them until the actions can be viewed from a different perspective (Marsh, 2006; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). *Transcendence* is the incorporation of an action or attribute into a context that the public had not previously included it, and is usually utilized when the speaker wants the audience to focus on a more abstract view of their character, not the situation at hand (Marsh, 2005; Ware & Linkugel, 1973).

Ware and Linkugel (1973) gave four types of speeches that combine their response strategies. An *absolute* speech combines the differentiation and denial strategies, and focuses on the speaker seeking acquittal, whether from the court of law, the court of public opinion, or both. The *vindictive* speech relies on transcendence strategies and places the speaker in a positive light, preserving the speaker’s reputation to the public. The *explanative* speech combines the bolstering and differentiation strategies. Speakers assume that if the public can understand their position and responsibility in the crisis, then they will have a less negative outlook on the

organization. The *justificative* address, which combines the bolstering and transcendence strategies, has the speaker asking for understanding and approval.

Evolving from the earlier apologia theory, Benoit (1995, 1997) based his image restoration theory on the idea that an attack, or crisis, has two components: the accused is held responsible for an action and the action is considered offensive. Only when these two conditions are considered by the public to be true is the organization's reputation in danger. The foundation of image restoration theory involves two key assumptions: communication is a goal-directed activity and maintaining a positive reputation is one of the key goals of communication (Benoit, 1995, 1997). Responding to a crisis is important because crisis communication, as well as public relations as a whole, is concerned with reputation. The public relations profession exists to create, and once created, maintain a positive reputation for organizations (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Therefore, Benoit (1995, 1997) believed the goal of communication in a crisis is to either restore or protect the reputation of the organization.

Benoit (1995, 1997) gives 14 image restoration strategies, organized into five categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Table 2.1 gives a detailed list of these strategies (*All tables are located in Appendix A*). The denial strategies include the *simple denial*: just stating that the organization did not perform the act in question, which can evolve into *shifting the blame* onto another person or organization. When an organization cannot deny the actions, evading responsibility strategies help the organization avoid or reduce blame. Four strategies are present in this category. *Provocation*, or scapegoating, involves claiming that the action was provoked by the actions of another person or organization. *Defeasibility* involves claiming that the action was provoked by lack of information or

misinformation. The organization can also claim that the crisis was the result of an *accident*, or the crisis was the result of the organization acting under *good intentions*.

The organization can also try to reduce negative perception caused by the crisis. Benoit (1995, 1997) gave six strategies for reducing offensiveness. *Bolstering* involves the organization stressing the positive traits of the organization in order to mitigate the negative perception. *Minimization* involves the organization claiming that the crisis is not as serious as the public or the media is claims. *Differentiation* involves the organization making the act seem less offensive than the public perceives. *Transcendence* places the crisis in a more favorable context. The organization may also decide to *attack the accuser* or *compensate* the victims of the crisis.

The final two categories have no variants. *Corrective action* involves the organization promising to correct the problem. Benoit (1995, 1997) stated that there are two forms of corrective action: restoring the situation to its state before the crisis or promising to prevent the recurrence of the crisis. *Mortification* involves the organization admitting the crisis was its fault and asking for forgiveness. These two strategies are often used together by apologizing for the crisis and vowing to fix the existing problem and preventing it from happening again.

Allen and Caillouet (1994) apply impression management strategies to responding in a crisis. Impression management is based on the concept of organizational legitimacy. Allen and Caillouet (1994) believed that a crisis can threaten an organization's legitimacy in the public eye, and suggested that image restoration strategies can be used by the organization in order to strategically control the public's perception of them, resulting in restoring the organization's legitimacy. Sixteen impression management strategies were presented in the research,

categorized under seven categories: excuse, justification, ingratiation, intimidation, apology, denouncement, and factual distortion. Table 2.2 gives a list of these strategies.

Excuse involves the organization's attempt to deny responsibility for an event (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). These strategies include *denying intention* for the crisis, *denying volition*, or stating that the organization had no control over the crisis, and *denying agency*, or stating that the organization did not cause the crisis.

Justification involves the organization accepting responsibility for the crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). These strategies include *denying injury* to anyone due to the crisis, *denying victimage*, which involves claims that the victim deserved the consequences of the crisis, *condemning the condemner*, and claiming that *negative events were misinterpreted*.

Ingratiation involves the attempt of the organization to gain the public's approval (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). These strategies involve providing *self-enhancing communication*, displaying the organization as a *role model*, suggesting the organization accepts *social responsibility*, providing *other enhancing communication*, or *opinion conformity*, which suggests that the organization accepts the public's opinion and holds the same beliefs.

The final four strategies presented by Allen and Caillouet (1994) have no variants. *Intimidation* involves conveying an organizational identity of danger and potency, and is often used with threats. *Apology* admits the organization's responsibility in the crisis and often requests punishment. *Denouncement* indicates an external person or organization is the cause of the crisis, and *factual distortion* stresses that the details of the crisis were taken out of context or are false.

Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory applies attribution theory to crisis communication. Attribution theory assumes that people perceive that someone is responsible for certain situations when the cause is not obvious (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Crises are unexpected situations and the cause of the crisis is not always obvious, therefore, blame must be attributed to someone, which when shifted on the organization can impact the perception of the organization and behavior toward the organization (Coombs, 2007). SCCT theory uses attribution theory to assess an organization's level of responsibility for the crisis, and recommends a specific set of crisis response strategies developed from a synthesis of the former three crisis response strategies. The SCCT theory, as well as attribution theory, will be presented in detail in part 3 of this literature review as the basis behind the relational approach to crisis communication.

Relationship Management

The study of relationships and their impact on how public relations is practiced has been the focus of many studies and journal articles for more than 20 years. Beginning with Ferguson's (1984) call for relationships to become the core concept of public relations scholarship, the emergence of the relational perspective as one of the central paradigms to public relations has called into question what public relations is, what it does or should do, its value in today's society and the benefits generated for the organizations and various stakeholders it serves (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). As public relations struggles to find a theoretical framework to guide the field, relationship management is slowly becoming a prominent paradigm in the literature and provides a competent rival to two-way symmetrical communication as the dominant theoretical paradigm in the field (Gower, 2006).

After Ferguson's (1984) call for research, Cutlip, Center and Broom (1987) modeled a new definition of public relations, stating that public relations is "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1987, 1994). Several scholars began to study relationships, specifically organization-public relationships, as the central idea of public relations. Broom and Dozier (1990) stressed that researchers rarely study relationships in public relations, although it should be the core concept. Grunig, Grunig and Ehling (1992) argued that the relationships between organizations and stakeholders are critical to the success of the excellence theory, but noted that relationships have not been the focus of public relations scholarship. Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) proposed a model of theory for relationship management and challenged other scholars to contribute to the advancement of theory building in public relations based on organization-public relationships. This challenge was accepted by Ledingham and Bruning in 1998, and culminated in a book dedicated to relationship management in 2000.

Relationship Management Theory

Public relations research before 1984 acknowledged the importance of relationship management without a clear cut definition, concept, or theoretical framework (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997). Since then, scholars have strived to develop a framework for the evolving paradigm. Relationship management takes concepts from several fields of study, including marketing, interpersonal communication, marketing, and social psychology (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). From these fields of study, public relations scholars have constructed a

preliminary concept of relationship management and its central core unit of study: the organization-public relationship.

The relationship management perspective of public relations balances the interests of both the organization and its publics through the management of organization-public relationships (Ledingham, 2003). The organization-public relationship, its antecedents and consequences were discussed by Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997). They discuss that several antecedents cause the formation of relationships, including social and cultural norms, needs for resources, and legal/voluntary necessity. These relationships are formed through several processes, including exchanges, transactions and communication, which is considered the most important factor in the success of the relationship between the organization and the public. The results of these relationships are goal achievement, dependency, loss of autonomy and routine and institutionalized behavior (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997). These measurable factors of organization-public relationships helped validate the concept of relationships as a viable concept for theoretical development and study.

Bruning, Castle and Schrepfer (2004) discussed two different approaches to scholarly research for examining and conceptualizing organization-public relationships. Some scholars treat the organization-public relationship as an entity separate from the perceptions held by the participants in the relationship. The relationship is a third, independent phenomenon that is influenced by external factors as well as the parties that formed the relationship, and takes on characteristics separate from the parties involved. Other scholars believe that members' attitudes about the relationship within the organization influence behaviors and evaluation of the relationship (Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004). The relationship is not a separate entity, but an

interdependent phenomenon that is influenced by the organizations that participate in the relationship.

Several other factors of relationships were outlined by Ledingham (2003). Relationships were determined to be dynamic, volatile and can constantly change over time. Ledingham (2003) also provided several types of organization-public relationships, which included symbolic, behavioral, personal, professional and community relationships, and provided several dimensions of organization-public relationships, which will be discussed in a later section. Ledingham also provided a theoretical definition of relationship management, grounded in a review of scholarly literature: “Effectively managing organizational-public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics” (p. 190).

Measurement and Dimensions of Relationship Management

Scholars have not only provided a theoretical background for relationship management, but have provided several ways to measure relationships and their effectiveness. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) conducted a study that produced four dimensions out of a list of 17 that was developed from a review of literature in several other fields of study. These four dimensions; trust, openness, investment and involvement, were considered the primary factors that determine whether or not an organization-public relationship is effective. Ledingham and Bruning conducted a later study that developed a 4 X 3 multi-dimensional matrix that measured the above four characteristics against professional, personal and community relationships (1999). A later study conducted by Bruning and Galloway (2003) validated the addition of commitment to the Bruning-Ledingham organization-public relationship scale and determined that organization-

public relationships have five dimensions: anthropomorphism, or the way the organization demonstrates positive human qualities, professional benefits/expectations, personal commitment, community improvement, and comparison of alternatives.

Huang (2001) saw the need for a cross-cultural, multi-dimensional scale for measuring organization-public relationships, and called it the Organization-Public Relationship Assessment (OPRA). Five dimensions were named: trust, relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, control mutuality, and face and favor. All but face and favor rely heavily on Western culture, with face and favor prevalently from Eastern culture. Hon and Grunig (1999) developed a similar scale and defined six relational outcomes: control mutuality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, communal relationships, and exchange relationships. Hung (2005) stepped away from the discovery of dimensions and worked towards discovering several types of organization-public relationships. Hung further placed these relationship types on a continuum and concluded that relationships move dynamically along the continuum. Similarities can be seen in these scales, especially with the need for trust and commitment for the validity of a relationship, and the dynamic structure of organization-public relationships.

The Relational Approach to Crisis Communication

Although little empirical research has been devoted to studying crisis communication from a relational perspective, many scholars have stressed the need to consider building and maintaining relationships before a crisis strikes. Fearn-Banks (2007) stressed the need to identify key publics and develop initial contact with them in order to communicate effectively when a crisis arises. Seeger (2006) believed that crisis managers should accept the public as legitimate and equal partners during a crisis. Coombs (2007) views crises as small but significant episodes

in an ongoing relationship. The need to establish and maintain pre-crisis relationships validates the need for crisis communication to be looked at from a relationship management perspective. The status of the organization-public relationship can have a significant effect on the perception of a crisis. Coombs and Holliday (2001) believed that relationship history, especially a negative relationship history, has an effect on the perception of the organization during a crisis.

The relational approach to crisis management has largely been developed by Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2001), and by developing the SCCT theory, Coombs (2000) applied attribution theory to crisis communications in order to explain how publics assign responsibility and blame for crises. In order to explain SCCT theory, attribution theory and its role in crisis communication must be examined.

Attribution Theory

Weiner (1985) based attribution theory on the assumption that people want to know and understand why an event happened. Psychologically speaking, people want to place responsibility for events on someone or something because it helps them manage the situation and possibly take corrective action if necessary. When a negative event arises, the individual or group that is perceived to be responsible for the action (the accused) receives stronger feelings of anger from the public and is viewed in a more negative light (Coombs, 2000).

There are four causal dimensions people use to determine if the event in question should be attributed more to the accused (strong individual responsibility) or to outside sources (weak individual responsibility): stability, external control, personal control and locus of causality (McAuley, Duncan & Russell, 1992, as cited in Coombs, 2000). Stability refers to the frequency of the event. The more the accused is involved in similar events, the more stable the

organization's involvement in the event. External control refers to how much control an outside source other than the accused has on the event. The more control an outside source has on the event, the more external control present. Personal control refers to how much control the accused had over the event. The more control the accused has, the more personal control attributed. Locus of causality refers to whether the cause of the event is something about the accused (internal locus) or something about the situation (external locus). Although measures have been developed for all four dimensions, research has indicated that personal control and locus of causality overlap (Coombs, 2000). High personal control and internal locus creates perceptions of an intentional act, while low personal control and external locus creates perceptions of an unintentional act. Therefore, most research uses three dimensions: stability, external control, and locus/personal control. The judgments of these three dimensions determine feelings and behaviors of the public towards the accused (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

Attribution Theory and Crisis Communication: The SCCT Theory

Coombs (2000) determined that the dimensions of attribution can help explain how publics interpret crises that develop, and can be used to determine an appropriate response to the crisis. A crisis provides an opportunity to trigger an attribution search because it is unexpected, usually chaotic, and presents some sort of failure. Publics search for causes to crises, and usually the crisis attribution will revolve around the organizational responsibility, or the amount of blame the public attributes to the organization. The more organizational responsibility present, the more damage occurs to the organization's reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). The three dimensions of attribution provide a measurement of organizational responsibility (Coombs, 2000). External control determines how much control another person or group outside the

organization had over the crisis. Strong external control weakens organizational responsibility because the organization had no control over the outside agents. Locus/personal control determines if the organization had control of the events leading up to the crisis. Strong locus/internal control indicates that the organization could have taken precautions to prevent the crisis. Stability can refer to two things: the crisis history of the organization and the reputation of the organization. A stable crisis history, or frequent amount of crises, can increase organizational responsibility. A stable prior reputation can help decrease organizational responsibility. This stable reputation can be built by building and maintain a good relationship with an organization's publics.

Coombs' (2007) SCCT theory takes into account three factors when determining crisis responses: crisis type, crisis history, and prior reputation. The first step in the SCCT theory is to determine the crisis type. The type of crisis determines personal control, and therefore, helps determine crisis responsibility. Coombs (2007) separates his typology of crises into three clusters. The victim cluster includes crises that possess weak personal control for the organization. These include *natural disasters*, *rumors*, *workplace violence*, and *malevolence*. The accidental cluster includes crises that possess moderate personal control. These include *challenges*, *technical-error accidents*, and *technical-error product harm*. The preventable cluster includes crises that possess strong personal control. These include *human-error accidents*, *human-error product harm* and *organizational misdeeds*.

Once the crisis type and the level of personal control are determined, then the organization's reputational threat must be examined. Crisis history and prior reputation help decide reputational threat. If the organization has an unfavorable history of crises, or unfavorable

reputation, then the reputational threat can increase. This can cause an organization's stakeholders to perceive a crisis as more threatening than it is.

Once the organization's reputational threat is determined, then the crisis team selects the recommended crisis response strategies. Coombs (2007) gives ten crisis response strategies, divided into four postures. Table 2.3 gives a list of these responses. The denial posture strives to remove any connections an organization has with a crisis. These include *attacking the accuser*, *simple denial* and *scapegoating*. The diminishment posture attempts to reduce attributions of organizational control and reduce negative effects of the crisis. These include *excusing* and *justification*. The rebuilding posture attempts to improve the organization's reputation. These include *compensation* and *apology*. Bolstering strategies seek to build a positive connection between an organization and its publics. These include *reminding*, *ingratiation* and *victimage*.

The Need for Research

After Coombs (2000) first introduced the relational perspective to crisis communication, Coombs and Holliday (2001) explored the impact of relationship history on the crisis situation, under the belief that relationships affect crises by shaping the perceptions of the crisis and the organization in the crisis. Coombs and Holliday (2001) found that only a negative relationship history had an effect on reputational threat and perception of the crisis, but stressed the need for research, including the need to test the effects of relationship history on the selection of crisis response strategies.

Kim and Lee (2005) began to study how the organization-public relationship affects the perception towards crisis response strategies, specifically Benoit's (1995, 1997) image restoration strategies. They found that stakeholders with favorable relationships towards an

organization will respond to crisis response strategies more positively than those with hostile relationships; however, the study did not explore which crisis response strategies are more effective towards either group.

Lee (2007) moved a step forward towards the concept of using perception of relationship to select crisis response strategies. Lee (2007) found no evidence to prove that the organization-public relationship had an effect on the attitude toward the image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1995, 1997) presented or the perception of the crisis situation, but stressed the need to further study in this area, including opportunity for scale construction and research design improvement.

Research has been initiated into linking relationship management and crisis communication; however, there is still a gap in the research. As stated earlier, the need to establish and maintain pre-crisis relationships helps validate the need to approach crisis communication from a relational perspective (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Most literature about crisis communication presents general strategies for approaching the different stages in crisis communication. The problem with that outlook is that stakeholder groups have different priorities. The issues from a crisis that affect employees are different from those that affect customers, investors, community members, etc. If crisis communication is approached from a relational perspective, organizations can tailor response strategies for each stakeholder group to achieve the best outcome for each group.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the survey of literature, the experimental design, and the use of relationship management theory, SCCT theory, and attribution theory, the following research questions and hypotheses were tested:

RQ₁: Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and lowest attribution of crisis responsibility regardless of perception of organization-public relationship?

H₁: There is a difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies regardless of perception of organization-public relationship.

RQ₂: Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and lowest attribution of crisis responsibility for students with a more positive organization-public relationship?

H₂: There is a difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies for students with a more positive organization-public relationship.

RQ₃: Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and lowest attribution of crisis responsibility for students with a more negative organization-public relationship?

H₃: There is a difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies for students with a more negative organization-public relationship.

H₄: There is a difference among the mean attribution scores for students with a more positive organization-public relationship and students with a more negative organization-public relationship regardless of crisis response strategy.

RQ₄: Is there a difference among the mean attribution scores for students with a more positive organization-public relationship and students with a more negative organization-public relationship for each of the four crisis response strategies?

H₅: There will be a correlation between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility regardless of crisis response strategy.

RQ₅: Is there a correlation between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility for each of the four crisis response strategies?

H₆: There is a difference among the correlations between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility for each of the four crisis response strategies.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This study sought to link relationship management and crisis communication by exploring how the public's perception of an organization-public relationship and crisis response strategies affect the attribution of crisis responsibility. The theories behind the assumptions of this study are already established, which triggers a deductive research process, and calls for quantitative research methods (Buddenbaum & Novak, 2001).

The method used was a design that blends the survey and experimental methods, similar to work presented by Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2001), Callison (2004), and Lee (2007). Previous scholars have used a between-subjects design to randomly assign manipulations of independent variables in the form of different questionnaires. The questionnaire for this study measured or manipulated three variables: perception of relationship, crisis response strategy, and attribution of crisis responsibility. Perception of relationship was measured using a modification of Bruning and Galloway's (2003) relationship scale. Crisis response strategies were manipulated by the use of four newspaper articles with one of each of the four SCCT postures or crisis response embedded in the article. Attribution of crisis responsibility was measured using a modification of McAuley, Duncan and Russel's (1992) attribution scale, which was used in Coombs' and Holladay's (2001) seminal study linking relationship management and crisis communication. The questionnaire and the four manipulation articles are included in appendices C and D.

Measurement and Manipulation of Variables

As stated above, three variables were either measured or manipulated in the questionnaire: perception of relationship, crisis response strategy and attribution of crisis responsibility.

Perception of Relationship

Perception of relationship was treated as an independent variable. The variable was measured by using a modification of Bruning and Galloway's (2003) organization-public relationship scale. This scale is an extension of Bruning and Ledingham's (1999) original organization-public relationship scale, and modifications were made through editing and pretesting in order to increase reliability and to accurately measure the relationship in the experiment. The revised scale was adapted to measure the relationship between the university and its students. The scale was not used to test the dimensions of the relationship given by Bruning and Galloway (2003), but was used to produce a relationship score. The scale consisted of 19 items and used a seven-point Likert scale. The higher the score, the more positive the relationship was between the student and the university. The scores could range from 19 (answering strongly disagree for all items) to 133 (answering strongly agree for all items). The scores were used to develop relationship categories by performing a median split once the data were collected. Scores below or equal to the median were considered "negative" relationships, and scores above the median were considered "positive" relationships. Using data from the pretest, the revised scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .91. The instrument's items are shown in Table 3.1.

Crisis Response Strategy

Crisis response strategy was treated as an independent variable. The variable was manipulated through the random assignment of four crisis response statements. A crisis response strategy was chosen from each of the four postures of Coombs' (2007) SCCT theory, and the four strategies were tested through four written statements, each using one of the four strategies. The strategies were scapegoating (denial posture), justification (diminishment posture), apology (rebuilding posture), and reminding (bolstering posture). The statements were embedded in a fictitious newspaper article pertaining to the crisis. The news article was chosen as the information vehicle because more people get their information about crises from the mass media than any other source (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

A organizational challenge was chosen as the crisis. According to Coombs (2007), a challenge occurs when "the organization is confronted by discontented stakeholders with claims that it is operating in an inappropriate manner" (p. 65). According to SCCT theory, challenges to an organization have low attribution of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). However, the attribution of crisis responsibility is more dynamic for organizational challenges, and is dependent more on other factors, such as the organization's crisis history and prior reputation. Due to the current economic crisis, the university used as the organization for this study has threatened to cut more than 800 jobs and possibly increase tuition by 8 percent (White, 2009). The manipulated news story discussed the possible cancellation of 10-15 percent of offered courses for the 2009 fall semester, which could delay graduation for some university students.

The news stories followed standard AP reporting style and included a statement from the university using one of the four crisis responses. The four news articles are included in Appendix

C. The following four excerpts are the spokesperson quotes used to manipulate the four crisis response strategies:

(Scapegoating) “The reduction in state funding has given us no choice but to reduce classes for the upcoming semester. The state government has been very adamant about its refusal to free any funds that could keep our employees from being laid off and our student’s education from being sacrificed,” a university spokesperson stated in a news conference on Monday.

University officials have noted their willingness to cooperate with the state government, but in the end, the state has not attempted to provide additional funding for the university.

“The class cuts are inevitable, and the state government is to blame. We have given state officials every chance to work with us to fix this situation, but their unwillingness to cooperate has made it difficult for us to find another solution to this problem,” stated a university spokesperson.

(Justification) “The university is within its right during these economic times to reduce classes as a viable cost-management strategy. We have explored every possible option, but do not see an alternative to the class cuts. The reduction in classes is a reality; however, the university does not believe that the class cuts will hinder most students from graduating on time,” a university spokesperson stated in a news conference Monday.

During the news conference, university officials believed that the class cuts are the only viable option to keep from lifting the tuition cap or raising tuition even more, but continued to state that the class cuts are not a serious matter and despite the large number of classes that will be cut, students will not suffer.

“We can assure that only a handful of students will be greatly affected by the reduction in classes, most students that are scheduled to graduate in the fall will graduate on time. The university honestly has no better options available,” stated a university spokesperson.

(Apology) “The reduction in classes is unfortunate, and on behalf of the university, I sincerely apologize to our dedicated students who will suffer because of this situation. We will do whatever it takes to assure that the class cuts have a minimal impact on graduation,” a university spokesperson stated in a news conference on Monday.

The university acknowledged their unsuccessful efforts to find an alternative to cutting classes during the press conference.

“The University of Tennessee takes full responsibility for the class cuts. We explored many other options to try to avoid punishing our students, but in the end the university had no choice. Once again, we apologize to our students for the unfortunate circumstances,” stated a university spokesperson.

(Reminding) “The University of Tennessee has an undying commitment to its students. The university has long been committed to increasing the quality of education for its students and will continue to do so in this time of economic crisis,” a university spokesperson stated in a news conference Monday.

During the news conference, reporters were constantly reminded of the university’s attempts to lessen the impact of the crisis, including President John Petersen’s fight to keep the tuition cap intact.

“Although the university has to cut classes for the upcoming semester, President Petersen and his staff have fought to keep the tuition cap and will continue to fight to keep the increase in tuition minimal. The education of our students will remain our first priority and will not suffer because of class reductions,” stated a university spokesperson.

Attribution of Crisis Responsibility

Attribution of crisis responsibility was treated as a dependent variable. The variable was measured using a modification of McAuley, Duncan and Russel’s (1992) attribution scale. The original scale was a twelve-item, nine-point semantic differential scale. Similar to the relationship scale, the attribution scale modifications were made through editing and pretesting in order to increase reliability and to accurately measure the relationship in the experiment. The resulting modifications resulted in a twelve-item, seven-point Likert scale. The scale measured the three dimensions of attribution: stability, external control, and locus/personal control. The individual items used to measure the dimensions are as follows:

Locus/Personal Control: Questions 1, 3, 6, 12

External Control: Questions 5, 7, 8, 10

Stability: Questions 2, 4, 9, 11

The items measuring external control were reversed coded for use in determining the student’s attribution score. The higher the score, the more the student attributed the crisis to the university. The scores ranged from 12 (answering “strongly disagree” to every question) to 84

(answering “strongly agree” to every question). Using data from the pretest, the revised scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of .70. The instrument’s items are shown in Table 3.2.

Preparation and Pretesting Procedures

The scales were edited numerous times before the experiment was conducted in order to accurately measure the organization-public relationship. The manipulation articles were read by several scholars in the field, and once revisions were agreed upon, students enrolled in a crisis communication seminar were asked to identify the crisis response strategy used in each article. Once edits were agreed upon, the experiment was pre-tested among 39 students using manipulation treatments and survey questionnaires. After the students took the survey, they were asked to comment on the items. The pretest data was analyzed to find the reliability of the scales and the individual questions in order to edit the questionnaire and changes were made accordingly. The manipulation and comprehension checks were added after the pretest stage for the actual data collection, and the data of the subjects that failed the manipulation and comprehension checks were discarded. Table 3.3 shows the items used for manipulation and comprehension checks for each crisis response manipulation.

Participants

Compared to several studies that manipulated relationship and/or crisis status, notably articles by Coombs and Holladay (1996, 2001), this study measured the status of an actual organization-public relationship. A large southeastern research university was the organization under observation. The students of this university were chosen as the population (the public in the organization-public relationship). Several lecturers and professors were contacted for permission to conduct the study in their classrooms. After permission and IRB approval was

granted, the researcher asked the members of these classes to voluntarily participate in the study. All participants were over the age of 18. The study was conducted over a two-day period in four classes in various disciplines across the university in order to get a more diverse set of opinions.

The researcher gave a brief description of the project, explaining the nature of the project, but not completely disclosing the purpose. The participants were also told that the subject of the study can cause anxiety and stress. After the oral instructions and the students read the informed consent statement, willing participants were instructed to begin the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were orally debriefed about the nature of the study, emphasizing that the news article was fictitious. The participants were also given a written debriefing statement and a coupon provided by participating restaurants for their participation in the study. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Procedure

The study was conducted in a classroom setting either before class or during the last 15 minutes of the class period. The instrument used to administer the study consisted of five parts. Section A consisted of the informed consent form. This form also asked the participant's gender and classification. This form provided a description of the study, a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity, and stressed that participation is voluntary.

Section B provided Bruning and Galloway's (2003) 19-item scale measuring the status of the relationship between the university and the student participating in the questionnaire. Section C provided a fictitious news story based on current events. The news article included one of the four manipulations of the crisis response strategies. Each student received only one of the crisis response manipulations. Section D provided a five-item manipulation and comprehension check

and the adaptation of McAuley, Duncan and Russel's (1992) 12-item scale. This section asked the participant to measure the attribution of crisis responsibility to the university based on the preceding news story.

Section E provided a debriefing statement. The statement informed the participant the purpose of the study and that the news story was fictitious. The statement also provided a word of thanks from the principal researcher and contact information if the participant would like a copy of the study or the results.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses of the data collected were done using SPSS version 16.0. Demographic information was analyzed through use of frequencies. Data collected from the perception of organization-public relationship scale and the attribution of crisis responsibility scale was used to determine means and standard deviations as well as scale reliability. Data collected from the attribution of crisis responsibility scales was used to determine means and standard deviations among crisis response strategies. To test the hypotheses, univariate analysis of variances (ANOVA), independent samples t-tests, correlations, and regression analysis was used. The results section will detail each test used for each hypothesis, and Table 3.4 displays the variables examined and statistical tests used for each hypothesis.

Chapter 4: Results

During the two days of data collection, 400 questionnaires were distributed among the four classes used. Of the 400 surveys distributed, 390 were returned to the researcher. The researcher eliminated any questionnaires that failed the manipulation and comprehension checks by discarding any questionnaires that failed two or more of the comprehension checks, or that failed the manipulation check. After elimination, 275 questionnaires were used in the analysis.

Descriptive Analysis

Demographical information was analyzed for gender and classification, or year in school. Means and standard deviations were also taken for the relationship scale, attribution scale and comprehension and manipulation checks.

Demographic Information

Of the 275 respondents, 31 percent (N=85) were male and 68 percent (N=186) were female. Table 4.1 provides demographic information for gender (*Appendix B will contain all statistical tables referred to in this section*). Fourteen percent (N=39) were freshmen, 37 percent (N=102) were sophomores, 35 percent (N=96) were juniors, and 12 percent (N=34) were seniors. Table 4.2 provides demographic information for classification. Four of the respondents did not give any demographical information.

Scale Descriptive Statistics

The relationship scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. The mean score for the relationship scale was an 81.21, with a standard deviation of 14.89. The attribution scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81. The mean score for the attribution scale was a 45.31, with a standard deviation of 9.39. Table 4.3 provides descriptive statistics for the two scales used in the study.

A median split was conducted to categorize the relationship scores into two categories: “positive” relationship scores and “negative” relationship scores. The median of the relationship scores was 81. Participants that scored 81 or below on the relationship scale were placed in the “negative” category (N=139). Participants that scored 82 or above were placed in the “positive” category (N=136).

Manipulation and Comprehension Descriptive Statistics

The questionnaires that failed the manipulation and comprehension checks were discarded. Out of the 275 questionnaires that were used to run the statistical analysis, 25 percent of the respondents (N= 69) were exposed to the scapegoating manipulation, 26 percent of the respondents (N=72) were exposed to the justification manipulation, 23 percent (N=64) were exposed to the apology manipulation, and 26 percent (N=70) were exposed to the reminding manipulation. Table 4.4 provides the number of respondents used for each crisis response manipulation. The means of the three comprehension checks ranged from 5.59 to 5.89, and the mean of the manipulation check was a 5.32.

Analysis of Means of Attribution Scores

Research questions 1-4 and hypotheses 1-4 analyze the means of attribution scores. Each research question or hypothesis is listed below, followed by statistical analysis.

RQ₁: Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and which produced the lowest attribution of crisis responsibility regardless of perception of organization-public relationship?

Descriptive analysis was used to determine the answer to this research question. Means and standard deviations of the attribution scores were taken for each of the four crisis response strategies. The scapegoating manipulation yielded the highest attribution scores (M = 46.52, SD

= 10.74). The reminding manipulation yielded the lowest attribution scores ($\underline{M}$ = 43.84, $\underline{SD}$ = 9.10). Table 4.5 gives a summary of the mean attribution scores according to crisis response strategy.

H₁: There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies regardless of perception of organization-public relationship.

A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze this hypothesis. Hypothesis 1 was not supported by the data {F (3, 271) = 0.990, $p > .05$ }. Table 4.6 gives the ANOVA table used to analyze this hypothesis.

RQ₂: Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and which produced the lowest attribution of crisis responsibility for students with a more positive organization-public relationship?

Descriptive analysis was used to determine the answer to this research question. Means and standard deviations of the attribution scores for respondents with a positive organization-public relationship were taken for each of the four crisis response strategies. The apology manipulation yielded the highest attribution scores ($\underline{M}$ = 43.27, $\underline{SD}$ = 8.16). The reminding manipulation yielded the lowest attribution scores ($\underline{M}$ = 42.11, $\underline{SD}$ = 9.99). Table 4.7 gives a summary of the mean attribution scores for the four crisis response strategies for respondents with a positive relationship.

H₂: There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies for students with a more positive organization-public relationship.

A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze this hypothesis. Hypothesis 2 was not supported by the data {F (3, 132) = 2.264, $p > .05$ }. Table 4.8 gives the ANOVA table used in this analysis.

RQ₃: Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and which produced the lowest attribution of crisis responsibility for students with a more negative organization-public relationship?

Descriptive analysis was used to determine the answer to this research question. Means and standard deviations of the attribution scores for respondents with a negative organization-public relationship were taken for each of the four crisis response strategies. The scapegoating manipulation yielded the highest attribution scores ($\underline{M} = 50.06$, $\underline{SD} = 10.86$). The reminding manipulation yielded the lowest attribution scores ($\underline{M} = 45.57$, $\underline{SD} = 7.88$). Table 4.9 gives a summary of the mean attribution scores for the four crisis response strategies for respondents with a negative relationship.

H₃: There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies for students with a more negative organization-public relationship.

A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze this hypothesis. Hypothesis 3 was not supported by the data { $F(3, 135) = 0.415$, $p > .05$ }. Table 4.10 gives the ANOVA table used in this analysis.

H₄: There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores for students with a more positive organization-public relationship and students with a more negative organization-public relationship regardless of crisis response strategy.

An independent samples t-test was used to analyze this hypothesis. Hypothesis 4 was supported by the data { $t(265) = 4.492$, $p < .05$ }. Respondents with a more positive relationship yielded a mean attribution score of 42.82, with a standard deviation of 9.15. Respondents with a more negative relationship yielded a mean attribution score of 47.74, with a standard deviation of 9.01. Table 4.11 gives the means for the attribution scores based on relationship and table 4.12 give the t-test analysis used for this hypothesis.

RQ₄: Is there a significant difference among the mean attribution scores for students with a more positive organization-public relationship and students with a more negative organization-public relationship for each of the four crisis response strategies?

Independent samples t-test were used to analyze the differences in means between students with a positive relationship and students with a negative relationship. For the scapegoating manipulation, there was a significant difference among means $\{t(67) = 3.020, p < .05\}$. For the justification manipulation, there was a significant difference among means $\{t(70) = 2.131, p < .05\}$. For the apology manipulation, there was a significant difference among means $\{t(62) = 2.094, p < .05\}$. For the reminding manipulation, there was no significant difference among means $\{t(68) = 1.607, p > .05\}$. Table 4.12 gives the t-test analysis used for this research question.

Relationships among Relationship and Attribution Scores

Research questions 5 and 6, and hypotheses 5 and 6, study the relationship between the relationship scores and the attribution scores. Correlation analysis was used to explore these research questions and hypotheses.

H₅: There will be a correlation between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility regardless of crisis response strategy.

A bivariate Pearson correlation was used to analyze this hypothesis. Hypothesis 5 was supported by the data. There was a moderate, negative correlation between relationship score and attribution score, and the correlation was significant $\{r(275) = -0.31, p < .05\}$. Table 4.13 gives the correlation data between relationship score and attribution score.

RQ₅: Is there a correlation between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility for each of the four crisis response strategies?

Bivariate Pearson correlations were used to analyze this research question. For the scapegoating manipulation, there was a moderate, negative correlation between relationship score and attribution score, and the correlation was significant $\{r(69) = -0.37, p < .05\}$. For the

justification manipulation, there was a weak, negative correlation between relationship score and attribution score, and the correlation was significant $\{r(72) = -0.25, p < .05\}$. For the apology manipulation, there was a moderate, negative correlation between relationship score and attribution score, and the correlation was significant $\{r(64) = -0.34, p < .05\}$. For the reminding manipulation, there was a weak, negative correlation between relationship score and attribution score, and the correlation was significant $\{r(70) = -0.29, p < .05\}$. Tables 4.14, 4.15, 4.16 and 4.17 give correlation data for relationship score and attribution score based on each of the four crisis response manipulations.

H₆: There is a significant difference among the correlations between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility for each of the four crisis response strategies.

A Fisher r-to-z transformation was conducted to analyze this hypothesis. Hypothesis 6 was not supported by the data. There was no significant difference found among the correlations for the four crisis response strategies. The strongest correlation (scapegoating: $r = -0.374$) and the weakest correlation (justification: $r = -0.252$) were tested against each other, and there was no significant difference among the means $\{z(139) = -0.79, p > .05\}$. Since there was no significant difference between those two means, it is concluded that there is no significant difference among the four means.

Summary of Results

Hypothesis 1-3 determined that there were no significant differences in attribution scores among the four crisis response strategies. However, research questions 1-3 found that the scapegoating manipulation revealed the highest attribution scores overall, as well as among students with a negative relationship with the university. The reminding manipulation had the

lowest attribution scores overall, as well as among students with a negative and a positive relationship with the university. Hypothesis 4 showed a significant difference in attribution scores among students with positive and negative relationships. Research question 4 found significant differences in the attribution scores among students with positive and negative relationships for the scapegoating, justification, and apology manipulations.

Hypothesis 6 confirmed that there were no significant differences among the correlations comparing relationship scores and attribution scores for each of the four crisis response manipulations. Hypothesis 5 and research question 5 found significant correlations. The correlation between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility, regardless of the crisis response manipulation, was moderate. The scapegoating manipulation showed the highest relationship between relationship score and attribution score. The scapegoating and apology manipulations produced moderate correlations between relationship score and attribution score, and the justification and reminding correlations produced weak correlations between the two scores. The correlations showed that perception of organization-public relationship slightly predicts attribution of crisis responsibility.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study was designed to examine the effect of the perception of an organization-public relationship and the use of certain crisis response strategies on the attribution of crisis responsibility. The study's goal was to further explain how relationship management can be applied to crisis communications. Although the study only involved relationships within one organization, the results can be used to help determine if certain crisis response strategies can affect positive and negative relationships during times of crisis. The results of the experiment extend Coombs (2000) initial study fusing the relational perspective with crisis communication, add to the small amount of empirical research linking relationship management and crisis communication, and develop opportunities for future research. This section will begin with a discussion of the results, followed by an explanation of the implications of the study, and conclude with a report of the limitations and suggestions for future research.

The study examined differences in mean attribution scores among the four crisis response manipulations for the participants overall, for participants with a positive relationship, and for participants with a negative relationship with the organization. An interesting finding was that the reminding strategy produced the lowest attribution scores for all participants overall. The reminding strategy also produced the lowest attribution scores for participants with a positive relationship, and the lowest attribution scores for participants with a negative relationship with the organization. The reminding strategy was also the only strategy that did not produce a significant difference between students with a negative relationship and students with a positive relationship with the university. Coombs (2007) stated that the bolstering posture, which includes the reminding response strategy, is considered supplemental to other response strategies because

they almost seem egocentric in their use. However, this strategy, when used alone, produced the lowest attribution of crisis responsibility for the organization. This can give support for this strategy to be used alone, as well as a complement to other response strategies. One explanation could be that bolstering strategies are designed to emphasize the organization's good deeds during times of crisis. Organizations could use the bolstering strategies to remind stakeholders why they became involved with the organization from the beginning, which in turn could reduce the amount of crisis responsibility the stakeholders place on the organization.

The scapegoating response manipulation produced the highest attribution scores overall, as well as for participants with a negative relationship with the organization. Students who had a negative relationship with the university and who were exposed to the scapegoating strategy yielded the highest attribution scores ($M = 50.06$). The scapegoating manipulation also yielded the largest difference in attribution scores between students with a positive relationship and students with a negative relationship with the organization. Kim and Lee (2005) found that attribution of crisis responsibility is lower when the organization uses more accommodative strategies (i.e. apology) rather than defensive strategies (i.e. scapegoating). Coombs (2007) stated that the denial posture, which includes the scapegoating strategy, includes strategies that seek to remove any connection between the organization and the crisis. One possible explanation for the high attribution scores is that students with the more positive relationship may have felt compassion with the university, whereas the students with the more negative relationship may have seen the response as a way for the university to shift blame from itself to the state government in order to cover up its mistakes.

No significant differences among the four crisis response strategies were found. Attribution of crisis responsibility was not affected by the use of particular certain crisis response strategies. This is congruent with Lee's findings (2007) that no specific crisis response strategy affects stakeholders' placement of responsibility and the perception of the severity of the crisis. This may be explained by the assumption that there may not be a particular response strategy that is more effective for any type of relationship.

A problem with crisis communication theories such as Coombs' (2007) SCCT theory is that they imply there is a blueprint suggesting that a certain strategy will always work in a given situation. This contradicts the reason relationship management should be integrated into crisis communications. There is not one correct way to approach dynamic relationships in times of crisis, nor is there only one strategy that will work every single time in certain crisis situations. Crises, like relationships, are always changing because of their humanistic nature. Instead of crisis communication theories that suggest there is usually one correct way to approach a specific crisis situation, the type of relationship, the dynamics of the stakeholder relationship, the reputation of the organization and any other external effects should be examined to decide the right response to a stakeholder group in order to reduce attribution of responsibility and limit harm to the organization.

There were significant differences between the attribution scores of students with a negative relationship with the university and students with positive relationship overall, and for three of the four response strategies. The reminding strategy was the only one not statistically significant. There were significant correlations between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility overall and for each of the four crisis response

strategies, but there were no significant differences among correlations for the four response strategies. These findings supported findings by Coombs and Holliday (2001), Kim and Lee (2005) and Lee (2007). The perception of an organization-public relationship has a negative correlation with attribution of crisis responsibility, which means the more positive the relationship, the less the person attributes responsibility to the organization. The perception of relationship was determined to be able to predict attribution of responsibility.

According to Coombs' (2007) SCCT theory, since the crisis used for this study was an organizational challenge, diminishment and rebuilding strategies should have been used. Although the relationship history has never been tested against these recommendations, Coombs and Holliday (2001) found a significant, positive correlation between prior reputation and relationship history. According to SCCT recommendations, the diminishment posture should be used when there is a favorable prior reputation and the rebuilding posture should be used when there is an unfavorable prior reputation. Therefore, we could infer that when faced with a challenge, as defined by SCCT theory, diminishment strategies, which include the justification response strategy, are recommended for use when a positive relationship history is present, and rebuilding posture strategies, which include the apology response strategy, are recommended for use when a negative relationship history is present. However, according to the findings of this study, the justification manipulation did not produce the lowest attribution scores for positive relationships. The apology manipulation did not produce the lowest attribution scores for negative relationships. This supports the assumption that systematic recommendations for crisis response do not always work for dynamic situations. When approaching crisis communications

from a relational perspective, the humanistic nature of relationships, as well as the constant changing of crisis situations, makes it harder to follow a set of guidelines to respond to crises.

This study examined a financial crisis situation that was very relevant to current events. Because of the current state of the economy, more and more organizations have to deal with financial difficulties. This study is one of the first to examine how crisis response strategies affect attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization in light of a financial crisis.

Conclusion

The study contributes to a small body of research about applying relationship management to crisis communications. It points to the need to examine the relationships that exist between the organization and its stakeholders in order to approach each relationship with the best strategy in times of crisis. The primary concerns of each stakeholder group are not the same; different groups possess different needs and priorities. Approaching crisis communications from a relational perspective can benefit both the organization and the stakeholders. It can help the organization maximize the positive outcomes in times of crisis by focusing on each relationship's needs separately. The only disadvantage to a relational perspective is the increase of time and effort involved. However, practitioners and crisis teams should plan ahead during the precrisis stage by establishing and maintaining pre-crisis relationships to identify their priorities and concerns (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Stakeholders benefit because the organization is tailoring crisis communication strategies to their priorities specifically, which could strengthen the relationship after the crisis is over.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to the study. First, although the relationship tested was an actual organization-public relationship, the sample used was a convenience sample that consisted of a non-random representation of the student population. Asking for permission to use class participation in the study was easier to achieve than asking students enrolled in the university to voluntarily participate in the study. The reliability of the data was measured solely on the comprehension and manipulation checks. The researcher attempted to provide a more reliable amount of data by completely eliminating the respondents that failed the comprehension and manipulation checks. Reliability may have also suffered slightly because the experiment was not conducted in a laboratory setting, but rather in the participants' classrooms.

The scales were used to achieve an overall measure of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility. Construct validity was achieved through the use of modifications of earlier published scales. Both scale modifications achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .80. Although the scales were accurate construct measures, the data analysis did not take into account the different components of the two measures, which was beyond the scope of the study. Therefore, it was not determined if certain factors of the organization-public relationship affected the attribution of crisis responsibility. It was also not determined if certain aspects of attribution were affected more by the difference in relationship.

The manipulations of the study were approved by several professors as sufficient representations of the crisis response strategies. The manipulation articles, however, were subject to comparison to other news reports related to the article since the article dealt with current events. During the data collection, the president of the university resigned and several methods to

reduce the budget were being discussed. It is not clear how the related news reports affected the effects of the manipulation articles on the participants.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study is an initial attempt to use a relational model of crisis communications to find a connection between several factors of a crisis in order to maximize crisis communication efforts. Future research should attempt to find the connection between crisis type and history, relationship type and history, and prior reputation can help an organization choose crisis response strategies that are most effective for the organization-public relationship.

This study only took into account the perception of an organization-public relationship. Future studies should take into account crisis history and prior reputation as intensifiers of the crisis situation. Future studies can also attempt to find the connection between relationship perception and prior reputation in order to possibly combine these two components. The relationship between these three intensifiers can help determine how to approach several crises.

Only one type of relationship was studied in this research project. Future research should study different types of organization-public relationships. Future research can also seek to find the differences in approach for primary versus secondary stakeholder groups. Studying different types of relationships to determine the way to approach them specifically is the ultimate goal of this research agenda. In addition, only one crisis type was studied. Future research should study several types of crises to examine if there are different approaches based on the type of crisis.

SCCT theory and attribution theory provided the basis for the theoretical assumptions for this study. The scales used to measure perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility were borrowed from previous studies. Future research can be

used for scale construction and theory development in order to create a unique approach and operationalization of this approach to crisis communication.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Tables

Table 2.1: Benoit's (1995, 1997) Crisis Response Strategies based on Image Restoration Theory

Categories	Strategies and Explanations
Denial	• Simple Denial <i>Stating that the organization did not perform the act in question</i> • Shifting the Blame
Evading Responsibility	• Provocation <i>Scapegoating, Claiming the actions were provoked by the actions of another person or organization</i> • Defeasibility <i>Claiming the action was provoked by lack of information or misinformation</i> • Accident • Good Intentions
Reducing Offensiveness	• Bolstering <i>Stressing the positive traits of the organization</i> • Minimization <i>Claiming the crisis is not as serious as the public or media perceives</i> • Differentiation <i>Making the act seem less offensive than the public perceives</i> • Transcendence <i>Places the crisis in a more favorable context</i> • Attack the Accuser • Compensation
Corrective Action	• Corrective Action <i>Promising to correct the problem</i>
Mortification	• Mortification <i>Admitting the crisis was the organization's fault and asking for forgiveness</i>

Table 2.2: Allen and Caillouet's (1994) Crisis Response Strategies based on Impression Management Theory

Categories	Strategies and Explanations
Excuse	• Denying Intention • Denying Volition <i>Stating the organization had no control over the crisis</i> • Denying Agency <i>Stating the organization did not cause the crisis</i>
Justification	• Denying Injury • Denying Victimage <i>Claiming the victims deserved the consequences of the crisis</i> • Condemning the Condemner • Negative Events were Misinterpreted
Ingratitation	• Self-Enhancing Communication • Role Model • Accepting Social Responsibility • Other Enhancing Communication • Opinion Conformity <i>Accepting the public's opinion and holding the same beliefs</i>
Intimidation	• Intimidation <i>Conveying an organizational identity of danger and potency, often used with threats</i>
Apology	• Apology <i>Admitting the organization's responsibility in the crisis</i>
Denouncement	• Denouncement <i>Indicating an external person or organization is the cause of the crisis</i>
Factual Distortion	• Factual Distortion <i>Stressing that the details of the crisis were taken out of context or are false</i>

Table 2.3: Coombs' (2007) Crisis Response Strategies based on SCCT Theory

Crisis Response Postures and Explanations	Crisis Response Strategies
Denial Posture: <i>Strives to remove any connections an organization had with a crisis</i>	• Attacking the Accuser • Simple Denial • Scapegoating
Diminishment Posture: <i>Attempts to reduce attributions of organizational control and reduce negative effects of the crisis</i>	• Excusing • Justification
Rebuilding Posture: <i>Attempts to improve the organization's reputation</i>	• Compensation • Apology
Bolstering Posture: <i>Seeks to build a positive connection between an organization and its publics</i>	• Reminding • Ingratiation • Victimimage

Table 3.1: Revised Organization-Public Relationship Scale Items, based on Bruning and Galloway's (2003) Scale

1) The University of Tennessee is honest with students about its plans for the future.
2) The University of Tennessee is not involved in activities that promote the welfare of its students.
3) I am committed to maintaining my relationship with The University of Tennessee after graduation.
4) I believe that The University of Tennessee supports events that are of interest to its students.
5) There are universities that can provide me with better academic opportunities than the University of Tennessee.
6) I feel that I can trust The University of Tennessee's key decision makers (President, Chancellor, etc.).
7) The University of Tennessee does not act in a responsible manner when dealing with its students.
8) I feel very strongly linked to The University of Tennessee.
9) I think that The University of Tennessee strives to improve the campus community for its students.
10) I think that The University of Tennessee is not honest in its dealings with students.
11) I think other universities could fulfill my social needs better than the University of Tennessee.
12) The University of Tennessee shares its plans for the future with its students.
13) The University of Tennessee is not aware of what I want as a student.
14) I think that The University of Tennessee actively plays a positive role in the communities it serves.
15) I would not feel very upset if I no longer had a relationship with The University of Tennessee.
16) The University of Tennessee is the kind of university that invests in its students.
17) The University of Tennessee does not see my interests and the university's interests as the same.
18) The University of Tennessee is not willing to devote resources to maintain its relationship with me.
19) I believe that The University of Tennessee will do what it says it will do.

Table 3.2: Revised Attribution of Crisis Responsibility Scale Items, based on McAuley, Duncan and Russel's (1992) Scale

1) The crisis is the fault of the University of Tennessee.
2) The crisis is a permanent issue for The University of Tennessee.
3) The cause of the crisis is something inside the University of Tennessee.
4) The crisis is something that will remain an issue over time.
5) The reason(s) for the crisis are under the control of people outside the University of Tennessee.
6) The crisis is something over which the University of Tennessee has control.
7) External sources, other than the University of Tennessee, caused the crisis.
8) The crisis is a fault of the state's financial situation.
9) The crisis is temporary.
10) The cause of the crisis is something outside the University of Tennessee.
11) The crisis is something that will change over time.
12) The University of Tennessee can successfully manage the crisis.

Table 3.3: Manipulation and Comprehension Checks for each Crisis Response Manipulation

Scapegoating Manipulation and Comprehension Checks

The class reductions are a result of the University of Tennessee's budget cuts.

Both introductory-level and upper-division courses are threatened by the class reductions.

Class reductions for the spring 2010 are a possibility.

The spokesperson blamed the class reductions on the state government.

Justification Manipulation and Comprehension Checks

The class reductions are a result of the University of Tennessee's budget cuts.

Both introductory-level and upper-division courses are threatened by the class reductions.

Class reductions for the spring 2010 are a possibility.

The spokesperson stated that the university was within its right to reduce classes as a cost-management strategy.

Apology Manipulation and Comprehension Checks

The class reductions are a result of the University of Tennessee's budget cuts.

Both introductory-level and upper-division courses are threatened by the class reductions.

Class reductions for the spring 2010 are a possibility.

The spokesperson took full responsibility for the class reductions.

Reminding Manipulation and Comprehension Checks

The class reductions are a result of the University of Tennessee's budget cuts.

Both introductory-level and upper-division courses are threatened by the class reductions.

Class reductions for the spring 2010 are a possibility.

The spokesperson said that the university is dedicated to increasing the quality of education for its students.

Table 3.4: Research Questions and Hypotheses, Variables and Statistical Procedures

	Research Question/Hypothesis	Variables	Statistics
RQ1	Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and lowest attribution of crisis responsibility regardless of perception of organization-public relationship?	IV: crisis response strategy DV: attribution scores	Descriptive analysis: means and standard deviations
H1	There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies regardless of perception of organization-public relationship.	IV: crisis response strategy DV: attribution scores	Mean analysis: one-way ANOVA
RQ2	Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and lowest attribution of crisis responsibility for students with a more positive organization-public relationship?	IV: crisis response strategy, relationship categories DV: attribution scores	Descriptive analysis: means and standard deviations
H2	There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies for students with a more positive organization-public relationship.	IV: crisis response strategy, relationship categories DV: attribution scores	Mean analysis: one-way ANOVA
RQ3	Which of the four SCCT crisis response postures produced the highest and lowest attribution of crisis responsibility for students with a more negative organization-public relationship?	IV: crisis response strategy, relationship categories DV: attribution scores	Descriptive analysis: means and standard deviations
H3	There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores of the four crisis response strategies for students with a more negative organization-public relationship.	IV: crisis response strategy, relationship categories DV: attribution scores	Mean analysis: one-way ANOVA
H4	There is a significant difference among the mean attribution scores for students with a more positive organization-public relationship and students with a more negative organization-public relationship regardless of crisis response strategy.	IV: relationship categories (positive, negative) DV: attribution scores	Mean analysis: independent samples t-test
RQ4	Is there a significant difference among the mean attribution scores for students with a more positive organization-public relationship and students with a more negative organization-public relationship for each of the four crisis response strategies?	IV: relationship categories (positive, negative); crisis response strategies DV: attribution scores	Mean analysis: independent samples t-test
H5	There will be a correlation between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility regardless of crisis response strategy.	IV: relationship scores DV: attribution scores	Correlation analysis
RQ5	Is there a correlation between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility for each of the four crisis response strategies?	IV: relationship scores, crisis response strategy DV: attribution scores	Correlation analysis
H6	There is a significant difference among the correlations between perception of organization-public relationship and attribution of crisis responsibility for each of the four crisis response strategies.	IV: relationship scores, crisis response strategy DV: attribution scores	Fisher r-to-z transformation

Appendix B: Statistical Tables

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics for Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	85	30.9	30.9	30.9
Female	186	67.6	67.6	98.5
No Response	4	1.5	1.5	100.0
Total	275	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics for Classification

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Freshman	39	14.2	14.2	14.2
Sophomore	102	37.1	37.1	51.3
Junior	96	34.9	34.9	86.2
Senior	34	12.4	12.4	98.5
No Response	4	1.5	1.5	100.0
Total	275	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics for Relationship Score and Attribution Score

	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Relationship Score	275	38.00	129.00	81.21	14.90
Attribution Score	275	15.00	74.00	45.31	9.39
Valid Responses	275				

Table 4.4: Descriptive Statistics for Crisis Response Manipulations

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Scapegoating	69	25.1	25.1	25.1
Justification	72	26.2	26.2	51.3
Apology	64	23.3	23.3	74.5
Reminding	70	25.5	25.5	100.0
Total	275	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.5: Means of Attribution Scores based on Crisis Response Manipulations

Manipulation	M	N	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Scapegoating	46.52	69	10.74	22.00	74.00
Justification	45.67	72	9.56	15.00	69.00
Apology	45.20	64	7.81	26.00	69.00
Reminding	43.84	70	9.10	15.00	63.00
Total	45.31	275	9.39	15.00	74.00

Table 4.6: Analysis of Variance in Means of Attribution Scores based on Crisis Response Manipulations

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	261.879	3	87.293	.990	.398
Within Groups	23892.848	271	88.165		
Total	24154.727	274			

Table 4.7: Means of Attribution Scores based on Crisis Response Manipulations: Positive Relationship Perception

Manipulation	Mean	N	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Scapegoating	42.67	33	9.32	25.00	65.00
Justification	43.25	35	9.33	15.00	69.00
Apology	43.27	33	8.16	26.00	69.00
Reminding	42.11	35	9.99	15.00	62.00
Total	42.82	136	9.15	15.00	69.00

Table 4.8: Analysis of Variance in Means of Attribution Scores based on Crisis Response Manipulations: Positive Relationship Perception

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	522.953	3	174.318	2.264	.084
Within Groups	10162.783	132	76.991		
Total	10685.735	135			

Table 4.9: Means of Attribution Scores based on Crisis Response Manipulations: Negative Relationship Perception

Manipulation	Mean	N	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Scapegoating	50.05	36	10.86	22.00	74.00
Justification	47.94	37	9.34	23.00	69.00
Apology	47.25	31	6.97	32.00	62.00
Reminding	45.57	35	7.88	33.00	63.00
Total	47.74	139	9.01	22.00	74.00

Table 4.10: Analysis of Variance in Means of Attribution Scores based on Crisis Response Manipulations: Negative Relationship Perception

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	114.060	3	38.020	.415	.742
Within Groups	12353.955	135	91.511		
Total	12468.014	138			

Table 4.11: Means of Attribution Scores based on Relationship Category

Relationship Category	Mean	N	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Negative	47.74	139	9.01	22.00	74.00
Positive	42.82	136	9.15	15.00	69.00
Total	45.31	275	9.39	15.00	74.00

Table 4.12: T-Test Analysis for Means of Attribution Scores for Positive and Negative Relationship Perception (by Crisis Response Strategy)

Manipulation	t	df	p	M difference
<i>All Manipulations</i>	4.492	273	.000	4.92
<i>Scapegoating</i>	3.020	67	.004	7.39
<i>Justification</i>	2.131	70	.037	4.69
<i>Apology</i>	2.094	62	.040	3.99
<i>Reminding</i>	1.607	68	.113	3.46

Table 4.13: Correlation between Perception of Organization-Public Relationship and Attribution of Crisis Responsibility

		Relationship Score	Attribution Score
Relationship Score	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.310**
	Significance		.000
	N	275.000	275
Attribution Score	Pearson Correlation	-.310**	1.000
	Significance	.000	
	N	275	275.000

Table 4.14: Correlation between Perception of Organization-Public Relationship and Attribution of Crisis Responsibility: Scapegoating Manipulation

		Relationship Score	Attribution Score
Relationship Score	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.374**
	Significance		.002
	N	69.000	69
Attribution Score	Pearson Correlation	-.374**	1.000
	Significance	.002	
	N	69	69.000

Table 4.15: Correlation between Perception of Organization-Public Relationship and Attribution of Crisis Responsibility: Justification Manipulation

		Relationship Score	Attribution Score
Relationship Score	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.252 [*]
	Significance		.033
	N	72.000	72
Attribution Score	Pearson Correlation	-.252 [*]	1.000
	Significance	.033	
	N	72	72.000

Table 4.16: Correlation between Perception of Organization-Public Relationship and Attribution of Crisis Responsibility: Apology Manipulation

		Relationship Score	Attribution Score
Relationship Score	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.341 ^{**}
	Significance		.006
	N	64.000	64
Attribution Score	Pearson Correlation	-.341 ^{**}	1.000
	Significance	.006	
	N	64	64.000

Table 4.17: Correlation between Perception of Organization-Public Relationship and Attribution of Crisis Responsibility: Reminding Manipulation

		Relationship Score	Attribution Score
Relationship Score	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.291 [*]
	Significance		.015
	N	70.000	70
Attribution Score	Pearson Correlation	-.291 [*]	1.000
	Significance	.015	
	N	70	70.000

Appendix C: Manipulation Articles

Scapegoating Manipulation Article

UT budget cuts threaten classes, graduation

Possible class reductions can delay graduation for some

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (Feb. 3)—The proposed budget cuts that threaten job layoffs and tuition increases now threaten classes for The University of Tennessee's fall 2009 semester.

University officials are predicting, due to the decrease in state funding, 20 percent of classes for the fall semester will be canceled. This reduction in classes could delay graduation for some students planning to finish their college careers next semester.

The class cuts are due to the layoff of several non-tenured faculty members. The university officials are expected to discuss this situation in the upcoming weeks, and will decide which upper-division classes will be cut and how many sections of introductory lecture courses the university can afford to cancel. No other alternatives are being proposed.

It is predicted the cuts will delay the graduation for more than 300 university students for an extra semester. The delay, as well as the proposed increase in tuition, can threaten the university's retention rate.

"The reduction in state funding has given us no choice but to reduce classes for the upcoming semester. The state government has been very adamant about its refusal to free any funds that could keep our employees from being laid off and our student's education from being sacrificed," a university spokesperson stated in a news conference on Monday.

University officials have noted their willingness to cooperate with the state government, but in the end, the state has not attempted to provide additional funding for the university.

"The class cuts are inevitable, and the state government is to blame. We have given state officials every chance to work with us to fix this situation, but their unwillingness to cooperate has made it difficult for us to find another solution to this problem," stated a university spokesperson.

The cancellation of classes comes after a statement was released acknowledging that university officials will begin notifying employees who will lose their jobs due to state budget cuts as early as March. Officials have also stated the possibility of an additional nine percent increase in tuition and have discussed the possibility of lifting the tuition cap; however, President John Petersen has stated that the tuition cap will remain intact.

The decision to cut classes was made by the UT Board of Trustees during its Nov. 5 meeting. Officials also gave the indication that class cancellations for the spring 2010 semester are a huge possibility, and will be discussed during the university's annual June meeting.

Justification Manipulation Article

UT budget cuts threaten classes, graduation

Possible class reductions can delay graduation for some

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (Feb. 3)—The proposed budget cuts that threaten job layoffs and tuition increases now threaten classes for The University of Tennessee’s fall 2009 semester.

University officials are predicting, due to the decrease in state funding, 20 percent of classes for the fall semester will be canceled. This reduction in classes could delay graduation for some students planning to finish their college careers next semester.

The class cuts are due to the layoff of several non-tenured faculty members. The university officials are expected to discuss this situation in the upcoming weeks, and will decide which upper-division classes will be cut and how many sections of introductory lecture courses the university can afford to cancel. No other alternatives are being proposed.

It is predicted the cuts will delay the graduation for more than 300 university students for an extra semester. The delay, as well as the proposed increase in tuition, can threaten the university’s retention rate.

“The university is within its right during these economic times to reduce classes as a viable cost-management strategy. We have explored every possible option, but do not see an alternative to the class cuts. The reduction in classes is a reality; however, the university does not believe that the class cuts will hinder most students from graduating on time,” a university spokesperson stated in a news conference Monday.

During the news conference, university officials believed that the class cuts are the only viable option to keep from lifting the tuition cap or raising tuition even more, but continued to state that the class cuts are not a serious matter and despite the large number of classes that will be cut, students will not suffer.

“We can assure that only a handful of students will be greatly affected by the reduction in classes, most students that are scheduled to graduate in the fall will graduate on time. The university honestly has no better options available,” stated a university spokesperson.

The cancellation of classes comes after a statement was released acknowledging that university officials will began notifying employees who will lose their jobs due to state budget cuts as early as March. Officials have also stated the possibility of an additional nine percent increase in tuition and have discussed the possibility of lifting the tuition cap; however, President John Petersen has stated that the tuition cap will remain intact.

The decision to cut classes was made by the UT Board of Trustees during its Nov. 5 meeting. Officials also gave the indication that class cancellations for the Spring 2010 semester are a huge possibility, and will be discussed during the university’s annual June meeting.

Apology Manipulation Article

UT budget cuts threaten classes, graduation

Possible class reductions can delay graduation for some

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (Feb. 3)—The proposed budget cuts that threaten job layoffs and tuition increases now threaten classes for The University of Tennessee's fall 2009 semester.

University officials are predicting, due to the decrease in state funding, 20 percent of classes for the fall semester will be canceled. This reduction in classes could delay graduation for some students planning to finish their college careers next semester.

The class cuts are due to the layoff of several non-tenured faculty members. The university officials are expected to discuss this situation in the upcoming weeks, and will decide which upper-division classes will be cut and how many sections of introductory lecture courses the university can afford to cancel. No other alternatives are being proposed.

It is predicted the cuts will delay the graduation for more than 300 university students for an extra semester. The delay, as well as the proposed increase in tuition, can threaten the university's retention rate.

"The reduction in classes is unfortunate, and on behalf of the university, I sincerely apologize to our dedicated students who will suffer because of this situation. We will do whatever it takes to assure that the class cuts have a minimal impact on graduation," a university spokesperson stated in a news conference on Monday.

The university acknowledged their unsuccessful efforts to find an alternative to cutting classes during the press conference.

"The University of Tennessee takes full responsibility for the class cuts. We explored many other options to try to avoid punishing our students, but in the end the university had no choice. Once again, we apologize to our students for the unfortunate circumstances," stated a university spokesperson.

The cancellation of classes comes after a statement was released acknowledging that university officials will begin notifying employees who will lose their jobs due to state budget cuts as early as March. Officials have also stated the possibility of an additional nine percent increase in tuition and have discussed the possibility of lifting the tuition cap; however, President John Petersen has stated that the tuition cap will remain intact.

The decision to cut classes was made by the UT Board of Trustees during its Nov. 5 meeting. Officials also gave the indication that class cancellations for the spring 2010 semester are a huge possibility, and will be discussed during the university's annual June meeting.

Reminding Manipulation Article

UT budget cuts threaten classes, graduation

Possible class reductions can delay graduation for some

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (Feb. 3)—The proposed budget cuts that threaten job layoffs and tuition increases now threaten classes for The University of Tennessee’s fall 2009 semester.

University officials are predicting, due to the decrease in state funding, 20 percent of classes for the fall semester will be canceled. This reduction in classes could delay graduation for some students planning to finish their college careers next semester.

The class cuts are due to the layoff of several non-tenured faculty members. The university officials are expected to discuss this situation in the upcoming weeks, and will decide which upper-division classes will be cut and how many sections of introductory lecture courses the university can afford to cancel. No other alternatives are being proposed.

It is predicted the cuts will delay the graduation for more than 300 university students for an extra semester. The delay, as well as the proposed increase in tuition, can threaten the university’s retention rate.

“The University of Tennessee has an undying commitment to its students. The university has long been committed to increasing the quality of education for its students and will continue to do so in this time of economic crisis,” a university spokesperson stated in a news conference Monday.

During the news conference, reporters were constantly reminded of the university’s attempts to lessen the impact of the crisis, including President John Petersen’s fight to keep the tuition cap intact.

“Although the university has to cut classes for the upcoming semester, President Petersen and his staff have fought to keep the tuition cap and will continue to fight to keep the increase in tuition minimal. The education of our students will remain our first priority and will not suffer because of class reductions,” stated a university spokesperson.

The cancellation of classes comes after a statement was released acknowledging that university officials will begin notifying employees who will lose their jobs due to state budget cuts as early as March. Officials have also stated the possibility of an additional nine percent increase in tuition.

The decision to cut classes was made by the UT Board of Trustees during its Nov. 5 meeting. Officials also gave the indication that class cancellations for the spring 2010 semester are a huge possibility, and will be discussed during the university’s annual June meeting.

Appendix D: Questionnaire (without News Articles)

An Examination of the Relationship between the University of Tennessee and its Students

Principal Investigator: Kenon A. Brown

Informed Consent Statement

To the Participant:

You have been invited to participate in a research project conducted by a university student for his Master's thesis. You will be asked to answer a series of questions about your relationship with the university, and after reading a short article, you will be asked to answer a few questions about your opinion and reaction to the article.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate without penalty, and if you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty. If you withdraw before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed. This study has no impact on your class grade. Your complete identity will remain confidential and anonymous. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study. The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes.

You must be 18 years of age to participate in this study. The scope of the questionnaire may cause anxiety, and students with stress or anxiety issues are encouraged to either not participate or discuss the study with the principal investigator before continuing.

If you have any questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Kenon A. Brown, by mail at 1523 Highland Avenue, Apt. 9 or by email at kabrown@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

Return of the completed questionnaire constitutes consent to participate.

For Statistical Purposes Only:

Gender (circle one): Male Female

Classification (circle one): Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

Part I

***How strongly do you agree with the following statements about the University of Tennessee?
Circle one number for each of the following questions.
(1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)***

The University of Tennessee is honest with students about its plans for the future.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The University of Tennessee is not involved in activities that promote the welfare of its students.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

I am committed to maintaining my relationship with The University of Tennessee after graduation.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

I believe that The University of Tennessee supports events that are of interest to its students.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

There are universities that can provide me with better academic opportunities than the University of Tennessee.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

I feel that I can trust The University of Tennessee's key decision makers (President, Chancellor, etc.).

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The University of Tennessee does not act in a responsible manner when dealing with its students.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

I feel very strongly linked to The University of Tennessee.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

I think that The University of Tennessee strives to improve the campus community for its students.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

I think that The University of Tennessee is not honest in its dealings with students.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

I think other universities could fulfill my social needs better than the University of Tennessee.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The University of Tennessee shares its plans for the future with its students.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The University of Tennessee is not aware of what I want as a student.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
I think that The University of Tennessee actively plays a positive role in the communities it serves.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
I would not feel very upset if I no longer had a relationship with The University of Tennessee.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The University of Tennessee is the kind of university that invests in its students.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The University of Tennessee does not see my interests and the university's interests as the same.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The University of Tennessee is not willing to devote resources to maintain its relationship with me.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
I believe that The University of Tennessee will do what it says it will do.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree

Read the following article and afterwards, proceed to Part II of the questionnaire.

Part II

***How strongly do you agree about the following statements about the crisis in the preceding article? Circle one answer for each of the following questions.
(1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)***

The class reductions are a result of the University of Tennessee's budget cuts.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

Both introductory-level and upper-division courses are threatened by the class reductions.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

Class reductions for the spring 2010 are a possibility.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The spokesperson took full responsibility for the class reductions.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The crisis is the fault of the University of Tennessee.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The crisis is a permanent issue for The University of Tennessee.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The cause of the crisis is something inside the University of Tennessee.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The crisis is something that will remain an issue over time.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The reason(s) for the crisis are under the control of people outside the University of Tennessee.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The crisis is something over which the University of Tennessee has control.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

External sources, other than the University of Tennessee, caused the crisis.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
-------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------

The crisis is a fault of the state's financial situation.

Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The crisis is temporary.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The cause of the crisis is something outside the University of Tennessee.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The crisis is something that will change over time.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
The University of Tennessee can successfully manage the crisis.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree

To the Participant:

I want to thank you for participating in this study. The questionnaire was designed to test your relationship with the university and its impact on the attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization for the crisis reported. The news story provided, although based on current events, was fictitious. The article was manipulated to test several crisis response strategies. As stated on the consent form, your participation in this study was voluntary, and your identity will remain confidential and anonymous.

As a reminder, if you have any questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Kenon A. Brown, by mail at 1523 Highland Avenue, Apt. 9, by email at kabrown@utk.edu, or by phone at (865) 243-5617. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

Thank You,

Kenon A. Brown
M.S. Candidate

Vita

Kenon A. Brown was born June 21, 1982 in Memphis, TN. He graduated from Memphis Central High School in 2000, and attended the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August 2000. During his undergraduate studies, Brown was a member of the Public Relations Student Society of America and the “Pride of the Southland” Marching Band, which he became drum major for the 2004-2005 marching season. Brown graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications, with an emphasis in Public Relations, in the summer of 2005.

After graduation, Brown became marketing and promotions manager of Buffalo Wild Wings for almost three years. During his tenure, Brown decided to pursue future graduate studies and joined the University of Tennessee’s masters program in the fall of 2007. During his graduate studies, he developed a love for research and decided that a career in academia would be his ideal profession. His desire for a career in academia will continue when Brown attends the University of Alabama in the fall of 2009 to begin work on his Doctor of Philosophy in Communication and Information Sciences.