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Experimenting with Transparency: A Mixed Methods Approach to Assessing Crisis Communication Messaging

Abstract

This study sought to add to the body of research on transparency in crisis communication messaging in a higher education setting through the lens of Coombs' (1995) situational crisis communication theory. Using a mixed methods explanatory sequential experimental design, the study collected quantitative data via an experiment to determine how specific elements of a message might result in more positive perceptions of message and organizational trust, transparency, and reputation. Next, the study collected qualitative data through four focus groups to provide a deeper understanding of which elements of the message readers found most transparent and how it might have impacted their perceptions of organizational and message credibility. The online experiment (N=171) results found that there were no statistically significant differences in perceptions of trust, transparency, and organizational reputation across the three stimuli. A content analysis of the focus group transcripts suggests that participants preferred action-based information and instruction first, specific details and resources increase perceptions of transparency, and values-based language is most effective when it follows factual information. The study also discusses implications for crisis communication researchers and public relations practitioners in the field, including key takeaways. Perhaps the most impactful contribution to the field of crisis communication research is a model created by the researcher that aligns stakeholder communication needs to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, offering communicators a new guide for crafting crisis communication messages.

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Experimenting with Transparency: A Mixed Methods Approach to Assessing Crisis

Communication Messaging

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the friends and family who have shown incredible support throughout my time in the doctoral program at St. John Fisher University.

To my parents, Dennis and Sue: the words it would take to articulate my love and appreciation for you could span the length of this dissertation and still not be nearly enough. Your moral support, pride in my journey, and time you gave caring for Bella wholly made this possible. You are my best friends, model parents, and the best humans I know.

To my aunt, Carla Biuso: Thank you for loving on Bella twice a month for the last 2 years. Knowing that she was experiencing museums, swimming at Uncle Rod's, or backyard camping gave me piece of mind that she wasn't missing out because I was in class. You are a "great aunt" in every sense of the phrase, and so much more: friend, confidant, cheerleader, last-minute-paper-printer—you've filled so many roles in my life. My appreciation runs so deep.

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Brian Gravelle: You swept me off my feet. You're the only person worth briefly derailing a dissertation for and I am grateful that I had your encouragement in the last phases of the process. I'm looking forward to a long life of you calling me Dr.

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Biographical Sketch

Melissa Greco Lopes is currently the assistant director for the Office of Marketing and Communication at St. John Fisher University. Ms. Greco Lopes attended the University of Miami and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Communication and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 2005. She attended the Rochester Institute of Technology and graduated with a Master of Science in Communication and Media Technology in 2013. She earned APR designation by the Public Relations Society of America through the Universal Accreditation Board in 2020. Greco Lopes began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher University in 2021. She pursued research in crisis communication under the direction of Dr. Guillermo Montes and Dr. Myra Henry and received her Ed.D. degree in 2023.

Abstract

This study sought to add to the body of research on transparency in crisis communication messaging in a higher education setting through the lens of Coombs' (1995) situational crisis communication theory. Using a mixed methods explanatory sequential experimental design, the study collected quantitative data via an experiment to determine how specific elements of a message might result in more positive perceptions of message and organizational trust, transparency, and reputation. Next, the study collected qualitative data through four focus groups to provide a deeper understanding of which elements of the message readers found most transparent and how it might have impacted their perceptions of organizational and message credibility. The online experiment ($N=171$) results found that there were no statistically significant differences in perceptions of trust, transparency, and organizational reputation across the three stimuli. A content analysis of the focus group transcripts suggests that participants preferred action-based information and instruction first, specific details and resources increase perceptions of transparency, and values-based language is most effective when it follows factual information. The study also discusses implications for crisis communication researchers and public relations practitioners in the field, including key takeaways. Perhaps the most impactful contribution to the field of crisis communication research is a model created by the researcher that aligns stakeholder communication needs to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, offering communicators a new guide for crafting crisis communication messages.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Biographical Sketch	vi
Abstract	vii
Table of Contents	viii
List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Problem Statement	2
Theoretical Rationale	4
Statement of Purpose	9
Research Hypotheses	9
Potential Significance of the Study	10
Chapter Summary	11
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature	12
Identification of Studies	12
Past Reviews of Literature	13
Literature Review Findings	15
Chapter Summary	30
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology	33
Study Objectives and Research Goals	33
Research Design	34
Researcher Positionality	34

Research Context	36
Participant Recruitment	36
Participant Consent and Confidentiality	36
Quantitative Design: Experiment.....	37
Qualitative Design: Focus Groups	44
Chapter Summary	48
Chapter 4: Results	50
Quantitative Results	50
Qualitative Results	53
Connected Mixed Methods Data Analysis	61
Chapter Summary	62
Chapter 5: Discussion	64
Introduction.....	644
Interpretations and Implications of Findings	655
Key Learnings.....	67
Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research	700
Chapter Summary	722
References.....	733

List of Tables

Item	Title	Page
Table 3.1	Frequencies of Participants by Stimuli Intervention	44
Table 3.2	Frequencies of Demographics Across Interventions and Summary of Chi-Square Tests	44
Table 3.3	Qualitative Participant Demographics	47
Table 4.1	One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary for Trust and Transparency Scale	54
Table 4.2	One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary for Organizational Reputation Scale	54
Table 4.3	Codes/Themes – Crisis Communication Messages	56
Table 4.4	Blended Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Results	65

List of Figures

Item	Title	Page
Figure 1.1	Crisis Type Matrix	5
Figure 1.2	Pillars of Situational Crisis Communication Theory	7
Figure 3.1	Participant Affiliation to Institution	44
Figure 3.2	Participant Institution Type	44
Figure 3.3	Visual Description of Qualitative Participant Demographics	48
Figure 5.1	Alignment of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Stakeholder Communication Needs	69

Chapter 1: Introduction

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that no organization is immune to a crisis. Regardless of size, industry, or structure, the emergence of events that can negatively impact an organization are inevitable. While the pandemic may have proven that concept to the world at large, it was no surprise to those in the public relations industry. For the last 50 years, practitioners have been developing competencies specific to crisis communication and it has become an increasingly common part of their role within an organization (Cutlip et al., 2013).

The ability to anticipate the unplanned, mitigate threats, and effectively manage an organization's reputation throughout a crisis is a required skill set; in fact, 15% of the computer-based examination for practitioners looking to earn Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) is focused on issues management (Public Relations Society of America, 2021). At the same time, academic research on crisis communication strategies and best practices continues to be a growing field of inquiry, particularly with the advent of social media (Coombs, 2015).

Understanding the intersections between practice and theory can sharpen communication strategies and help organizations put their best foot forward before, during, and after a crisis. Exactly how best to respond to crises from a communications standpoint has become a rich topic among academic researchers including Sturges (1994), Benoit (1994), and Coombs (1995), who have aimed to develop prescriptive frameworks or guidelines for practitioners in the field.

Garrard and Newell (2006) define a scandal or crisis as “breaches of standards of correct behavior ... communicated to an audience wider than those immediately involved” (p. 5). This definition is predicated on the idea that a crisis incident arises not just when a moral standard is transgressed, but when that transgression is revealed in the public sphere and triggers a reaction (Greco Lopes, 2013). Coombs (2015) defined a crisis as an event that has a potentially negative

impact on an organization's business functions and reputation and developed the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to help crisis communicators mitigate both.

In the last several years, transparency has emerged as an element of crisis communication messaging. The Public Relations Society of America (2021) noted that public relations professionals have an ethical obligation to encourage transparency within an organization while also operating in the best interest of the institution and its reputation. This balance of obligatory transparency versus reputation management has offered several paths for research (Fisher & Hopp, 2020). The researchers define transparent messaging as having nine characteristics: it should be "substantial, accurate, timely, coherent, and honest, aid in audience understanding," and "should address stakeholder needs, facilitate organizational accountability, and should reflect the mission and goals of the communicating entity" (Fisher & Hopp, 2020, p. 203-204). To develop effectively transparent messages, practitioners must make strategic decisions about how much to say, what to say, and when to say it. Conducting a study that used levels of transparent messaging about the social responsibility of a clothing company, Fisher and Hopp (2020) found that transparent messaging can help an organization build trust, particularly when the messages emphasize altruistic characteristics.

Problem Statement

Studies have concluded that greater transparency positively affected stakeholders' perceptions of organizational credibility, and higher levels of transparency in crisis messaging almost always benefitted the organization (Holland et al., 2021). As they reported their findings, Holland et al. (2021) pointed to areas of further study including how degrees of clarity, accuracy, and disclosure in messaging all may affect stakeholder perceptions. Fisher and Hopp (2020) and Holland et al. (2021) both identified gaps in the academic research on transparency as a part of

strategic communication and crisis management, despite its growing popularity in practice. As late as 2018, Holland et al. (2018) noted that there is space in academic research to conduct studies that can inform strategic decisions, including how to operationalize characteristics of transparency in messaging. Recently, researchers have begun filling this void by more precisely defining transparency and providing empirical support for tactical ways to incorporate transparency and its elements into messaging, among other goals (Fisher & Hopp, 2020; Holland et al., 2021). Experiments can also assess varying degrees of transparency in messages to see how it influences audience perceptions of an organization. Coombs (2007) published additional guidelines for crisis response, including ethical considerations for the strategies and identifying specific pathways to mitigate negative threats to an organization's reputation. However, these guidelines stop short of providing specific language that characterizes each strategy or operationalizing the strategies in a concrete manner. Page (2019), Fisher and Hopp (2020), and Im et al. (2021) have begun to build a body of research that operationalizes elements of SCCT, creating hypothetical scenarios that test the success of the framework and messaging employing its guidelines.

Opportunities for research also lie in industries that could benefit from deeper study. Cheng (2018) conducted a content analysis of 73 articles in 11 academic journals to explore the effects of social media on crisis communication strategies. Each article was coded using three categories: (a) publication year and date; (b) research subjects including crisis name, crisis type, region, research perspective, organization, and social media; and (c) crisis communication strategy and time it was applied (Chen, 2018). The analysis brought to light several gaps in current academic research, including a lack of studies looking at crisis communication in the nonprofit arena (Cheng, 2018). Two years later, Ozanne et al. (2020) reported that research on

nonprofits still lagged behind those on private sector organizations. Kim (2019) also suggest that research findings may differ when a crisis occurs in the private versus the public sector.

This study sought to apply a similar experimental methodology in the context of higher education. It explored how elements of transparency could potentially enhance message credibility with readers, and as mentioned above, influence their perceptions of the transparent and trustworthy nature of an organization and its reputation.

Theoretical Rationale

Early research looked at crisis communication through the lens of Grunig's (1968) situational theory of publics—or tailoring messaging based on a public's level of involvement in the crisis. In the 90s, Sturges' (1994) identification of three types of messaging (instructing, adjusting, and internalizing), Benoit's (1994) image repair theory, and Coombs' (1995) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) emerged.

Over the course of 20 years, SCCT has become a widely cited framework and extant research has aimed to refine and test aspects of the theory (Coombs, 1995; Holland et al., 2021; Ozanne et al., 2020). SCCT argues that as stakeholders make sense of a crisis they look to assign a level of responsibility to the organizations involved (Coombs, 1995). The degree of responsibility stakeholders assign is based on several factors, including the organization's history of crisis and the type of crisis that occurred, among others (Coombs, 2015). SCCT posits that the strategies used to communicate during a crisis should be led by the perceived amount of responsibility a stakeholder assigned to the organization (Coombs, 1995). Coombs (1995) created the crisis type matrix to group crises by unintentional or intentional events (committed by a “purposeful actor” or not) and external or internal events (the crisis was by done the

organization or by some person or group outside of the organization) (Coombs, 1995, p. 455).

Figure 1.1 displays a visual representation of the Crisis Type Matrix (Coombs, 1995).

Figure 1.1

Crisis Type Matrix

	Unintentional	Intentional
External	Faux Pas	Terrorism
Internal	Accidents	Transgressions

Note. Adapted from Coombs' Crisis Type Matrix. From "Choosing the right words: The development of guidelines for the selection of the 'appropriate' crisis-response strategies" by

W.T. Coombs, 1995, *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8(4), p. 455

(<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318995008004003>). Copyright 1995 by *Management*

Communication Quarterly.

In the matrix, a faux pas is an unintentional action that is turned into a crisis by an external agent; accidents are unintentional, often random in nature, and occur within the organization; transgressions happen within the organization and are intentional in nature, that is to say, agents knowingly act in a harmful manner; and terrorism is an act of harm taken by an external agent outside of the organization (Coombs, 1995).

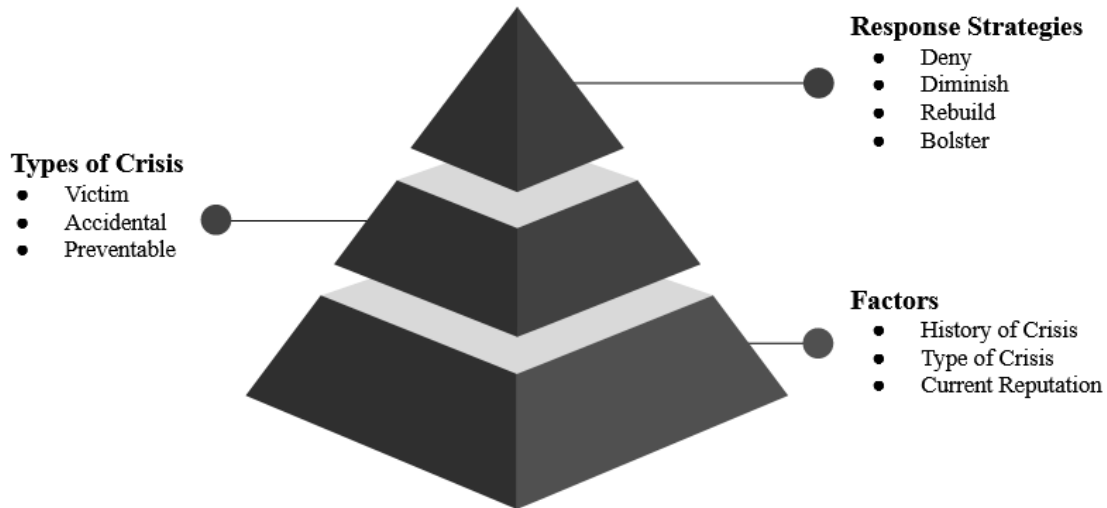
Later SCCT research grouped crisis scenarios into three clusters—victim, accidental, and preventable—based on the assigned level of responsibility an organization may have for the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The victim cluster includes crises where organizations have

little to no control; the accidental cluster includes crises where organizations have moderate control or are unintentional; the preventable cluster includes crises where organizations have a high level of control and/or responsibility (Coombs, 2006). A main pillar of SCCT is that the degree of responsibility an organization has in a crisis should be a driving factor in selecting the appropriate communication response (Coombs, 2006).

Coombs' (2006) research was also focused on demonstrating that matching the correct response strategy to the crisis type would effectively mitigate threats to the organization's reputation. First and foremost, SCCT guides the practitioner to use instructing messaging, or telling stakeholders what they need to know to stay safe during or after the crisis (Coombs, 2006). It is an ethical imperative that crisis response strategies ensure the health, wellness, and safety of stakeholders (Coombs, 2016). Once instructing messaging has been successful and any harmful elements of the crisis have been removed, the practitioner should then address any reputational harm stemming from the crisis (Coombs, 2016). To guide practitioners to the appropriate strategy, Coombs (1995) created a series of flowcharts that include crisis type, proof of crisis, the degree of damage, presence of victims, and the organization's history with crisis. Based on where the flowchart leads a practitioner, SCCT offers various suggested strategies. Coombs (2006) places these strategies into three overarching themes (a) deny, (b) diminish, and (c) deal. Under each of these are a series of strategies to distance the organization from the crisis: (a) prove there is no crisis; (b) accept varying degrees of responsibility; or (c) offer apologies, show concern, or provide compensation to affected stakeholders (Coombs, 2006).

Figure 2

Pillars of Situational Crisis Communication Theory



Note. Figure illustrated by author to visually depict the main pillars of situational crisis communication theory, as developed by Coombs (1995, 2005, 2006).

Over the last two decades, academics have sought to understand how SCCT works, and a meta-analysis was conducted to synthesize the research landscape of the theory and offer areas for further study (Ma & Zhan, 2016). The meta-analysis of SCCT included 24 studies that examined various aspects of the theory over a 25-year time period (Ma & Zhan, 2016). The studies reported mixed findings related to the degree to which SCCT's response strategies could mitigate threats to reputation and Ma and Zhan (2016) noted that researchers' explanations for these inconsistencies have not been grounded in research. Their work sought to provide empirical evidence for the relationship between SCCT strategies and reputation, identify whether accurately matching response strategies would have a more positive impact on reputation, and understand any variables that might affect the two concepts (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Their findings

largely supported two main pillars of SCCT: (a) crises which carry the highest amount of organizational responsibility can be the most threatening to reputation and (b) to a lesser degree, matching the response to the crisis cluster can mitigate threats to reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016).

One recent example of the SCCT framework in action is demonstrated in a case study developed by Thelen and Robinson (2019), which layered SCCT response strategies over social media messages that addressed a controversial speaker at the University of Florida (UF). The study examined messages posted on social media by UF President Ken Fuchs leading up to and following a lecture delivered by White nationalist Richard Spencer (Thelen & Robison, 2019). The most common response strategy was adjusting information—helping stakeholders cope with what was happening; and the second most common was instructing information—telling stakeholders how to be safe (Thelen & Robison, 2019). When Fuchs used emotional appeals in addition to factual information, stakeholders viewed the message more favorably (Thelen & Robinson, 2019). This supports SCCT’s prediction that correctly matching response strategy (in this case – instructing information and emotional appeals) to the crisis type (accidental) can result in favorable stakeholder perceptions of the organization. The findings present an opportunity to explore SCCT in new ways and test further how message elements can aid in stakeholder perceptions of an organization during a crisis.

The meta-analysis also uncovered several areas for further research and suggestions for researchers as they develop new experiments. For example, the meta-analysis suggested that future research use real crisis vignettes (as opposed to fictitious crises) as it can mirror more accurately the often-blurry perceptions of organizational responsibility that occurs in real-life situations (Ma & Zhan, 2016). They also encouraged research that looks at crisis communication strategies that move beyond addressing responsibility to uncover nuances in how those factors

can influence organizational reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Both the meta-analysis (Ma & Zhan, 2016) and a longitudinal study of crisis communication research conducted by Avery et al., (2010) pointed to gaps in crisis communication research as it relates to expanding messaging beyond information that addresses the physical and psychological safety of stakeholders and explains organizational responsibility. Avery et al. (2010) noted that academic research on the topic should be “less descriptive and more prescriptive” and include “increased attention to outcomes and goals beyond reputation management” (p. 192).

Statement of Purpose

The goal of the new research was to create concrete, tangible guides for practitioners who are crafting crisis communication messages for their organizations. As a framework, situational crisis communication theory has allowed academic researchers to explore elements of crisis response and offer practitioners evidence-based strategies to successfully respond to a crisis. As an element, the strategic use of transparency is an under-researched but much talked about aspect of crisis communication. What is currently missing from the academic study of crisis response strategy are the tactical elements that practitioners in the field can apply as they guide their organizations through a crisis.

Research Hypotheses

H1: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the control message.

H2: The message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals will lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the control message.

H3: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the control message.

H4: The message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals will lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the control message.

H5: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals.

H6: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals.

Potential Significance of the Study

Public relations professionals have an ethical obligation to encourage transparency while also operating in the best interest of the institution and its reputation (Public Relations Society of America, 2021). As such, a study that explores how practitioners can strategically apply transparency to their communication messages, how to measure the most effective level of transparency in a message, and how each level of transparency can impact a reader's perception of the organization would add to the body of research not just on crisis communication, but on strategic communication as well.

The new study also sought to explore a relatively untouched sector within crisis communication experimentation: higher education (Ozanne et al., 2020). Global pandemic aside, on any given day higher education institutions can face issues of racial tension, incidents of sexual assault, academic dishonesty, or strained town-gown relationships, among dozens of other issues percolating under the surface of campus life (Gigliotti, 2020). Case studies, content analyses, and experiments have sought to unpack how college leadership can effectively manage crises, often through the lens of SCCT (Thelen & Robinson, 2019; Varma, 2011). As institutions of higher education provide ample opportunity to test messaging using vignettes grounded in

reality and its stakeholders are easily identifiable (students, employees, parents, alumni, donors, etc.) the study included a crisis in this sector.

Chapter Summary

As a framework, situational crisis communication theory has offered practitioners baseline strategies to successfully respond to a crisis that are grounded in evidence. In reflecting on the meta-analysis, Coombs (2016) noted that instructing and adjusting information are “essential elements for crisis communication” but argued further research is needed to explore outcomes beyond reputation (p. 122). Studying message credibility as an outcome and exploring how elements of transparency can aid in increasing stakeholder belief and trust in a message extends SCCT in that manner. At the same time, new research can create concrete, tangible guides for practitioners who are crafting crisis response messages for their organizations.

Chapter 1 introduced the dissertation topic, including the problem statement, theoretical rationale, and statement of purpose. It also introduced hypotheses and the potential significance of the study. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth review of literature related to crisis communication with a focus on studies using the SCCT framework and the concepts of transparency. Chapter 3 details the research methodology of the study, while Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 provide an overview of the study’s results and a discussion about its significance and suggestions for future avenues of exploration.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Across the communications field and in academia, crisis communication has become a robust topic of conversation and intellectual inquiry; for example, early in the literature review process a cursory search on Google using the phrase “crisis communication research” calls up more than 55,000 results. The Public Relations Society of America offers dozens of professional development workshops, webinars, and certificate programs related to crisis management, brand reputation, and crisis response, among other topics. Researchers gather at academic and association conferences each year to engage in discussions about the latest studies.

Identification of Studies

The researcher conducted an initial search of literature beginning with the St. John Fisher University Lavery Library general search bar, then conducted queries in specific journals, including *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, *International Journal of Strategic Communications*, and *Public Relations Review*. These four journals were chosen because they have a Quartile 1 ranking on the SCImago Journal & Country Rank database. Searches included a combination of the following keywords: “crisis communications,” “crisis,” “transparency,” “situational crisis communication theory,” “Coombs, T.W.,” “crisis management,” and “crisis messaging.” Articles that explored the management of a crisis from an emergency response perspective were excluded.

In the initial search, a total of 42 studies were identified and 15 of those are included in the literature review. Twenty-seven articles were discarded because they were published prior to 2016 or were commentaries, book chapters, or book reviews. Four articles were read as background, but because they were prior to 2016, were not included in the literature review.

Several weeks later, a second search was conducted to expand the literature review via EBSCO Host, using the search term “crisis communication” + “transparency.” To ensure the most recent research was returned, the search was limited to the years 2019 through 2022. A second search of the journal, *Public Relations Review*, was conducted as well using the term “crisis communication” and the years 2019 through 2022. This journal was specifically chosen because of its relevance to crisis communication and the vast amount of research it publishes on the topic. Articles from both searches that were book chapters or commentaries were discarded, as were articles that were not expressly about crisis communication.

The 30 journal articles included in the literature review were analyzed based on their (a) relevance to crisis communication; (b) the strength of the study design and execution of the methods (including reliability and/or validity checks and measurements of instrument reliability, when applicable); and (c) their contribution to new or innovative approaches to crisis communication.

Past Reviews of Literature

Avery et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative review of 18 years of crisis communication research that revealed little diversity in the organization type in which the crisis occurred, with 47% looking at the corporate landscape, 17% at the political area, and 15% at the transportation industry (e.g., airlines). The review also showed a large gap in research on the phase of the crisis; only 5% explored the prevention or pre-crisis stage, while 67% of articles focused on communication during and post-crisis. Perhaps the most compelling part of the review is Avery et al.’s (2010) call for a more “prescriptive” body of work that expands outcomes beyond the current focus on organizational reputation. Avery et al.’s (2010) systematic review also confirmed SCCT as a “dominant paradigm” in the field (p. 190).

Six years later, a meta-analysis of 25 years of original research using SCCT was conducted (Ma & Zhan, 2016). The analysis found support for a considerable relationship between attributed responsibility and organizational reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016). It also showed an association, albeit weak, between matching response strategies over mismatching response strategies at protecting reputation; with greater effect when dealing with an accidental crisis versus a preventable crisis. Ma and Zhan (2016) found that preventable crises carry the biggest threat to reputation, followed by accidental and victim, because the level of responsibility stakeholders assign to the organization for the crisis is greater. In sum, the findings of the meta-analysis largely supported two main pillars of SCCT: (a) crises which carry the highest amount of organizational responsibility can be the most threatening to reputation and (b) to a lesser degree, matching the response to the crisis cluster can mitigate threats to reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016). The match response strategy effect on reputation was found to be greater when the studies used Coombs and Holiday's (2002) Organizational Reputation Scale rather than a general attitude scale, making the case for future studies looking to test SCCT to use the ORP scale (Ma & Zhan, 2016; Coombs & Holiday, 2002; Coombs, 2016). Similar to Avery et al. (2010), Ma and Zhan (2016) challenged researchers to explore a broader set of response strategies and preferred outcomes beyond reputation.

The objective of this literature review is to offer a contemporary exploration of crisis communication research from 2019 to 2022, including experiments, case studies, and content analyses. A look at more recent studies revealed that several academics responded to the suggestions set forth by Avery et al. (2010) and Ma and Zhan (2016). It identified lines of inquiry that have reached saturation and those that might warrant further exploration. The literature review divides the studies by method. The first set of research studies use experiments,

and are coupled by (a) how they tested the effectiveness of strategies and tactics or (b) how they research outcomes. The second set employs case study or content analysis methods, and are grouped by studies that use (a) SCCT; or (b) audience sentiment and perceptions to evaluate organizational response to a crisis; or (c) include interviews that resulted in tactical response advice for crisis managers.

Literature Review Findings

The following literature review includes 30 studies that explore crisis communication from a variety of aspects using several different methods, including experiments, case studies, and content analyses. Much like the research before it, this body of work remains focused on ways for crisis managers to protect organizations against the reputational threats caused by a crisis and identify strategies that will work best in fostering positive public opinion.

Experimental Studies

Experimental studies exploring crisis communication, particularly those using SCCT as a framework, tended to look at strategies and tactics that can be used in responding to a crisis and the outcome those strategies and tactics can evoke. Seven of the 11 experimental studies looked specifically at elements of messaging and its impact on stakeholder perceptions of an organization in crisis. Eleven of the studies included in the literature review use experiments to better understand the effectiveness of crisis communication response and what may bolster or detract from a successful response. Many of the studies in the experiment category demonstrated a robustness of the research, innovative study design, inclusion of instrument checks, and strong power.

Strategies and Tactics. In a crisis situation, organizations can communicate with their stakeholders through their owned channels (websites, emails, newsletters), shared channels

(social media platforms or online forums), and earned channels (media coverage). In addition to channel selection, communicators also need to decide the medium (text versus video) and content and elements of the message when responding to a crisis. Academic research has sought to use experiments to help practitioners understand which strategies and tactics can be most effective.

Coombs et al. (2016) conducted a study that looked at how organizational responsibility could impact the effectiveness of the denial strategy in protecting an organization's reputation. While there were several interesting points of data that resulted from the experiment, the study closed the book definitively on an ongoing debate about the benefits of commenting versus not commenting that has raged in the industry for decades. The research showed that there is a significant effect on reputation and stakeholder expressions of anger on crisis responsibility and that silence is a "rather ineffective response when an organization is responsible for the crisis" (Coombs et al., 2016, p. 390). In other words, when an organization is the cause of the crisis, any response is better than no response at all.

SCCT also posits that an organization's history can influence stakeholder perceptions of an organization's ability to respond to a crisis and its post-crisis reputation. One of the more recent studies found nuances to this idea. Through an experiment that tested how prior reputation could impact audience responses to an organization facing a moral crisis, Wei and Diddi (2022) found that organizations with no known reputation or a favorable reputation suffered significant reputational harm following the crisis. Organizations with an unfavorable reputation prior to the crisis also experienced reputational harm, but not to the same degree as the former (Wei & Diddi, 2022). In other words, organizations cannot rely on their good reputation alone to weather a crisis. A case study exploring "Dieselgate," the discovery that Volkswagen intentionally rigged

its “clean diesel” vehicles to display false emissions results demonstrated how crisis history can impact reputation (Jong & van der Linde, 2022). In this case, Volkswagen was the first bad actor, to be followed several years later by BMW and Mercedes, moving the crisis from an organizational issue to an industry-wide scandal (Jong & van der Linde, 2022). Moral outrage continued through each new scandalous revelation—moving from negative emotions directed at executives to the entire industry (Jong & van der Linde, 2022). Jong and van der Linde (2022) suggested that Volkswagen’s crisis “became an intensifying factor for other car-manufacturers within the industry and increased their level of crisis responsibility” (p. 5).

Research has also tested the impact that time has on audience emotions and behavior (Kim, 2022). Kim (2022) conducted an experiment to see if the temporal crisis distance, or how immediate or distant a crisis’ impact feels to stakeholders, had any impact on their behavioral intentions. While the findings did not reveal any statistically significant impact of time on behavioral intentions, it did show that audiences who received the distant crisis material were more likely to believe the crisis required more resources and demands of the organizations, and in turn, expected the organization to expend more effort addressing the crisis (Kim, 2022).

Several studies explored the impact of who serves as an organizational spokesperson during interviews and how their answers can impact stakeholder opinion. Clementson and Beatty (2021) and Clementson and Xie (2021) conducted a pair of studies that looked at how manipulations to televised media interviews can bolster a public’s positive perception of an organization. Clementson and Beatty’s (2021) study explored how a spokesperson’s framing of the narrative can affect attitudes. The researchers found no significant difference between on-topic narrative and non-narrative responses in lessening attribution and bolstering reputation (Clementson & Beatty, 2021). However, when the spokesperson engaged in narrative spinning it

worsened organizational reputation among stakeholders (Clementson & Beatty, 2021). Similarly, Clementson and Xie (2021) looked to see if it would be better for an organization if its spokesperson answers or evades questions about a crisis during a media interview. The study also assessed stakeholder perceptions of message truthfulness, completeness, clarity, and relevance (Clementson & Xie, 2021). Among participants who watched a media interview where the spokesperson engaged in evading, a survey found their perceptions of the message to have less truth, completeness, clarity, and relevance (Clementson & Xie, 2021). The study showed that when spokespeople “handle media interviews with deflection and evasion, tarnished credibility and a damaged reputation will result” (Clementson & Xie, 2021, p. 15).

Verčič et al. (2018) noted that another line of decision-making for organizations in crisis lies in who should serve as a spokesperson. Their study explored the effect sources (CEO versus communications representative) have on organizational reputation, as well as what message they share (apology versus sympathy) (Verčič et al., 2018). In the article’s literature review, Verčič et al., (2018) explained that a common belief among practitioners is that CEOs are always the best option when selecting a spokesperson, and the study sought to provide empirical data to support or deny that claim. Study participants watched one of four 90-second mock news clips that included an account of the incident by a journalist and an explanation by either the CEO or communications representative (Verčič et al., 2018). The results found no significant advantage for selecting one spokesperson over the other; and if organizations have CEOs who lack media savvy or are unavailable, a communications representative can serve as an effective source (Verčič et al., 2018). Additionally, when it comes to apology versus sympathy in messaging, “apology was shown to be more effective increasing more positive impressions of the speaker and the organization as well as increasing account acceptance” (Verčič et al., 2018, p. 34).

Other lines of research focused more specifically on the content included in written responses to a crisis, including apology and use of language to increase transparency, clarity, or accuracy. Im et al. (2021) noted that as a tool for practitioners, SCCT offers a roadmap for how to respond to a crisis. First, organizations must understand the nature of the crisis and its responsibility in its cause and resolution. Second, it must create an appropriate response. One such response includes the apology, but Im et al. (2021) noted that to date, research is vague in what constitutes an apology. Inconsistencies exist in what elements to include in an apology, such as acceptance of responsibility (and to what degree), expression of remorse, offer of compensation, request for forgiveness, and plan for corrective action (Im et al., 2021). For the purposes of the study, Im et al. (2021) defined an apology as a “statement that implicitly or explicitly attempts to convey acceptance of crisis responsibility” (p. 3). The research also explored how an apology can be paired with another response strategy (accommodative versus defensive) to affect its impact on stakeholder perception, as well as the timing of both responses. The study found that pairing an apology with an accommodative response—where the organization attempted to rectify or offer compensation for the crisis—was more well-received by study participants than when an apology was paired with a defensive strategy (where the organization blamed a third-party for the issue).

Holland et al. (2021) conducted a 3x3x2 experiment that looked at crisis type (victim, accidental, preventable); crisis response (deny, diminish, rebuild); and message transparency (high, low). The study built on previous work Holland (2018) conducted on message transparency. It exhibited high power including 898 participants—one of the largest samples in this literature review. In regards to crisis type, the results reinforced studies by Zhao et al. (2020) and Kim (2019) reporting that participants viewed organizations in a preventable crisis as less

transparent and less credible, and the messaging produced less sympathy and more anger than accident or victim crises. The study also found that messages with greater transparency resulted in more positive perceptions of organizational transparency, attitudes, and credibility and less anger; while there was no effect on behavior intention or sympathy (Holland et al., 2021). The main finding of the study was that “when organizations choose to use transparent, diminishing message strategies, the organization is viewed as significantly more credible in victim or accidental situations compared to when the crisis type is preventable” and during a preventable crisis organizational credibility can benefit from higher levels of transparent messaging when paired with rebuild or deny strategies over diminish strategies (Holland et al., 2021, p. 47). In conclusion, Holland et al. (2021) were able to provide evidence that message transparency can increase organizational credibility.

As explained in Chapter 1, Fisher and Hopp (2020) offer another example of work that advanced the body of research on transparency as it relates to effective communication. The researchers define transparent messaging as having several characteristics: it should be “substantial, accurate, timely, coherent, and honest, aid in audience understanding,” and “should address stakeholder needs, facilitate organizational accountability, and should reflect the mission and goals of the communicating entity” (pp. 203-204). The research was worth noting again, as Fisher and Hopp’s (2020) definition is used throughout this study and serves the foundation for creating the stimuli used in the experiment.

Outcomes. Experimental studies are also concerned with outcomes—either directly or indirectly, each of the studies assessed factors that can positively or negatively affect organizational reputation. Four studies dug deeper into the concept of reputation and looked at

credibility, trust, and transparency. Other studies explored how perceptions of responsibility for the crisis can affect an organization's reputation post-crisis.

Kim (2019) conducted an experiment to see how different crisis types impact a public's response to a crisis and explored the role preventability, blame, and trust can play in influencing an organization's post-crisis reputation. The experiment included a survey of 329 college students who read an article about product issues with Red Bull. The third paragraph included "manipulation, offering three distinct causes for the crisis: (1) it was intentionally overlooked by Red Bull, (2) it occurred accidentally due to technical errors, and (3) it was a third-party rumor to mar Red Bull's reputation" (Kim, 2019, p. 4). The findings of the study showed crisis type did impact public perceptions of preventability—which increased blame and decreased reputation. These findings support those from a series of past studies by Coombs (1996, 2002, 2004).

Holland et al. (2018) moved beyond reputational outcomes and explored how messaging can affect perceptions of organizational transparency and credibility. The experiment included a manipulation of messaging—one condition included high transparency messages with less jargon, more information, and precise statistics while a second condition was designed to be less transparent, with more jargon, less information, and vague statistics (Holland et al., 2018). Participants who read the high transparency message reported perceptions of greater organizational transparency and credibility and more expressions of positive attitudes toward the organization than participants who read the low transparency message (Holland et al., 2018). In the discussion, the researchers offered guidance for practitioners working on messaging, noting that "disclosure, greater clarity, and greater accuracy result in positive outcomes for an organization" (Holland, et al., 2018, p. 261).

Case Studies and Content Analyses

Case studies and content analysis have also been used to explore crisis communication in myriad ways, including evaluating organizational response through the lens of SCCT (Muindi & Kiarie, 2021; Thelen & Robinson, 2020). Another assessed the effectiveness of an organization's response to a crisis through the analysis of messages and stakeholder sentiment (Zhao et al., 2020). Three case studies include in-depth interviews with crisis managers and organizational leaders to better understand the decision-making process during a crisis and what guides the communications response (Liu et al., 2021; Ozanne et al., 2020). Those in-depth interviews allowed researchers to offer guidance in best practices, many of which align with SCCT.

Using SCCT to Evaluate Organizational Response. Food-borne illnesses have long challenged companies in the food production industry; one content analysis explored how Blue Bell Creameries responded to its first food recall due to a *Listeria* outbreak (Calley et al., 2019). The study looked at press releases issued by Blue Bell and 68 news stories from across the country regarding the recall. The findings showed that Blue Bell used the rebuild posture most frequently, and that theme was generally echoed in the news reports. Additionally, Blue Bell chose to include quotes from officials in 65% of its press releases; another strategy that paid off, as those officials were then quoted in 70% of news stories). In fact, Blue Bell officials were the most quoted source in news reports about the recall—meaning that the company was able to successfully frame the story (Calley et al., 2019).

As would be expected, communication research is starting to explore the COVID-19 pandemic. Kim and Woo (2021) looked at the pandemic through the lens of the fashion industry. They conducted a comparative analysis of how three international fashion retailers—Zara, H&M, and Uniqlo—responded to the crisis. When it came to disruptions to production or labor issues, the authors noted similarities in each company using a combination of deny and deal

strategies; transferring responsibility to supply chain issues and the economic fall-out from the pandemic. At the same time, the companies also offered sympathy and expressed compassion for those affected by the issues (Kim & Woo, 2021).

Muindi and Kiarie (2021) conducted a content analysis of 13 messages from the communications team at Daystar University in Kenya in response to a student boycott that shut down school operations several times over the course of three months. The SCCT framework was used to analyze and evaluate the University's response. Muindi and Kiarie (2021) noted that language in the messaging implied that the University positioned itself as victim in the situation, and blamed other parties during various stages of the crisis, including students. The researchers also pointed to instances where the University used denial and scapegoating, as well as diminishing tactics before eventually dealing with the crisis through apology (Muindi & Kiarie, 2021). In the discussion portion of the study, the researchers suggested that the University chose the wrong crisis type, and should have positioned it as a preventable crisis and used apology and accommodation much sooner (Muindi & Kiarie, 2021).

Using SCCT to Evaluate Leadership Response. Thelen and Robinson (2020) conducted a review of social media messaging from the University of Florida's (UF) president before, during, and after the appearance of a controversial speaker on campus. In addition, the researchers analyzed social media engagement (replies, emotions, shares/retweets, etc.) to understand what effect the presidential messaging had on stakeholders (Thelen & Robinson, 2020). The researchers coded the messages to (a) identify the strategy used (deny, diminish, rebuild, or reinforce); (b) assess if it included instructing or adjusting information; (c) identify the appeal type (functional/rational versus emotional); and (d) categorize messaging by theme (Thelen & Robinson, 2020). The study also tracked levels of public engagement through (a) a

sentiment analysis of replies and retweets on Facebook and Twitter; (b) use of emotions on Facebook; and (c) the organization of comments by theme. The research findings revealed that UF used adjusting information most frequently as a response strategy to help people cope psychologically with the situation and to show compassion for the charged emotions it elicited on both sides (Thelen & Robison, 2020). The researchers noted that the strategy switched to instructing information in the week leading up to the event; this messaging focused on providing information to help individuals remain safe prior to and during the talk (Thelen & Robison, 2020). While user responses on Facebook and Twitter (now X) differed greatly during several stages of the crises, anger was the predominant public emotion across both social media platforms (Thelen & Robison, 2020). The researchers noted that presidential messages that included emotional appeals or shared pride in the institution resulted in more positive user content than other messages—a concept that would be worth testing through an experiment (Thelen & Robison, 2020).

Perepu and Mikkilineni (2021) compared and contrasted the leadership actions of two airline CEOs—Tony Fernandes of AirAsia and Ahmad Jauhari Bin Yahya of Malaysia Airlines—who faced the disappearance and crash of company airplanes. Both airlines suffered tragedies, and the case study showed how Fernandes’ personal, direct, and timely communication with all stakeholders, much of it over Twitter (now X), led families and employees to feel supported and bolstered shareholder confidence in the airline’s efforts (Perepu & Mikkilineni, 2021). This contrasted with Yahya, who relied on messages and interviews to communicate and failed to personally address the victims’ families (Perepu & Mikkilineni, 2021).

Two more recent studies explicitly looked at how leaders used social media to disseminate information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tian and Yang (2022) conducted a comparative study of United States President Donald Trump and New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo's use of Twitter (now X) while another study analyzed New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's communication strategy during the pandemic (McGuire et al., 2020). In the early months of the pandemic, Trump's use of denial as a strategy paid off significantly in terms of audience engagement via retweets (Tian & Yang, 2022). In contrast, Cuomo and Ardern focused on bolstering strategies, relying on direct, transparent, and informative information as well as messages of unity and collective and individual responsibility (Tian & Yang, 2022; McGuire et al., 2020).

Using SCCT to Evaluate Culturally-Sensitive Responses. Findings from other studies underscored the importance of cultural responsiveness in crisis communication. Cristofol et al. (2020) examined how the Police of Catalonia used social media following a terrorist attack in Barcelona. Understanding the varied cultural backgrounds of its audiences, the police of Catalonia translated its Twitter messages into several languages (Cristofol et al., 2020). On the flip side, two studies offered criticism of organizations that largely failed to address the uniqueness of the primary stakeholders. Taylor and Barrera (2019) found that of 218 higher education institutional messages denouncing the repeal of the Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA), also known as the Dream Act, 46% failed to specifically mention students who would be directly impacted and 48.1% did not provide any resources for students seeking help. Noting that addressing audiences is a well-known best practice, Taylor and Barrera (2019) posited that institutional messages fell short of being able to connect with DACA students who

would likely be feeling stress and anxiety related to the repeal and would have benefited from the empathy a specific mention in messaging could evoke.

A similar criticism was levied at the Phoebe Health System, a Georgia-based hospital that released a video in April 2020 that showed a white health care provider holding an iPad while family members said goodbye to a dying COVID patient, who is Black (Ponder et al., 2022). The authors questioned the use of imagery that could be traumatic for the Black community, who were hit especially hard throughout the pandemic, rather than offering specific information on how to mitigate the spread of the illness (Ponder et al., 2022). The authors also pointed to the need for a culturally-responsive approach to crisis communication; “without a critical cultural lens applied to communications, health systems may contribute to secondary trauma” (Ponder et al., 2022, p. 41).

Using Audience Sentiment to Evaluate Organizational Response. Several researchers used social media to better understand how publics react to crises and organizational responses. Zhao et al. (2020) used the sentiment analysis tool, Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner (VADER), to conduct a sentiment measurement of organizational messaging and user replies for six different crises across the three crisis clusters. VADER is a software tool designed to specifically identify sentiments expressed via social media. Their findings showed that social media users had more positive sentiments for crises that are accidental or ambiguous, and less so for preventable crises (Zhao et al., 2020). This data tracks with several experiments of Coombs’ (1995, 2006) that show organizations dealing with preventable crises can have a harder hill to climb in currying public favor.

Morgan and Wilk (2021) conducted a similar study analyzing 3,125 social media posts from Twitter (now X), Instagram, Facebook, and online forums that commented on a Cricket

Australia ball tampering incident. The researchers used the Salesforce Social Studio to review sentiment of posts using specific hashtags and used Leximancer to group together key themes (Morgan & Wilk, 2021). Overall, the sentiment of posts was 70% negative; 13.5% positive; 16.5% neutral; with the most negative posts occurring at the height of the crisis. While sentiment turned more positive with time, negative sentiment continued to arise as follow-up news related to the crisis came out (Morgan & Wilk, 2021, p. 9). The findings suggested that vigilant rebuilding may be required of organizations to weather the ebb and flow of negative press that a crisis can evoke (Morgan & Wilk, 2022).

A trio of case studies showed how brands and public figures can often rely on social media fans to help mitigate crises and long-term reputational damage (Jackson & Thaker, 2021; Scholz & Smith, 2019; Tu & Li, 2022). Two studies looked at how professional athletes were supported and defended by an enthusiastic and loyal fan base. While Tu and Li (2022) note that cultural variations could impact how fans think about public figures engaged in wrong-doing, it was interesting comparisons between Chinese fans, who supported their national hero and swimming Olympian Sun Yang, and New Zealand fans, who stood by national rugby star Aaron Smith. Despite differences in the scandals—Sun Yang was accused of doping while Aaron Smith was caught having sexual relations in an airport bathroom with a woman who was not his partner—on social media, fans of each athlete engaged in the deny strategy most frequently (Jackson & Thaker, 2021; Tu & Li, 2022). Throughout the scandals, they paired “attack the accuser/whistleblower” strategies with steadfast support for their athletes (Jackson & Thaker, 2021; Tu & Li, 2022).

The third case study explores how a brand, Protein World, used a social media firestorm to rally its supporters and effectively shut down criticism by flipping the script on its detractors

(Scholz & Smith, 2019). After two failed attempts to squash intense criticism of its latest campaign on social media, Protein World doubled-down on its message, caught the attention of its fanbase by appealing to their “work hard” mindset with provocative messaging, and effectively ended the crisis (Scholz & Smith, 2019). Scholz and Smith (2019) introduced the term “escalation strategy,” as a way to describe Protein World’s purposefully antagonistic response to critics and messaging that inspire fans to defend the brand (p. 1116).

Developing Best Practices from Interviews. A study involving in-depth interviews with higher education leaders regarding the COVID-19 pandemic offered one of the more recent insights into how values and ethics can guide crisis management (Liu et al., 2021). The research included the perspectives of 37 leaders from 30 U.S. colleges and universities, who described their role on the crisis team and how their institutions developed guiding principles for their response. A pre-survey revealed that while 84% of the respondents said their institutions had crisis communication plans in place, they noted the plans were inadequate or ineffective in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, due in part to its unpredictable and unprecedented nature (Liu et al, 2021). The survey also revealed that half of the participants reported that “institutional identity” drove their response, coupled with two main missions: ensure continuity of academic instruction and protect the health and safety of the community (Liu et al., 2021, p. 6). Another theme in the interview was the need to be accurate and transparent during the pandemic to maintain organizational credibility and stakeholder trust (Liu et al., 2021). The study also reported that all interviewees spent time discussing the importance of dialogue with stakeholders. In the discussion, Liu et al. (2021) offered “universal guiding principles” for crisis communication, including “(1) engage in accuracy, transparency, and accountability; (2) foster

deliberative dialog; (3) prioritize safety; (4) support justice, fairness, and equity; and (5) engage in an ethic of care” (p. 15).

Schoofs et al. (2022) interviewed 16 Belgian public relations practitioners to dig into the concept of empathy in crisis communication. While the interviews uncovered slight differentiations in how practitioners define empathy, the main theme was that empathy demonstrates an understanding and acknowledgement of stakeholders’ feelings or perceptions regarding a situation (Schoofs et al., 2022). The study also reported that the majority of practitioners interviewed believed that to some degree, communicating empathy should always be part of the response strategy and striking the right balance is the key challenge (Schoofs et al., 2022). The interviews also detailed how communications professionals operationalize the concept of empathy through explicit expressions, apologies, accepting responsibility, doing the right thing, and using language that is sincere, authentic, and human (Schoofs et al., 2022). The authors closed their study with the suggestion that future research test which of those tactics are the most effective in evoking positive stakeholder perceptions of the organization and its ability to handle the crisis and address their needs (Schoofs et al., 2022).

Ozanne et al. (2020) conducted interviews with four communications professionals at a university in New Zealand to learn about their response strategies following a series of earthquakes. Aligned with SCCT guidance, the main priority for communication was protecting the safety of stakeholders before reputation management. Early communication dealt with instructing information, and the team used a multichannel approach to share information via news media, direct email, videos, and specific Facebook pages. Upon seeing the increase in users to the Facebook pages, the team was able to engage in a dialogue with students responding to questions in real time.

The case study also included a survey of 115 students to understand their perceptions of the university's communication after the two most recent earthquakes. The survey results showed that students felt Facebook and email were the most effective means of sharing information, supporting the team's use of both channels (Ozanne et al., 2020). However, the results also uncovered a disconnect between the communication team's perceptions of the response plan and execution and the students' assessments. The team perceived the communication strategy to be successful, yet students reported feeling that the communication was less effective in terms of accuracy, compassion, helpfulness, and resourcefulness after the third earthquake. Ozanne et al. (2020) posited that the university's crisis history, also an element of SCCT, may have played a role in the more critical view of third response. While stakeholders may have been more forgiving after the first and second earthquake, they may have felt that the university should be able to better manage disruptions by the third one (Ozanne et al., 2020). The researchers suggested that communication teams pay close attention to social users' sentiment following crises and weave rebuild strategies into their plans to address any post-crisis reputational issues (Ozanne et al., 2020).

Chapter Summary

As a field of inquiry, crisis communication research has explored several aspects of crisis response messaging and aimed to provide practitioners with evidence-based strategies to successfully respond to a crisis. Collectively, the body of research finds support for the main pillars of SCCT; disagreement generally resides in nuances of term definitions and how best to measure organizational characteristics of credibility, trust, transparency, etc.

Extant research has shown there are significant relationships between crisis type and reputational harm. The findings of Kim's (2019) study showed crisis type did impact public

perceptions of preventability—which increased blame and decreased reputation. These findings support those from a series of past studies by Coombs (1996, 2002, 2004). Additionally, the literature shows that organizations with an unknown history or a good history related to crisis cannot rely on their reputational credit; in fact, a crisis can cause a more severe hit to their reputation and additional strategies may be needed to reduce the harm (Wei & Diddi, 2022).

The literature review also revealed a litany of strategies that can help organizations effectively communicate in a crisis. Kim (2022) found a relationship between timing and audience expectations of the demands a crisis can place on an organization; this knowledge allows crisis communicators to build strategies that can meet those expectations and in turn, bolster public support for the organization’s crisis response. Additionally, when it comes to apology versus sympathy in messaging, “apology was shown to be more effective in increasing more positive impressions of the speaker and the organization as well as increasing account acceptance” (Verčič et al., 2018, p. 34). Case studies demonstrated how leaders who understood the unique needs of their audiences, communicated regularly, and shared direct, transparent, and empathetic messages effectively helped their organizations navigate crises (Cristofol et al., 2020; Perepu & Mikkilineni, 2021; Schoofs et al., 2022). Culturally-responsive communication also emerged as a topic in the literature; with case studies showing the importance of understanding not just the current cultural nuances of an audience, but the history of the audience when crafting messages (Ponder et al., 2022). As diversity, equity, and inclusion continue to inform executive-level decision-making, it will be interesting to see how public relations practitioners adapt that mindset, and how academia studies it as a variable in crisis communication.

There is no shortage of academic literature that informs how practitioners should respond to a crisis. Case studies highlight the best and worst scenarios; content analyses make

connections, build themes, and offer points of comparison; and experiments test the impact and validity of theories. It seems the next logical step would be to show more precisely how practitioners can effectively operationalize and execute those strategies in the field. The goal of this research was to do just that: create concrete, tangible guides for practitioners who are crafting messages for their organizations. Chapter 3 will detail the research methodology of the study, while Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 will provide an overview of the study's results and a discussion about its significance and suggestions for future avenues of exploration.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Higher education institutions grapple with a number of different crises on any given day and administrative messaging has become the default strategy for responding. Today, the question is not whether to issue a statement but rather how quickly to respond and what language to use. Debates occur regarding the benefits and risks of high versus low transparency in messages (Gigliotti, 2020).

Study Objectives and Research Goals

This study sought to add to the body of research on transparency in crisis communication messaging in a higher education setting.

Hypotheses include:

H1: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the control message.

H2: The message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals will lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the control message.

H3: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the control message.

H4: The message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals will lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the control message.

H5: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals.

H6: The message employing elements of understanding will lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the message conveying elements of organizational mission and goals.

Research Design

This study used a mixed methods explanatory sequential experimental design, collecting quantitative data through an experiment, followed by the collection of qualitative data through focus groups. Explanatory sequential experimental design offers researchers the ability to have “qualitative data help explain in more detail the initial quantitative results” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 222). In this case, the experiment aimed to determine how elements of message transparency might foster more positive perceptions of trust, transparency, and organizational reputation. The focus group discussions provided a deeper understanding of which elements of the message readers found most reflective of a transparent message and impacted their perceptions of organizational credibility. As evidenced by the literature review in Chapter 2, this is a somewhat novel design for studies that explore SCCT; much of the research on crisis communication employed an experimental design without a second qualitative phase to help explain or dig deeper into the results (Clementson & Beatty, 2021; Holland et al., 2021; Kim, 2022; Wei & Diddi; 2022).

Researcher Positionality

The researcher is a Rochester, New York-based public relations professional with nearly 20 years of experience in higher education communications. This includes media relations, internal communications, brand strategy, and integrated marketing. The researcher has also served on crisis communication teams at three universities, handling media relations, crafting messaging, and offering executive leadership counsel including racially-based incidents, natural disasters, employee relations matters, student misconduct, and a global pandemic, among other crises.

It is also worth noting the researcher's past experience studying crises and scandal. While completing a master's degree, the researcher's thesis studied newspaper coverage of the Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle murder trial and the 1919 World Series gambling fix. Using a textual analysis, it examined differences in how hometown papers (*Chicago Daily Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times*) and a national paper (*New York Times*) covered the scandals. It answered questions about coverage of a scandal within the entertainment industry versus one within the sports arena, and also explored how reports revealed standards of morality in the 1920s. Results showed subtle differences in hometown and national newspaper coverage, but vast differences in reports about the entertainment scandal versus the sports scandal. The research also found that citizens with a vested interest in the outcome of the scandals served as strong voices of morality. This work provided the seed idea for a more advanced study of crises from a new perspective.

The researcher has also built a robust network of colleagues and peers within the industry, keeping a finger on the pulse of the latest trends, concerns, and opportunities within the industry. As a past president of the Rochester chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the researcher can anecdotally say that programming exploring crisis communication is among the most popular professional development opportunities offered. All this is to say, there is a keen interest in discovering ways to make crisis communication planning, execution, and evaluation easier and more efficient by creating evidence-based recommendations practitioners can use in the field.

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects lies in crafting the messages institutions issue during a crisis. A painstaking amount of time goes into analyzing every word for its potential impact and statements often go through a series of revisions before finalized and ready for distribution and publication. Transparency is often discussed during conversations about

crisis communication and can be operationalized via messaging. It seemed fitting to focus on this element. It should also be noted that PRSA stresses the ethical practice of public relations and in its Code of Ethics transparency is included as a cornerstone of sound ethics (PRSA Code of Ethics, n.d.). As crisis communication is such a large area of interest for practitioners, results of this study could be of interest to those working in the field, particularly but not limited to, professionals in higher education communications.

Research Context

The experiment was conducted using members of campus communities at colleges and universities in the United States. The experiment was administered in an online format using Qualtrics to present the manipulation as well as a questionnaire that measured respondents' reactions to the stimuli using Rawlins' (2008) Trust and Transparency Scale and Coombs and Holiday's (2002) Organizational Reputation Scale.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through targeted outreach using the researcher's robust network across several New York campuses and through involvement in national professional associations. The researcher sent an invitation to the study and asked colleagues to forward it to students and fellow employees. The researcher also attended several undergraduate classes in spring 2023 to discuss the experiment with potential participants.

Participant Consent and Confidentiality

The study was approved by St. John Fisher University's Institutional Review Board and followed the University's protocols for securing informed consent through an electronic form. All data (including transcriptions, notes, and survey results) is being stored on the University's

secure servers on a password-protected laptop. While the research could not promise anonymity, particularly in the focus groups, confidentiality of each participant is being protected.

Quantitative Design: Experiment

Participants accessed the experiment through an online link to Qualtrics, which included three stimuli and a questionnaire. Participants of the experiment were randomly assigned one of three news stories about a crisis that included the full text of a statement from the university involved. The full statement was manipulated to reflect (a) a baseline message that employed clarity and readability as elements of transparency (“control group”); (b) a message that employed clarity and readability plus aids in understanding (“understanding group”); or (c) clarity and readability plus reflected organizational mission and goals (“mission group”). The independent variable was the university message; the dependent variables were (a) trust and transparency and (b) organizational reputation. The independent variable manipulation was a combination of clarity (amount of jargon or inside language used) and readability (as defined by the Flesch–Kincaid tests) on their own or paired with “understanding” (information helps readers make sense of the situation) or “mission” (information connects organizational response to its mission and goals).

The researcher crafted a news story about a crisis occurring at a hypothetical university in New York. The news story and crisis mirror closely a personnel issue that occurred at a real university in the United States to make it as true-to-life as possible. The hypothetical university is a 4-year institution with a large residential undergraduate population. It draws students primarily from the Northeast with a growing national and international population.

The university is known for its rigorous, highly competitive academic programs, particularly its School of Architecture. It participates in Division II athletics and offers a host of

student clubs and organizations. In recent months, news has broken that the university is considering transitioning several of its athletics offerings into Division I programs.

The news story detailed the suspension of a well-known faculty member from the School of Architecture following a video published on YouTube ahead of the fall semester. The video was designed for students in an Architecture 101 course, explaining the goals for the course and expectations of the students. Four minutes of the 12-minute video included the professor's personal opinion on the university's decision to move into Division I athletics. In the video, the professor used profane language 10 times, two of which are in reference to university administrators. The news article shared a brief biography of the professor, excerpts from the video, and reactions from stakeholders (alumni). It also ran a full statement provided by the university and attributed to its president.

Following Coombs' (2007) SCCT crisis response strategy guidelines, this particular situation would be categorized into the accidental crisis cluster, as there is a claim from stakeholders (alumni) that the organization (the university) is operating in an inappropriate manner (suspending and eventually parting ways with the professor). The crisis response strategy flowchart prescribes using the diminish strategy because the crisis falls into the accident cluster and experiential respondents have no knowledge of the institution's history of crisis and have a neutral or positive current view of the organization (Coombs, 2007). When using the diminish strategies, responses should minimize the depth and breadth of the crisis, "lessen an organization's connection to the crisis," or attempt to have stakeholders "view the crisis less negatively" (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

The manipulation occurred in the full statement provided by the university. While all three used the diminish strategy, the statements differed in their elements of transparency.

Statement 1 (control group) served as the baseline message employing clarity and readability as elements of transparency. Statement 2 (understanding group) employed clarity and readability plus language that aided in audience understanding of the situation. Statement 3 (mission group) employed clarity and readability plus language that reflected organizational mission and goals. These characteristics were chosen from nine elements defined by Fisher and Hopp (2020) because they are relevant to the crisis at hand and could be effectively operationalized and manipulated in the experiment. Following a study by Holland et al. (2018) all of the news articles are the same length and adhere to best practices for journalism.

Experiment Instruments and Data Collection

A Qualtrics questionnaire was used to deploy the online experiment. Questions were drawn from Rawlins' (2008) Trust and Transparency Scale and Coombs and Holiday's (2002) Organizational Reputation Scale. Using a 7-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, participants answered 41 questions. Both scales were measured by calculating the mean score per item on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1=SD and 7=SA (Rawlins, 2008). For Rawlins' (2008) Trust and Transparency Scale, items were then grouped by overarching characteristics and constructs of trust and transparency (overall trust, competence, integrity, goodwill, overall transparency, participative, substantial information, accountability, and secrecy) as defined by Rawlins (2008, p. 11). The questionnaire also collected demographic information about the participants, including affiliation to their institution, institution type, education level, age, ethnic background, Hispanic origin, and gender identity. It also included an invitation to participate in the qualitative portion of the mixed methods study.

The researcher consulted with two seasoned public relations practitioners as a manipulation check to ensure that the news article and statement were as true-to-life as possible

and effectively operationalized the transparency concepts of clarity and readability; aids in understanding; and organizational mission.

Procedures for Experiment Data Analysis

To understand and make meaning of the data, the researcher explored the statistical significance, effect size, confidence interval, and practical significance of the data (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). Using SPSS, the researcher ran one-way ANOVA tests to see if there was statistical significance, and analyzed the eta squared (η^2) to measure the effect size (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). The literature review also found that crisis communication experiments do not consistently report the effect size; including this measurement is another way this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the topic.

The first set of hypotheses asks, “does the degree of transparency affect audience perceptions of trust and transparency and organizational reputation?” For the answer to be yes, both “understanding group” and “mission group” should produce statistically significant higher means than the “control group,” as those messages contain more elements of transparency. Based on past research findings (Fisher & Hopp, 2020; Rawlins, 2008), the researcher hypothesizes that the answer will be yes.

The second set of hypotheses, “which characteristic of transparency (aid in understanding versus reflects organizational mission) carries more weight in positively affecting audience perceptions of organizational trust, transparency, and reputation?” The researcher hypothesized that the understanding group would produce greater results than the mission group. Depending on the initial results, the researcher was prepared to conduct post hoc tests to help uncover if one experimental group has a statistically significant greater effect size than the other.

Quantitative Research Participants

Participants in the quantitative phase of the study included undergraduate and graduate students as well as employees of the higher education institutions—the most critical stakeholders on campus. While the goal was to have 300 participants in the study—Auger (2014) noted that power analysis indicates a study needs at least 269 to achieve acceptable power—the final number of participants was 171.

Of the 171 participants, 82 identified as current students (60 undergraduate; 22 graduate) and 88 identified as employees of a college or university (26 faculty; 62 staff or administrators) (Figure 3.1). An overwhelming majority of participants (82%) reported an affiliation to a private 4-year institution; 13% reported public 4-year and 4% reported an affiliation to a community college (Figure 3.2). Nearly 20% of respondents identified as Asian, Pacific Islander, Asian American, American Indian, Native American, African American, African Descent, Black, or of multiracial background, while 82% identified as White/Caucasian. More than 65% of respondents identified as female; 28% as male; 1% as gender variant, nonconforming, or transgender; and 3% preferring not to say or leaving the answer blank.

Figure 3.1

Participant Affiliation to Institution

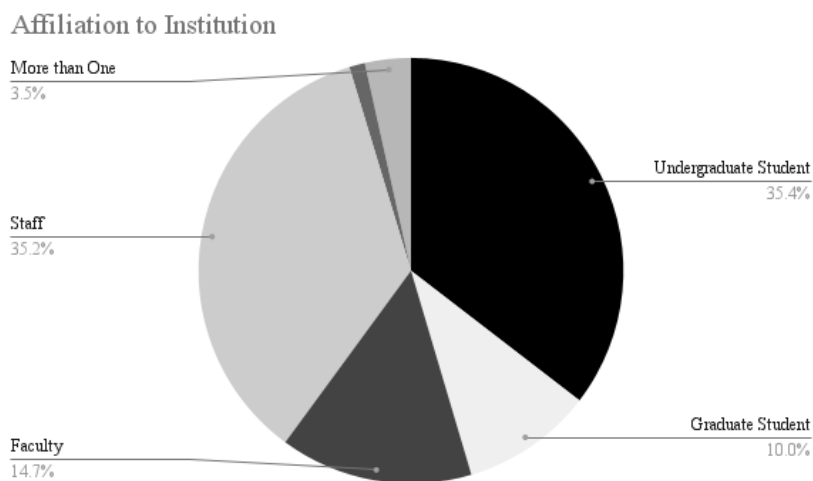


Figure 3.2

Participant Institution Type

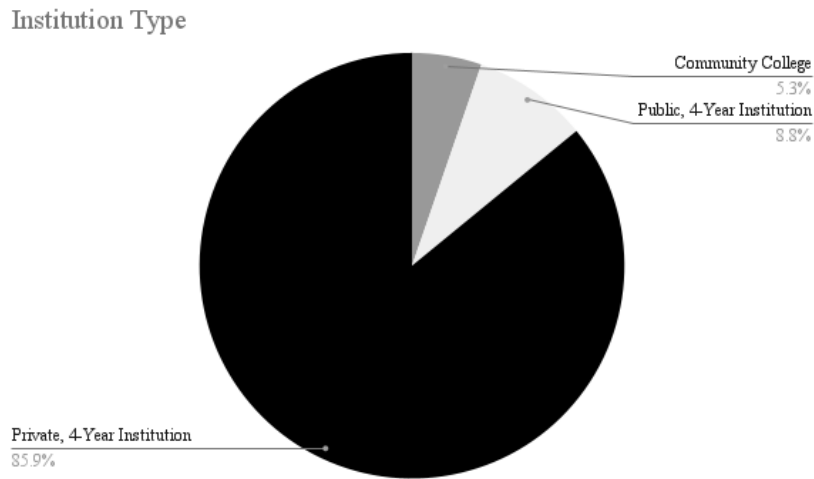


Table 3.1 and 3.2 show a summary of calculated frequencies across demographics and a summary of chi-square tests, which were run to provide evidence that intervention randomization happened across demographics.

Table 3.1

Frequencies of Participants by Stimuli Intervention

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Control	57.00	33.33	33.33	33.33
Aids in Understanding	57.00	33.33	33.33	66.67
Organizational Mission	57.00	33.33	33.33	100.00
Total	171.00	100.00	100.00	

Table 3.2*Frequencies of Demographics Across Interventions and Summary of Chi-Square Tests*

	Intervention			Total	χ^2	df	p-value
	Control	Understanding	Mission				
Affiliation to Institution					12.49	10.00	0.254
Undergraduate Student	29.80%	41.10%	35.10%	35.50%			
Graduate Student	15.80%	7.10%	7.00%	10.00%			
Faculty	12.30%	17.90%	14.00%	14.70%			
Staff	35.10%	33.90%	36.80%	35.30%			
None	0.00%	0.00%	3.50%	1.20%			
More than One	7.00%	0.00%	3.50%	3.50%			
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			
Institution Type					2.93	4	0.569
Community College	5.30%	5.40%	3.50%	4.70%			
Public, 4-Year							
Private, 4-Year	8.80%	12.50%	19.30%	13.50%			
Institution	86.00%	82.10%	77.20%	81.80%			
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			
Education					9.69	10	0.468
High School	3.50%	5.40%	1.80%	3.50%			
Some College	24.60%	23.20%	24.60%	24.10%			
Associate's Degree	1.80%	5.40%	0.00%	2.40%			
Bachelor's Degree	17.50%	16.10%	22.80%	18.80%			
Master's Degree	42.10%	32.10%	28.10%	34.10%			
Doctorate	10.50%	17.90%	22.80%	17.10%			
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			
Age					13.65	10	0.189
18 to 24	33.30%	42.90%	33.30%	36.50%			
25 to 34	10.50%	7.10%	10.50%	9.40%			
35 to 44	14.00%	25.00%	14.00%	17.60%			
45 to 54	19.30%	10.70%	31.60%	20.60%			
55 to 64	19.30%	10.70%	7.00%	12.40%			
65 and over	3.50%	3.60%	3.50%	3.50%			
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			

	Intervention			Total	χ^2	df	P-value
	Control	Understanding	Mission				
Ethnic Background					5.07	10	0.886
White/Caucasian	85.70%	83.60%	82.50%	83.90%			
African-American, African Descent, Black	5.40%	7.30%	5.30%	6.00%			
Asian, Pacific Islander, Asian-American	3.60%	3.60%	5.30%	4.20%			
American Indian, Native American	0.00%	1.80%	1.80%	1.2			
Other	0.00%	1.80%	3.50%	1.80%			
Prefer Not to Answer	5.40%	1.80%	1.80%	3.00%			
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			
Hispanic Origin					1.57	2	0.455
Yes	5.50%	5.40%	10.70%	7.20%			
No	94.50%	94.60%	89.30%	92.80%			
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			
Gender Identity					6.86	10	0.738
Female	68.40%	71.90%	61.40%	67.30%			
Male	24.60%	26.30%	33.30%	28.10%			
Transgender Male	1.80%	0.00%	0.00%	0.60%			
Gender Variant/Non-Conforming	0.00%	0.00%	1.80%	0.60%			
Not Listed	1.80%	0.00%	1.80%	1.20%			
Prefer Not to Answer	3.50%	1.80%	1.80%	2.30%			
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			

Qualitative Design: Focus Groups

Following completion of the experiment, the researcher hosted four focus groups via Zoom to glean further understanding of the respondents' perceptions of the messaging and the university. The researcher brought respondents from all three statement groups together for the focus groups to foster a deeper discussion about transparency in messages.

Focus Group Participants

From the list of participant volunteers, purposeful recruitment of focus group attendees was used. Participants were selected based on a number of criteria, led by which university

statement they were given to ensure a mix of participants from each group. Additional criteria included status as a student or employee to ensure representation across both.

The researcher sorted the list of focus group volunteers first by statement type, then by status at the institution. From there, emails were issued to all participants who matched those criteria inviting them to participate in one of two focus group sessions.

There were 21 participants across the four focus groups. Eighteen participants were employees of higher education institutions (17 staff members and one faculty member) and three participants were students (two undergraduates and one graduate student). The focus group attendees included 16 females and five males. The majority of participants were from Western New York, but individuals also represented Nevada and Utah. The respondents represented small liberal arts colleges, private research institutions, and a land grant state university. Figure 3.3 is a visual portrayal of focus group participants, while Table 3.3 offers a demographic description of the participants in the qualitative phase of the study.

Figure 3.3

Visual Description of Qualitative Participant Demographics

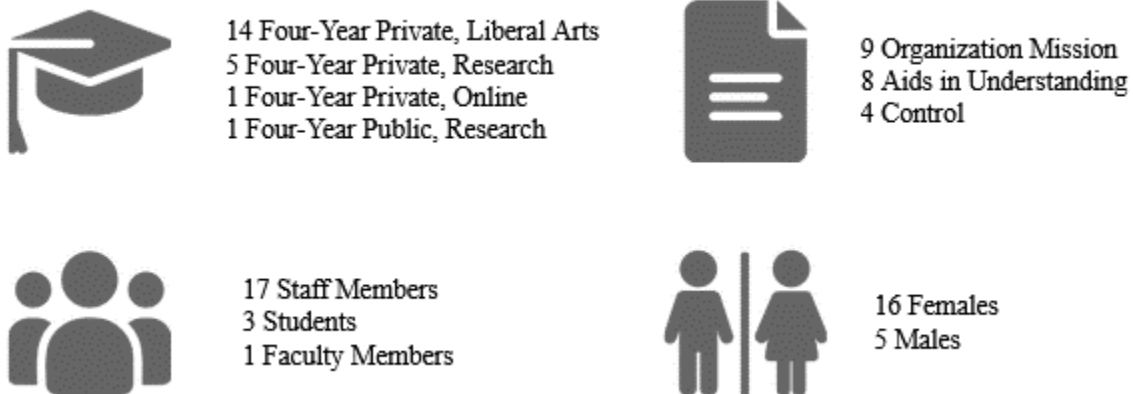


Table 3.3*Qualitative Participant Demographics*

Participant Code	Affiliation to Institution	Institution Type	Institution Unit	Assigned Stimuli
2001	Faculty Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Humanities	Organization Mission
2002	Graduate Student	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	N/A - Student	Organization Mission
2003	Staff Member	4-Year Public, Land-Grant Research University	Communications	Organization Mission
2004	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts College	Communications	Control
2005	Undergraduate Student	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	N/A - Student	Aids in Understanding
2006	Undergraduate Student	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	N/A - Student	Organization Mission
2007	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Student Affairs	Aids in Understanding
2008	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Library	Aids in Understanding
2009	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Research University	Communications	Control
2010	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Student Affairs	Aids in Understanding
2011	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Business	Aids in Understanding
2012	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Research University	Communications	Organization Mission
2013	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Student Affairs	Organization Mission
2014	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Academic Affairs	Aids in Understanding
2015	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Safety and Security	Organization Mission
2016	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Research University	Advancement	Aids in Understanding
2017	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Research University	Communications	Control
2018	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Research University	Advancement	Organization Mission
2019	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Online University	Communications	Control
2020	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Academic Affairs	Organization Mission
2021	Staff Member	4-Year Private, Liberal Arts University	Academic Affairs	Aids in Understanding

Focus Group Instruments

Participants of the focus groups were asked a series of questions to better understand how they perceived the university in crisis and what elements of the message influenced their perceptions. The focus group discussion began with general questions about crisis communication messaging, including what makes a message more effective to them. It also asked for examples of good or bad crisis messaging that they had seen.

The second half of the discussion focused on the three statements from the online experiment. Participants had the chance to reread the news story, as well as each of the three statements (Statement 1: control; Statement 2: understanding; and Statement 3: mission). They were then asked if they felt that the university was being fully transparent, if there were specific phrases that felt more or less transparent, and if any parts of the statements evoked opinions or impressions of the university.

Lastly, participants were asked if they preferred one statement over the others as being more transparent or better at responding to the situation.

Focus Group Data Collection

The focus groups were recorded via Zoom. The researcher also took notes and recorded observations during the focus group.

Procedures for Focus Group Data Analysis

The focus group recordings were transcribed using Rev Transcription Service. The researcher first engaged in provisional, or a priori coding, using a preset list of codes derived from the literature review, research questions, and questionnaire. The researcher-generated codes were revised (deleted or expanded) as the process unfolded, and the researcher looked for patterns and relationships to how the codes emerged in the transcript (Saldaña, 2021, p. 213).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that researchers often work inductively to find emerging themes and then deductively to find additional evidence to support them; for this study the research followed that directive when coding. During the second round of coding, the researcher used open coding to examine the participants' own language for similarities and differences to the provisional code by noting certain "words or phrases that seem to call for bolding" (Saldaña, 2021, p.139). This allowed the researcher to identify emerging patterns within the codes that illuminated the findings of the experiment and gleaned a better understanding of how elements of the messages aided in, detracted from, or had no effect on participants' perceptions of its credibility in their own words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To ensure intra-rater reliability, Creswell and Creswell (2018) also encourage researchers to memo throughout the coding experience; provide a "rich, thick description" of the findings to add to their validity; address any bias the research may have related to the study; present any contrary data; and use "peer debriefing" (pp. 200-201).

Chapter Summary

Employing a mixed methods explanatory sequential design, the study aimed to advance current research on transparency within the field of higher education communication. The study used an experiment, collecting data through a Qualtrics questionnaire, and focus groups, collecting data through audio/visual recording and notetaking. By blending quantitative and qualitative methods, the study was able to provide statistically sound findings about transparency in messaging while using focus groups to explain how respondents felt about different elements of the messages. A somewhat novel approach for communication research on this topic (none of the studies in the literature review employ this design), the mixed methodology advanced SCCT

research by using the same sample to explain the statistical results through a discussion of the respondents' perceptions of the messages (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the study's results, making connections between the qualitative results of the experiment and an analysis of themes that emerged from the focus groups. Chapter 5 will discuss how the findings address or answer each of the research questions, compare results to previous research, explore the significance of the findings, and offer suggestions for future avenues of exploration.

Chapter 4: Results

This research explored transparency in crisis communication messaging through the lens of Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (1995) using Fisher and Hopps' (2020) definition of transparency. It employed a mixed methods explanatory sequential experimental design, and collected quantitative data through an experiment in phase one, followed by the collection of qualitative data through focus groups in phase two. The research centered around how three elements of transparency (clarity and readability; aids in understanding; and reflects mission and goal) could potentially impact a reader's perception of a message and organization (Fisher and Hopp, 2020). Results of each phase of the study are as follows.

Quantitative Results

To understand the data, the researcher explored the statistical significance, effect size, confidence interval, and practical significance of the data (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). Using SPSS, the researcher ran one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) tests to see if there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores of each characteristic of Rawlin's (2008) Trust and Transparency Scale and Coombs and Holiday's (2002) Organizational Reputation Scale. Additionally, Bonferroni tests were run for each scale as an added check for statistical significance. None were reported.

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis posited that the message that aids understanding (Statement 2) would lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the control message (Statement 1). The one-way ANOVA found that there was no statistically significant difference between the two.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 theorized that the message reflecting organizational mission and goals would lead to increased trust and transparency compared to the control message. The calculations found no statistically significant difference between the mean scores for both messages.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 sought to compare the message that aids in understanding against the control message, this time positing that Statement 2 would lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the Statement 1. Again, the one-way ANOVA calculations showed no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the messages

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 theorized that the message reflecting organizational mission and goals would lead to greater organizational reputation compared to the control message. This difference was again found to be statistically insignificant.

Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6

The final two hypotheses of the study posited that the message that aids in understanding would lead to increased trust and transparency and greater organizational reputation compared to the message reflecting organizational mission and goals. In each of the calculations, no statistically significant difference was found between the mean scores of the two statements.

Summary of Mean Scores

Table 4.1 shows the mean scores and effect sizes of the nine characteristics of Rawlins' (2008) Trust and Transparency Scale, and Table 4.2. shows the mean scores and effect sizes of the five components of Coombs and Holiday's (2002) Organizational Reputation Scale.

As the literature review found inconsistencies in the number of crisis communication experiments that reported the effect size, the researcher also included eta squared (η^2) calculations in Table 4.1 (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). Looking at this measurement adds a layer of data to the results. In all calculations, even if the p-value had been statistically significant, the overall effect size would have been miniscule.

As none of the one-way ANOVA tests reported statistically significant differences among the three messages, no post-hoc tests were necessary.

Table 4.1

One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary for Trust and Transparency Scale

Characteristic	Control			Understanding			Mission			F	P	η^2
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD			
Overall Trust	57	3.78	1.22	57	3.66	1.14	57	3.66	1.21	0.22	0.80	0.003
Competence	57	4.41	1.12	57	4.50	1.13	57	4.73	1.02	1.28	0.28	0.015
Integrity	57	4.20	1.23	56	4.30	1.16	57	4.39	1.24	0.37	0.70	0.004
Goodwill	57	3.87	1.37	57	3.95	1.35	57	3.98	1.39	0.11	0.90	0.001
Transparency	57	3.76	1.45	57	3.89	1.49	57	4.11	1.44	0.85	0.43	0.01
Participative	57	3.41	1.32	56	3.52	1.48	57	3.58	1.46	0.20	0.81	0.002
Substantial Info	57	4.19	1.18	56	4.18	1.34	57	4.25	1.23	0.05	0.95	0.001
Accountability	56	3.35	1.30	55	3.42	1.30	57	3.69	1.20	1.18	0.31	0.014
Secrecy	56	3.35	1.21	56	3.30	1.07	57	3.47	1.26	0.33	0.71	0.004

Table 4.2

One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary for Organizational Reputation Scale

Characteristic	Control			Understanding			Mission			F	P	η^2
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD			
Organization is Concerned	57	5.00	1.27	56	4.89	1.34	57	4.47	1.28	0.77	0.46	2.60
Org is Dishonest	57	4.33	1.42	56	4.57	1.51	57	4.63	1.33	1.41	0.50	2.83
I Do Not Trust Org	56	3.73	1.50	56	3.84	1.57	57	4.19	1.71	3.30	0.28	6.59
I Believe in the Org	55	4.05	1.13	56	4.41	1.52	57	4.35	1.43	1.19	0.34	4.40
Org is not Concerned	55	4.56	1.30	56	4.55	1.66	57	4.50	1.31	0.05	0.98	0.10

Quantitative Analysis Summary

Chapter 4 began with an analysis of quantitative data collected through an experiment. The results calculated the mean averages on a 7-point scale for three messages (control and two interventions) comparing nine characteristics of trust and transparency and five characteristics of organizational reputation. No statistically significant differences were found across all comparisons. The next section of Chapter 4 will discuss qualitative results.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative portion of the study sought to interview participants of the experiment to understand better the data. In a way, the focus groups served as an opportunity to recreate the type of “water cooler talk” that might organically break out in classrooms, offices, and quads across campus following an institutional response to a crisis. It allowed for the participants to read more closely the statements and talk with colleagues about what the messages meant, what might be missing from the messages, and how it made them feel about the crisis response and institution. The qualitative portion of the study was particularly useful because the quantitative results were not significant. The focus groups helped the researcher understand what elements could have been added to the statements to increase participant perceptions of trust, transparency, and organizational reputation.

Following the focus groups, the researcher first engaged in provisional, or a priori coding of the transcripts, using a pre-set list of codes derived from the literature review, research questions, and questionnaire. The “researcher-generated codes” were revised throughout the coding process, and a second round of coding using the new emergent codes was conducted. From those codes, the researcher developed three themes that may help explain the lack of

statically significant differences in the quantitative results. Table 4.3 is a summary of codes and themes.

Table 4.3

Codes/Themes – Crisis Communication Messages

Provisional Codes	Emergent Codes	Codes by Category	Themes
Trustworthy	Action	First and foremost, respondents feel crisis messaging should inform and instruct; is there urgency to the situation; should there be an action on the part of the reader; why do we need to know this?; it should be clear, straightforward, and delivered in a timely manner	Information and Instruction First
Transparent	Creates Questions		
Fair	Emotions		
Clear	Policies; procedures; outcome		
Straightforward	Unnecessary		
Credible	Audience		
Informative	Comfort		
Honest	Specific Details		
Untrustworthy	Acknowledging situation		
Secretive	Instructions		
Misleading	Combining Two	Specific details of policies, procedures, outcomes create comfort; lack of details can feel vague and breed skepticism or impressions of secrecy; it can also create more questions for audience; there is a desire for organizations to be upfront when they are unable to disclose information (for whatever reason)	Comfort in Details
Unclear	Statements		
Vague	If you can't say something, say that you can't say it		
Skeptical	Tell me what I need to know		
Confusing	Timing		
Dishonest	Authentic/Genuine		
Reputation			
Values			
Mission			
Blame			
Denial		Respondents felt values-first statements could lack authenticity or genuineness in institutions; values-only language can seem “frilly” and have difficulty cutting through “clutter.” respondents suggested leading with the action of policies, procedures, and outcomes then transition to values-based language	Frill Needs Facts
		Target audiences - know who you are talking to and what information they need; acknowledge what audience might be feeling; avoid jargon that might not resonate with different audiences; who does your audience want to hear from most; internal versus external audiences - and do those separations even exist anymore?	Tending to Audiences

Theme 1: Information and Instructions First

In both a general discussion about crisis communication messaging and when specifically talking about the three hypothetical messages from the experiment, focus group participants echoed each other in expressing the desire for clear, concise information. For example, one participant, a communications professional at a 4-year institution, noted that instructions were among the first things she looked for in a statement:

The most important thing I think I look for is instructions on how do I, as a reader or an individual, what do I need to do to resolve a situation or respond to it? Just information—clear information on what I need to do as a member of the university community (Focus Group 1, 54-55).

Another participant agreed, adding that she assessed messages to understand if there was some action she needed to take, or if it was something she only needed to be aware of (Focus Group 1).

Several participants referenced their experiences receiving messages from organizations during the pandemic. Messaging that offered explicit instructions or included resources for additional information were looked on more positively than messages with less detail. For example, a university employee who had children attending different colleges noted the differences between each institution's communication efforts:

The confidence and the mistrust that some of the communication created, there wasn't the candor, there wasn't that transparency with some of the communication. And so, it created a sense of mistrust between administration and the student. My kids were kind of all over the place with how they felt about the current institution that they were attending. And so, I think, I guess what I took away from that experience was that how even just a communication about "this is what's going on, this is how we're handling it, and this is what you can expect," can create relationships between the person receiving that information and the person giving that information (Focus Group 2, 105-112).

A faculty member, staff member, and undergraduate student each noted that messages including links to resources pertaining the issue, such as crisis counseling, are helpful as well. The faculty member, a professor in the humanities, added that "concrete action in almost any

scenario would seem good” (Focus Group 2, 102-103), particularly when it comes to issues in the political arena. For this participant, messages showing how an institution is acting to advance a cause or advocate for change is important.

Timing and its relation to transparency emerged as a subtheme when participants were discussing their general reactions to crisis messaging. Two communications professionals each spoke about the challenges of issuing statements in a timely manner, particularly when details are slim. One participant, a seasoned communications professional working at a research institution, voiced the debate that often takes place internally:

Do we let them know immediately something’s up and we’re going to get back to [them]? Or do we take our time and do we put thought into this? It’s a question that always comes up after we do some kind of announcement (Focus Group 2, 125-127).

Echoing that sentiment, a communications professional in Focus Group 3 added that timely messages can be impacted by external challenges beyond an institution’s control:

Acknowledging that as others have said, that we don’t have all of the information or we won’t have information until we’ve notified next of kin, or we may not be able to give you that information because it’s a personnel matter and the media and other external stakeholders may not like the answer, but if we can give them the reason behind the answer, it’s less likely to be contentious because it’s not personal. You’re fighting a process and that process is there to protect people. Now whether those people should or shouldn’t be protected is not mine to judge. But yeah, I think timeliness and transparency is a big issue (Focus Group 3, 97-103).

Offering a student perspective, an undergraduate said that timing is important to mitigate the spread of rumors that inevitably spring up among students across campus (Focus Group 3).

Theme 2: Comfort in Details

A second theme of the focus group discussions centered around the amount of information provided in each of the statements. Participants gravitated to the phrase “policies and procedures,” and “due process,” linking them favorably to the institution. For example, a participant in Focus Group 1 noted:

I liked the second one where it said exactly what was done—when it was like we had the internal investigation based on our process, they adhered to it so that we [are] assured that he received due process (Focus Group 1, 273-275).

The more detail provided, the more comfortable participants seemed to feel about the crisis resolution and institution. For example, one person said that it “seemed like the statement [Statement 2] was looking at the rights of the professor and I can’t remember it perfectly right now, but I thought that was comforting” (Focus Group 1, 240-241).

The word “comfort” was used across the focus groups, often in relation to feelings of how the university acted. A participant from Focus Group 1 agreed, adding:

Yeah, I think if I was an employee, I would want to see due process just because I would want to make sure that if I ever did anything that was questionable that there was going to be a due process for myself or my colleagues (Focus Group 1, 328-330).

A third participant, a staff member who works in academic affairs, noted that reading the facts spoke to her personality:

I’m just a very factual person, so as long as I have that as a paper trail, if it is something that could be paper-trailed, definitely having that in an email stating this isn’t something we just made up in the moment, but this is a policy or procedure that we know that we

have followed in the past and we are going to continue following it (Focus Group 1, 129-132).

And in Focus Group 4, a participant felt that the information leant itself well to transparency saying, “I think that middle clause in Statement 2 probably does the best in terms of a kind of transparency just in that it seems to mention the most about the process” (Focus Group 4, 169-171).

While focus group participants did look favorably on several of the phrases from Statement 2, there was a healthy discussion about the desire for more specific detail. For example:

I liked in Statement 2, the middle paragraph was a little bit more straightforward instead of just saying the human resources policies and faculty statutes ... [but] they didn't actually share those policies, which would've been great (Focus Group 3, 219-221).

In Focus Group 4, that idea was reiterated by a participant who noted that the use of passive voice created a lack of clarity around who was motivating each decision or action and highlighted the lack of specificity in the messages:

[Statement 2 and Statement 3] make reference to the faculty assembly faculty statutes, but the statements never actually specify what those statutes are, or they don't give a real sense of what kinds of statutes were the ones that were considered or which this particular professor was considered to be in violation of (Focus Group 4, 217-222).

Calling those statements “vague” in nature, several participants noted that they can create more questions for readers:

It unfortunately leads you to draw your own conclusions on what happened and understanding that there's only so much that can be said because of privacy issues (Focus Group 1, 170-173).

While another participant put it more bluntly, "it sort of raises the question and then doesn't answer it" (Focus Group 2, 365).

Theme 3: Frill Needs Facts

Several focus group participants noted feeling good about the values language included in Statement 3. For example, one participant said, "I did like the third statement, the beginning where it reminded people [that] we do allow for free speech and we're not trying to stop people from doing that, but we had to do this investigation" (Focus Group 1, 276-278).

Both undergraduate students, who attend a small, liberal arts institution, noted that they would have liked to receive Statement 3 because it was "expressing the values and why there is action being taken about it" (Focus Group 3, Line 209).

The faculty member added that when it came to the institution's reputation, the third statement did the most to position itself in a good light:

I mean in the sense that it sort of opens specifically with a kind of value statement—values of free speech, open and honest discussion. Those strike me as ones that give the strongest very, very deliberate stated impression of the institution (Focus Group 4, 323-324).

One participant noted that she often assessed statements to see if an institution's actions align with her own values, but as an employee and parent, she valued information and instruction higher (Focus Group 1). Another noted that it didn't divulge enough information in comparison to Statement 2: "Least transparent to me is Statement 3. The other two are so straightforward.

They do say we conducted an internal review and we decided to part ways; they could have said a little bit more about it” (Focus Group 3, 193-195).

The faculty member from Focus Group 4 noted the difference in Statement 2 and Statement 3 was the action versus the values:

I would say that the impression that Statement 1 and 2 give contra 3 is they give an impression of more action, like immediate action, that this institution moves very quickly to address things. Whereas, the third one does not necessarily privilege that idea. It privileges the idea that it holds values first and then it acts on them. Whereas I think 1 and 2 are more like “we as a university, we act first, we move very quickly to address problems,” and I am not sure I feel equipped to make a claim about which I think is necessarily preferable (Focus Group 4, 238-243).

A participant from Focus Group 3 who is a communications professional, provided her own assessment of which is preferable: “That’s sometimes the delicate balance of crisis communications ... you want to acknowledge feelings, but at the end of the day, you have to provide facts and actionable information” (Focus Group 3, 252-253).

While Statement 3 did evoke positive feelings for participants, they felt it was overwhelmingly as less transparent than Statement 2. Overall, participants noted preferring Statement 2 (understanding) to Statement 1 (control) and Statement 3 (mission) in terms of transparency. Informally providing an answer to Hypotheses 1, 3, 5, and 6, of the 15 participants who responded to the question “Do you prefer one statement over the others as being more transparent?” 10 participants said Statement 2, three participants said Statement 3, and two participants said none of the statements felt transparent.

Combining Statement 2 and Statement 3

Across three focus groups, participants organically said they would like to see elements of Statement 3 mixed into Statement 2, but on its own Statement 3 couldn't "pass the test" (Focus Group 2, 407). One participant summed it up by saying, "It ... leads you into thinking that there were procedures that were followed in this and those procedures are all connected to the mission of the university" (Focus Group 1, 355-360). In Focus Group 3, one participant had a similar assessment for Statement 2 and Statement 3: "I definitely think a combination of two and three would've been better ... where it was a bit more straightforward, had the transparency ... including some of that value statement in two, that's what was missing ..." (Focus Group 3, 231-234).

Qualitative Analysis Summary

The 21 focus group participants provided additional insight into which elements of the three statements increased their perceptions of trust and transparency and organizational reputation. From a general discussion of crisis communication messaging to a line-by-line analysis of each statement, focus group participants felt that clear and concise instructions and information should come first; specific details that help answer questions create feelings of comfort and perceptions of trust; and values language feels more authentic when it follows detailed information.

Connected Mixed Methods Data Analysis

As this study employed a mixed methods explanatory sequential experimental design, it is important to synthesize both the quantitative and qualitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Table 4.4 summarizes data from both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study together, and offers a connected analysis of the results.

Table 4.4

Summary of Connected Mixed Methods Data Analysis

Quantitative Results	Qualitative Results	Connected Analysis
There was no statistically significant difference in trust, transparency, and organizational reputation between the understanding group compared to the control group	Focus group participants preferred Statement 2 over Statement 1, noting the additional details made it feel more transparent.	When read as standalone statements, Statement 1 and Statement 2 may have been too similar in nature to produce statistically significant results among quantitative respondents.
There was no statistically significant difference in trust, transparency, and organizational reputation between the mission group and the control.	There was no strong preference for either statement over the other in the focus groups, though participants debated whether Statement 3 felt genuine or authentic.	Both statements may have lacked the details to push one over the other in terms of trust, transparency, and organizational reputation.
There was no statistically significant difference in trust, transparency, and organizational reputation between the understanding group compared to the mission group.	Focus group participants preferred Statement 2 over Statement 3, overwhelmingly so.	When participants had the opportunity to compare the two messages side-by-side, the message that led with details performed stronger than the message that led with values.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 provided both the quantitative and qualitative results from the research and also offered a connected analysis of the two.

For both Rawlin's (2008) Trust and Transparency Scale and Coombs and Holiday's (2002) Organizational Reputation Scale, no statistically significant differences in mean averages were found across the three stimuli. In summary, none of the statements were found to be more effective at increasing perceptions of trust and transparency or organizational reputation among the 171 participants of the experiment. Additionally, any differences that might have been identified would not have demonstrated a large effect size, either.

Qualitative results were drawn from four focus groups with students, faculty, and staff who also participated in the quantitative study.

The researcher engaged in provisional coding using a preset list of codes based on literature review and questionnaire and then conducted open coding to find patterns and develop categories using the participants' own words. Through this process, three themes were developed: information and instruction first, comfort in details, and frill needs facts.

First and foremost, respondents felt crisis messaging should inform and instruct; letting stakeholders know if there is urgency to the situation or specific actions that should be taken. Messaging should be clear, straightforward, and delivered in a timely manner.

Participants suggested that specific details regarding policies, procedures, and outcomes create a sense of comfort in a situation and its resolution, while a lack of details can breed skepticism or impressions of secrecy. Vague language can also create more questions for audience. Focus group participants also said they would like organizations to be upfront when they are unable to disclose information, and explain why.

Lastly, respondents said that values-first statements can appear to lack authenticity or genuineness, instead seeming "frilly" or creating "clutter." Respondents suggested messages should lead with the action of policies, procedures, and outcomes then transition to values-based language.

Chapter 5 will discuss implications for the findings, detail several of the study's limitations, and offer recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Crisis management expert Stephen Fink (2002) noted that “managers should understand that anytime you’re not in a crisis, you are instead in a precrisis, or prodromal, mode” (p. 7). For leaders and communications managers in higher education, this can feel especially true. A study of news articles in two higher education publications over a 4-year span turned up more than 1,000 articles detailing different crises happening on campuses and those are just the ones that rose to a national level (Gigliotti, 2020). On a given day, higher education leaders are dealing with myriad situations and issues that impact their institutions in ways that can be deemed a “crisis.”

The focus of this study was to create concrete, tangible guides for practitioners who are crafting crisis response messages for their colleges and universities. The strategic use of transparency in crisis messaging is a rich topic of exploration. The study sought to understand if certain elements of transparency have a greater positive effect on perceptions of trust and organizational reputation than others. Specifically, the study isolated two characteristics of Fisher and Hopp’s (2020) transparent messaging definition in a quantitative experiment to see if there were any significant differences in perceptions of an organization’s transparency and reputation when using one statement versus another. The study followed that experiment with a series of focus groups to gain deeper insight into reader perceptions of specific phrases within each statement and its effect on their opinions of the institution.

The first section of Chapter 5 will provide an interpretation of the study’s findings and will offer a discussion of their implications. The second section of Chapter 5 will detail the

limitations of the research and provide several recommendations for future scholarship. The chapter will close with a summary.

Interpretations and Implications of Findings

As stated in Chapter 4, results of the quantitative portion of the study reported no statistically significant differences among any of the statements for both the trust and transparency and organizational reputation scales. This section of Chapter 5 will offer possible suggestions for why that was the case, including the lack of a comparison design to the experiment and a possible lack of distinct language between the three statements.

Could Comparison Produce Significant Perceptions?

The quantitative experiment asked participants to read one of three versions of a news article containing a statement from the hypothetical university, then respond to a series of questions. In contrast, the focus group participants had access to all three statements and were able to compare the language of each. This created a healthy debate about phrases that stood out as more or less transparent; and as noted in Chapter 4, participants noted preferring Statement 2 (understanding) to Statement 1 (control) and Statement 3 (mission) in terms of transparency. This suggests that giving the experiment participants all three statements and asking them questions to compare the levels of transparency, trust, and organizational reputation could have produced statistically significant results.

Could More Distinct Language Produce Significant Perceptions?

Across all four focus groups, participants picked up on the themes of both intervention statements, identifying Statement 2 as employing informational language to aid in the understanding of the university's process and actions and Statement 3 as seeking to connect its decision to its values and mission. However, they also noted—particularly in the case of

Statement 2—they would have preferred the language go even further in offering details. This suggests that perhaps the language in the statements were not strong enough in distinctly operationalizing the elements of transparency to garner a statistically significant difference in perceptions of trust, transparency, and organizational reputation.

Mixed Methods Add Layer of Data

One advantage of this study is the value of its mixed methods explanatory design. The qualitative data from the focus group discussions reinforced the literature on crisis communication and best practices within the profession in a way that the quantitative data did not. This layer of data is often missing from other experimental studies in the literature review. Even those that have statistically significant quantitative findings could benefit from the additional data and analysis that result from qualitative methods. In the case of this research, the qualitative findings provided support for SCCT, particularly the guidance to lead with instructing messaging first and reputation-building messaging second (Coombs, 2016).

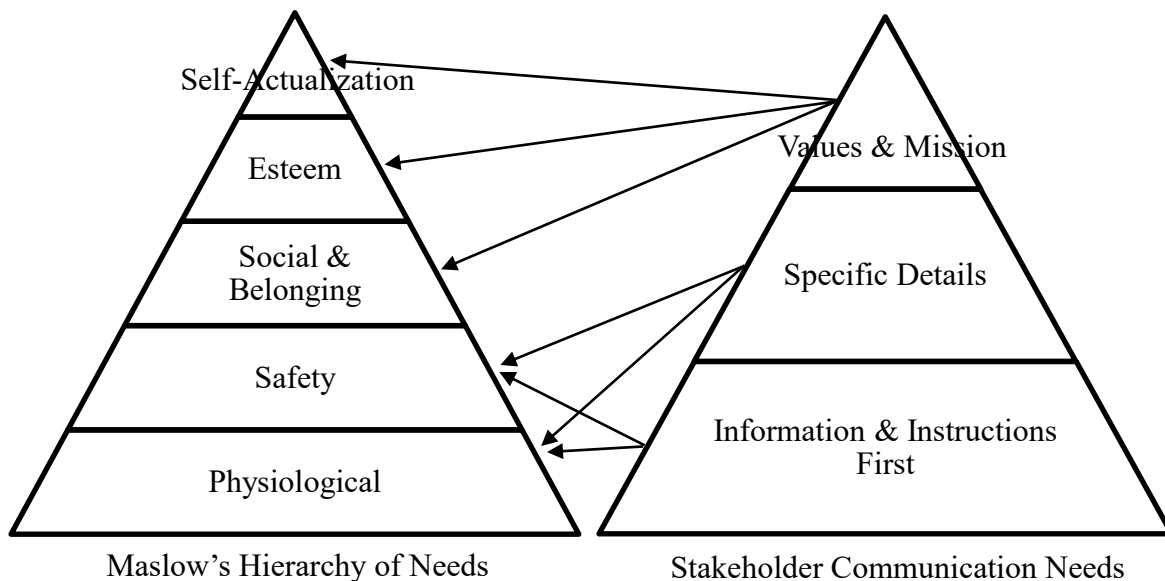
Focus Group Participants Needs Mirror Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In voicing their preferences for what a crisis message should include, the participants of the focus groups were almost unified in their desire for information and instruction first. While attending to information and instruction may be the obvious course of action when handling crises where there are direct threats to physical safety or well-being (such as natural disasters, active shooters, or pandemics), the focus group feedback showed instructions and information were important for a crisis that dealt with a relatively benign personnel issue, as well. Their desire for information and instruction first, bolstered by specific details, is line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a "widely accepted and enormously influential ... managerial practice" (Bolman & Deal, 2021, p. 126). Privileging information, facts, and instruction above values and

mission mirrors the hierarchy of needs, where humans tend to their physical needs and safety before their sense of belong, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Figure 5.1 shows a representation of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs positioned next to the needs articulated by focus group participants, offering a visual look at how the two align. This serves as a visual model for communications professionals and institutional leaders that stresses prioritizing facts and details above and before language that aligns with mission and values.

Figure 5.1

Alignment of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Stakeholder Communication Needs



Note. The left pyramid was adopted from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, as described and portrayed in *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (7th ed.) by L. Bolman and T. Deal, 2021. Copyright 2021 by Jossey-Bass. The right pyramid was created by the author.

Key Learnings

The primary goal of the study was to test elements of transparency for effectiveness in increasing perceptions of message and organizational trust, transparency, and reputation. A secondary goal was to examine the findings and attempt to develop evidence-based guidelines

for public relations practitioners to use in the field. In analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher has developed the following five recommendations and learnings, several of which reinforce best practices from the literature:

Audiences are Savvy

One focus group participant, a retired vice president of communications, advised to always start with the audience and anticipate what questions they will have (Focus Group 2). A student in Focus Group 3 also gave voice to this concept, adding that it's important to "know who you're talking to and what they would relate to most" (112-114). Additionally, focus group participants were able to pick up on the themes of Statement 2 and Statement 3, understanding that the second was designed to provide more details about the situation while the third was aiming to connect the institutions decision to its mission. Communicators should keep in mind that audiences have been over inundated with crisis communication messaging and are savvy, can often read between the lines, and know what they want from such messages.

Internal Communication No Longer Exists

Another participant said that even if communicators are able to pinpoint their audiences, there must be a recognition that college campus stakeholders are communicating with each other: "anything you send to one group, you have to assume they might send it [to each other] and to the media" (Focus Group 3, 259-262).

While keeping in mind the unique needs of each audience group, communicators should provide consistent information to all stakeholders to avoid confusion and frustration.

Don't Bury the Action

Lead with instructions or the action that the institution took to resolve the issue. As one participant said, "it's going to sound a lot more direct and ... a lot less defensive" (Focus Group

2, 378). That goes hand-in-hand with the phrase, “just tell me what happened,” which arose several times across the focus groups as participants voiced frustration about statements that do not lead with facts first (Focus Group 2, 288; Focus Group 4, 274-275). Next, lean into strong, supporting language to position the institution in crisis; but not before or at the expense of facts and details.

Be Specific

Identify the policy, law, issue at the center of the crisis, and provide details on its resolution. As was noted in Chapter 4, participants of the focus groups praised institutional messages that included links to resources or provided concise, concrete detail. If you cannot say something (because of the law, policy, unavailable pieces of information), say that you are unable to say it and why. As one participant said, it can be as simple as “acknowledging how people may be feeling, what they’re experiencing and saying, we understand that you’re frustrated. Here’s what we can tell you, and we will continue to add information as we can” (Focus Group 3, 108-110).

The retired communications professional from Focus Group 2 had a similar opinion, adding, “I agree completely with the principle of if you can’t say something, don’t avoid it. Just say upfront that you can’t say it. I think that carries a lot more credibility and is more transparent” (431-433).

Fink (2002) said that “what you say that counts. And in crisis communications, what you say and how you say it are essential tools to effective overall crisis management” (p. 116). This study also found that what you do not say can be as revealing as what you do say. For one participant in Focus Group 2, silence during a crisis can be an indication that there is a problem

with leadership, while others noted it can cause readers to make incorrect assumptions, cause rumors, or worse yet, foster frustration (Focus Group 3, Focus Group 4).

Be Authentic and Genuine

Show empathy and acknowledge the feelings of those affected by the situation.

Audiences look for facts and remember tone. One participant said that “there is an appreciation for a ... true leadership voice delivering a message” (Focus Group 1, 118-119). They went on to add that the most memorable examples of good crisis communication included a “sense of caring ... I don’t remember the facts and the details, but I do remember that kind of tone” (Focus Group 1, 186-191). A second participant, also from Focus Group 1, agreed, adding that authenticity, and “honest ... genuine ... heartfelt ... and sincere” are important features in a crisis message (153). And, remember, every message is an opportunity to build relationships between an institution and its stakeholders (Fink, 2002).

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This section of Chapter 5 will explore several of the study’s limitations related to manipulation checks, sample size, and the study’s quantitative design. It will also offer recommendations for further research based on these limitations, as well as other areas of research worth exploring.

Pilot Study

The researcher engaged in a manipulation check of the stimuli by consulting with two crisis communication professionals. However, a pilot study could have served as an additional check on the distinctness of each message and their ability to produce statistically significant reactions. Based on the results of a pilot study, necessary adjustments could have been made to the language if needed (Auger, 2014). In the case of this study, a recommendation for future

research would be to conduct a pilot study prior to conducting the research study as an added check on the distinct operationalization of each specific element of transparency.

Sample Size

The study did not obtain a large enough sample size to achieve strong power; therefore, any statistically significant findings would still have reported very minuscule effect size (Adams & Lawrence, 2018). Several studies from the literature review utilized participant recruitment services, including MTurk (Holland et al., 2021; Kim, 2022; Wei & Diddi, 2022) or United Sample Company (Auger, 2014) to achieve larger sample sizes. While the researcher felt there were benefits to conducting a study on higher education crisis communication using students and employees of colleges and universities, to obtain a stronger sample, future studies may consider using a recruitment service to reach more participants.

Additionally, researchers anticipating a similar sample size to this study might consider testing two messages instead of three. Slicing the sample in half (rather than by thirds) may help boost the effect size of any statistically significant findings.

Allowing for Comparisons

As discussed earlier in Chapter 5, the quantitative study did not allow participants to read all three statements to make comparisons. Future research recommendations include running an experiment that asks respondents to compare and contrast messages to see if this produces statistically significant differences in their perceptions of each.

In a similar vein, future research could look at how one statement with unintentionally transparent language performs against a statement with intentionally transparent language that embodies all nine elements of Fisher and Hopps' (2020) definition of transparency as appropriate (rather than selecting one). The intervention could seek to be “substantial, accurate, timely,

coherent, and honest, aid in audience understanding,” and “address stakeholder needs, facilitate organizational accountability, and reflect the mission and goals of the communicating entity” (Fisher & Hopp, 2020, pp. 203-204).

Recruitment of Focus Group Participants

A limitation of the study is the uneven representation of staff, employees, and students voices in the focus groups. The qualitative data is heavily made-up of staff voices. Recruiting participants, particularly students, to attend the focus group was challenging. The four focus groups were originally scheduled for late spring and the researcher was unable to recruit any students or faculty to participate. With that lack of representation, the researcher waited until fall and the return of classes to attempt to run the last two, with limited success.

Chapter Summary

This study sought to advance crisis communication research in the higher education sector through a mixed methods explanatory sequential experimental design. The study collected quantitative data via an experiment in an effort to determine how elements of message transparency might result in more positive perceptions of message and organizational trust, transparency, and reputation. Next, the study collected qualitative data through four focus groups to provide a deeper understanding of which elements of the message readers found most transparent. While the quantitative portion of the study found no statistically significant difference among the three stimuli (control, understanding, mission); the qualitative portion supported past research that found elements of transparency in messaging can impact perceptions of organizational trust and reputation (Fisher & Hopp, 2020 and Rawlins, 2008). The qualitative portion of the study also helped the researcher develop key recommendations for public relations practitioners working in higher education today.

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