

Effects of Crisis Type and Interactive Online Media Type on Public Trust During Organizational Crisis

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This 2 x 3 experimental design tests the effects of crisis type (accident, intentional or victim) and interactive online media type (specifically blog and streaming video) on public trust during organizational crisis. Coombs' (1997) Situational Crisis Communication Theory formed the foundation for the crisis type independent variable. Hon and Grunig's (1999) trust dimension measures from Relationship Theory were used as the basis for the dependent variables. Vonnetek Automotive, a fictional organization, was designed to test the variables. This is the first study of this kind to bridge the logical gaps between "new media" effects, crisis communication and trust. Furthermore, the experimental methodology offers predictive qualities not offered in other existing research on the individual variables.

INTRODUCTION

In this study, the public trust of fictional organization Vonnetek Automotive (designed expressly for this study) was measured using reports of the faculty and staff at a major southeastern university and business members of a chamber of commerce of a southeastern city. The results indicated that the crisis type variable strongly affected perceived trust reports while interactive online media type did not. Interaction effects were found in only 1 of 11 dependent measures, indicating that in some cases there may be a more complex relationship between media type and trust, something that must be studied further.

BACKGROUND

Researchers across multiple disciplines have attempted to define and understand the concept of trust, often disagreeing on its definition and theoretical foundation (Watson, 2005). While trust research has been conducted in fields such as psychology, management, marketing, and organizational behavior, public relations scholars hold the concept of trust in especially high regard because of its role within relationships – a foundation of the public relations discipline (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hon, 1999; Grunig & Huang, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). But why is trust so important to these relationships? Kent and Taylor (2002)

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accurately summed it up when they stated, “as is well known in public relations, once public trust has been lost it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to regain it.”

Understanding how trust is built and maintained is critical in organizational crisis public relations. One of the main goals of most organizations is to provide a return, or profit, for its shareholders. Trust is crucial to this goal as shareholders must trust an organization to become a shareholder in the first place, and ongoing trust is needed to retain shareholders. Crises occur for a myriad of reasons but all of them potentially threaten the trust shared between an organization and its publics. Even when an organization has properly planned for an unexpected crisis, effects on public trust are still vague at best. Progress has been made, however, in distinguishing different types of crises. Coombs & Holladay (2002) identified three crisis attribution clusters helpful in explicating crisis types: accident clusters, intentional clusters, and victim clusters. Regardless of the attribution of the crisis, however, an organization’s publics must be communicated with. In doing so, many organizations have integrated use of interactive online media tactics into its organizational communication strategies.

“New media” has been a buzzword in communication since McLuhan (1964) first told us that “the medium is the message.” While the definition of “new” has changed with time and technological advances, it currently refers to the interactive use of the Internet as the medium. Organizations, in general, and crisis public relations practitioners, in particular, regularly use the Internet as a key communication medium – hence the use of interactive online media as an independent variable in this research. However, there is no research to establish how interactive online media should be used during crisis and to what effect. Two types of interactive online media increasingly used by organizations are blogs and streaming video, but again there is little experimental research to test their effectiveness.

This paper details an experiment designed to better understand how public trust is affected by organizational use of interactive online media during various types of crises. Crisis public relations research has often neglected experimental methods in favor of case studies for analysis. While such case studies are valuable, they lack the predictive quality of experimental research – critical to further our understanding of crisis public relations. The focus of this experiment was to examine how organizational use of blogs and streaming video during different types of crises affect public trust of the organization. This study analyzed potential main effects of both crisis types and interactive online media types on trust, as well as interaction effects among variables. Furthermore, this study begins to fill the void of experimental research in the field of crisis public relations.

This research also furthers Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007). While Situational Crisis Communication Theory has already proven valuable by adapting concepts from Attribution Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory has not been tested experimentally. Furthering Situational Crisis Communication Theory through use of experimental method allows Situational Crisis Communication Theory to expand its theoretical application to the predictive – a goal that both benefits scholars

and practitioners. Situational Crisis Communication theory also currently overlooks media effects. This research begins to identify such media effects within Situational Crisis Communication Theory by examining blogs and streaming video.

TRUST

“Whenever philosophers, poets, statesmen, or theologians, has written about man’s relationship to his fellow man, to nature, or to animals, the phenomena of trust and betrayal, faith and suspicion, responsibility and irresponsibility, have been discussed.”

-Morton Deutsch

These words by Deutsch (1958), in his paper entitled “Trust and Suspicion,” were written 50 years ago but the sentiment is no less powerful today when applied to organizational trust with its key publics. Morton utilized a type of two-person, non-zero-sum game in order to test his hypotheses of trust. Based on game theory and today commonly referred to as “Prisoner’s Dilemma,” (Poundstone, 1993), he illustrated that if two parties could trust each other, they could also achieve mutually beneficial and desirable circumstances. However, if either party violated the trust then both parties would be punished.

While this mathematic model is too simplistic for direct application to most public relations research, its focus on the risks and rewards of mutual trust do translate well. This model easily correlates to interpersonal relationships but the tenets are the essentially the same when analyzing relationships between an organization and its publics. Simply put, shared trust between an organization and its key publics is necessary for the building and maintenance of mutually beneficial two-way communication. Public relations research in the 1950s was nil but current research on trust within the discipline has acknowledged the critical importance of such organization-public trust.

Public relations scholars express such strong interest in the concept of trust because of its influence on relationships. Public relations theorists attempting to understand the implications of trust are often focused on relationship-based theories, as it is part and parcel of them. The unit-of-analysis for public relations has steadily evolved with the discipline, current research strongly supporting relationship as unit-of-analysis. Trust is often included as a component of such relationships.

Hon and Grunig (1999) identified six precise components of relationships: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship. In this context, Hon and Grunig defined trust as “one party’s level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party.” Furthermore, they distilled three clear dimensions of trust: integrity, dependability, and competence. Integrity is defined as “the belief that an organization is fair and just,” dependability as “the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do,” and competence as “the

belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do.” Hon and Grunig (1999) tested these dimensions with the following questions:

1. This organization treats people like me fairly and justly.
2. Whenever this organization makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.
3. This organization can be relied on to keep its promises.
4. I believe that this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.
5. I feel very confident about this organization’s skills.
6. This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.

This conceptualization has been embraced by many public relations scholars (i.e., Ki & Hon, 2007; Yang, 2007; Hall, 2006; Huang, 2001), and is used to conceptualize the trust variable in this study.

CRISIS

Crisis management as an art has been around since the beginning of recorded time. Adam had to manage the first crisis after Eve persuaded him to eat that apple. But crisis management as a science for American companies has been around just a few decades (Pines, 2000).

Public relations itself is a relatively new discipline in respect to other communication disciplines, and younger still when compared to social sciences such as psychology and sociology. Furthermore, the sub-discipline of crisis public relations is in relative infancy. The first crisis public relations research was written in 1982 (Ressler, 1982), not incidentally the same year as the well-known Tylenol cyanide crisis. Considered a paradigmatic case of how to effectively handle crisis, its case study is often analyzed to ascertain effective methods of dealing with organizational crises (i.e., Brassell-Cicchini, 2003; Fearn-Banks, 1994; LaPlant, 1999; Leeper, 1996; Marra, 1998).

Coombs (2002) substantiated that a crisis can both carry the potential to disrupt normal operations and damage an organization’s reputation. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) defined crisis as “a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goals.” Seeger and Ulmer (2002) later refined their definition: “a fundamental threat to the very stability of the system, a questioning of core assumptions and beliefs, and risk to high priority goals, including organizational image, legitimacy, profitability, and ultimately survival.” This definition will be used for the term crisis in this study.

A review of the existing research finds that most crisis public relations research is based on case studies and theory/model development. Case studies are designed to gain greater understanding of how crises have occurred and been managed. The multitude of case studies available to crisis public relations scholars and practitioners can be considered a strength of the field as a resource but do they stand on their own? Considering that it is critical for the discipline of public relations to understand how to best plan for and manage crises, it would seem that case studies alone will not serve our goals. Certainly we can learn from the mistakes and successes of previous cases but how do scholars and practitioners best predict the effectiveness of future crisis management? The answer to predictive questions like this is experimental research – research that is explicitly used for its predictive quality. Unfortunately, there is almost no experimental research on crisis public relations. However some scholars have focused on furthering theory within the discipline. Scholars are still building the foundation on which to formulate comprehensive crisis public relations theory. Much of the research is introduced by adapting existing theory from other areas of public relations or associated social sciences or by creating relatively new theory altogether – including some models for crisis public relations. A review of theoretical crisis public relations research follows.

Coombs (2007) recently offered his theory of crisis response, Situational Crisis Communication Theory. It is based on Attribution Theory and Coombs' (1995, 2002) earlier research on crisis response strategies (nonexistence, ingratiation, mortification, suffering), his Crisis Type Matrix (Intentional-Unintentional and External-Internal quadrants), and the Threat Grid that was designed to assess the type and threat a crisis represented. As Coombs pointed out, an important consideration when evaluating organizational crisis public relations research is the attribution of the crisis. While previous research links Attribution Theory and crises (i.e., Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1995; Härtel, McColl-Kennedy, & McDonald, 1998; Jorgenson, 1994, 1996; McDonald & Härtel, 2000, Stockmyer, 1996), Coombs and Holladay (2002) used Situational Crisis Communication Theory to identify three crisis attribution (responsibility) clusters that are helpful in conceptualizing crisis type as an experimental variable (Coombs and Holladay, 2002):

Coombs and Holladay's (2002) crisis clusters were used to conceptualize the *crisis type* variable in this study. This experiment identifies the effects of crisis attribution cluster type on public trust of an organization. While the effects of traditional public relations methods (i.e., news releases, news conferences, media interviews) have been previously explored, this experiment will identify how public trust of an organization is affected during types of crisis through interactive online media channels.

INTERACTIVE ONLINE MEDIA

“Today we are beginning to notice that the new media are not just mechanical gimmicks for creating worlds of illusion, but new languages with new and unique powers of expression.”

-Marshall McLuhan (Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960)

What is “new” media? This is a question that has been asked throughout media history and can be difficult to answer. When McLuhan made the statement, he was speaking not of a particular medium but of media innovation and its continuous evolution.

Two new media that are increasingly being used by organizations are weblogs, or blogs, and streaming video on their organizational websites. A blog “is a website that typically combines text, images and links in a kind of personal journal (Goodman, 2006)”. Blog use has exponentially increased in recent years. According to Technorati, a company that presents data on the growth of blogs, it is currently tracking 106.1 million blogs – over double the 50 million blogs tracked in 2006. Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) suggested that blogs could potentially be better suited for online relationship building than its traditional counterparts – online relationships built, at least in part, on trust.

Streaming video is being increasingly used on organizational websites as a method for communicating with key publics. One of the main advantages of using streaming video is that the organization can disseminate messages as they choose – without the filter of a media gatekeeper – however there is currently no research testing its effects. This experiment will test how use of blogs and streaming video affect public trust of an organization during different types of crisis.

HYPOTHESES/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The theoretical perspective this research is based on, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), supposes the “crisis manager examining the crisis situation in order to assess the level of the reputational threat of a crisis” (p. 137). This inherent “level of reputational threat” is expected to damage trust regardless of the crisis cluster, simply by its nature. In other words, trust is expected to be damaged (to some extent) simply because of the presence of the crisis.

H1: All treatments will report lower trust scores after crisis than reports from pretest.

However, Coombs and Holladay (2002) theorized that “strong crisis responsibility and predisposition to a negative reputation evaluation should make it more difficult to protect the organization’s reputation” (p. 338). While reputation evaluation is not included in this experiment, crisis responsibility (type) should still have some effect.

H2: Intentional cluster treatments will report lower trust scores than accident or victim, regardless of medium.

In addition to the hypotheses stated above, this experiment also hopes to answer two research questions:

RQ1: Which interactive online medium, blog or streaming video, will report higher trust scores after organizational crisis treatments?

RQ2: Will use of either blog or streaming video be better suited to maintain trust during particular types of crises?

In summary, the logical connect between the variables in this experiment may be best summed up by borrowing from Harold Lasswell. Just as Lasswell (1948) famously described early models of communication as “Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect,” this experiment tests “Organization (says) Crisis Communication (to) Its Publics (in) Interactive Online Media (with) What Effect on Trust?”

PARTICIPANTS

Participants ($n=377$) were faculty and staff from a large southeastern university and business members of a chamber of commerce in a southeastern city. Demographic data of participants including sex, age, job position, years worked, organization type, state in which organization conducts business, number of employees and number supervised, tenure at the organization, and website use was taken for evaluation purposes. For purposes of internal validity, all participants were assigned to the same pretest and each participant was randomly assigned to one posttest treatment (blog/accident, blog/intentional, blog/victim, streaming video/accident, streaming video/intentional, streaming video/victim). This study used nonprobability consecutive sample as it was provided the best population representation of nonprobability methods. While using the university faculty and staff and chamber of commerce members were a convenience sample, each participant was randomly assigned one of the six posttests. The participants were subject to messages as if they were potential consumers of the fictional organization’s products.

METHODOLOGY

The 2 X 3 pretest/posttest design was used to assess the effects of interactive online media type and crisis cluster type on ratings of trust, including dimensions of integrity, competence and dependability. Ratings of trust, based on Hon and Grunig’s (1999) measures, were taken during both pre- and posttest.

1. Vonnetek Automotive treats people like me fairly and justly.
2. Whenever Vonnetek Automotive makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.
3. Vonnetek Automotive can be relied on to keep its promises.
4. I believe that Vonnetek Automotive takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.

5. I feel very confident about Vonnetek Automotive's skills.
6. Vonnetek Automotive has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.

Hon and Grunig's (1999) measures of satisfaction and communal satisfaction were also taken during the data collection process to disguise the trust variable.

Vonnetek Automotive was a fictional custom automobile manufacturer based out of Toledo, Ohio. An organizational website was built for Vonnetek Automotive specifically for this study. It was posted immediately before testing began in order to assure that no participants could have familiarity with it. This organizational website included links to the Homepage, the About page, a picture Gallery, an Events page, and a News page.

For each set of interactive online media treatments, one posttest treatment utilized a victim cluster (in which Vonnetek Automotive was perceived as a victim in Pilot Test), one posttest treatment utilized an accident cluster (which was perceived as an accident for Vonnetek Automotive in Pilot Test), and one posttest treatment utilized an intentional cluster (in which was perceived to be intentionally caused by Vonnetek Automotive).

The online survey used semantic differential scales to measure trust, satisfaction, and communal relationship using Hon and Grunig's (1999) questions. A reliability analysis was conducted for the 11 dependent measures. No measures were excluded (Chronbach's Alpha=.82).

All treatments were web-based. Four-thousand surveys were emailed and 377 were completed for a response rate of 11%. Participants were sent an emailing generally describing the experiment and asked to click a link to a website. Clicking the link first displayed the informed consent document and then directed participants to begin the treatment. Participants were asked to evaluate relationship characteristics of Vonnetek Automotive.

In the pretest, all participants were emailed a link to the same Vonnetek Automotive website and then they answered an online survey measuring their perceived trust of Vonnetek Automotive within the matrix of relationship questions. This pretest also established the control group for the experiment. One week later, participants were exposed to (posttest) one of six treatments (blog/accident, blog/intentional, blog/victim, streaming video/accident, streaming video/intentional, streaming video/victim) and then answered an online survey measuring their perceived trust (within the matrix of relationship questions) of Vonnetek Automotive to measure effects of interactive online media type and crisis type on trust of the organization. In blog treatments, the blog was identified as a corporate blog written by an executive of Vonnetek Automotive. This method tested for main and interaction effects of the two independent variables, as also allowed replication of each of the six conditions. All treatments and measures were

taken online. The participants were debriefed on the experiment and procedure following completion of the dependent measures.

FINDINGS

Descriptive data was analyzed. Two-way ANOVAs were conducted to test main and interaction effects of independent variables *interactive online media type* and *crisis type* on dependent variable *trust*. Bonferroni correction was used for each effect in order to ensure accuracy of statistical significance. Furthermore, one-ANOVAs were also conducted on each independent variable with each dependent variable to reduce instances of “chance” statistical significance.

The average age of the respondents was 45.55. Females comprised 62.3% of respondents and 37.7% were male. The average respondent has been in their position for 8.99 years and supervises 5.25 employees. In terms of total years at their organization, 35.3% reported working at their organization for More than 10 years, 29.4% reported 1-5 years, 16.1% reported 6-10 years, and 6.3% reported Less than one year. For organization type, 75.8% indicated Education, 9% indicated Corporation, 4.5% indicated Government, 4.1% indicated Not-for-profit, 1.2% indicated Consultant, and 5.3% indicated Other. These results were not surprising considering that respondents were faculty and staff at a large southeastern university and members of a chamber of commerce in a southeastern city. The vast majority of respondents indicated that their organization has a website (97.8%) and respondents reported spending an average of 9.9 hours per week conducting work-related activities on their website.

H1: All treatments will report lower trust scores after crisis than reports from pretest.

To test Hypothesis 1, descriptive analysis was first performed to see if posttest trust scores were lower than pretest treatments and then two-way ANOVAs were conducted to find statistical significance. Hypothesis 1 was strongly supported as pretests reported statistically significant higher means than Intentional treatments for 9 of 11 dependent variables: “Vonnetek Automotive treats people like me fairly, (4.02 vs. 2.67), $F(2, 620)=71.46, p=.00$ ” “Whenever Vonnetek Automotive makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me (3.58 vs. 2.52), $F(2, 620)=38.93, p=.00$,” “Vonnetek Automotive can be relied on to keep its promises (4.15 vs. 2.53), $F(2, 620)=86.04, p=.00$,” “I feel very confident about Vonnetek Automotive’s skills (4.40 vs. 3.57), $F(2, 620)=12.82, p=.00$,” “Vonnetek Automotive has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do (4.40 vs. 3.89), $F(2, 620)=8.82, p=.00$,” “Sound principles seem to guide Vonnetek Automotive’s behavior (4.21 vs. 2.27), $F(2, 620)=109.42, p=.00$,” “Vonnetek Automotive does not mislead people like me (4.00 vs. 2.22), $F(2, 620)=77.74, p=.00$,” “I am very willing to let Vonnetek Automotive make decisions for people like me (2.77 vs. 1.90), $F(2, 620)=15.63, p=.00$,” and “I think it is important to watch Vonnetek Automotive closely so that it does not take advantage (3.97 vs. 2.67), $F(2, 620)=24.00, p=.00$.”

Pretests also reported statistically significant higher means than Accident treatments in 3 of 11 dependent variables: "I feel very confident about Vonnetek Automotive's skills (4.40 vs. 3.62), $F(2, 620)=12.82, p=.00$," "Vonnetek Automotive does not mislead people like me (4.00 vs. 3.47), $F(2, 620)=77.74, p=.00$," and "I think it is important to watch Vonnetek Automotive closely so that it does not take advantage (3.97 vs. 3.45), $F(2, 620)=24.00, p=.00$."

However, Pretests also reported significantly lower means than Victim treatments in 4 of 11 dependent variables: "Vonnetek Automotive treats people like me fairly (4.02 vs. 4.60), $F(2, 620)=71.46, p=.00$," "Whenever Vonnetek Automotive makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me (3.58 vs. 4.12), $F(2, 620)=38.93, p=.00$," "Vonnetek Automotive can be relied on to keep its promises (4.15 vs. 4.53), $F(2, 620)=86.04, p=.00$," and "Sound principles seem to guide Vonnetek Automotive's behavior (4.21 vs. 4.71), $F(2, 620)=109.42, p=.00$."

H2: Intentional cluster treatments will report lower trust scores than accident or victim, regardless of medium.

To test Hypothesis 2, descriptive analysis was first performed to see if the Intentional treatment mean was lower than Accident and Victim treatments and then two-way ANOVAs were conducted to find statistical significance. Hypothesis 2 was strongly supported as all 11 of 11 Intentional treatments reported lower trust score means than Accident and Victim and the difference was statistically significant in 9 of 11 dependent variables: "Vonnetek Automotive treats people like me fairly, $F(2, 620)=55.67, p=.00$," "Whenever Vonnetek Automotive makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me, $F(2, 620)=27.57, p=.00$," "Vonnetek Automotive can be relied on to keep its promises, $F(2, 620)=72.86, p=.00$," "I believe that Vonnetek Automotive takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions, $F(2, 620)=18.40, p=.00$," "Sound principles seem to guide Vonnetek Automotive's behavior, $F(2, 620)=93.05, p=.00$," "Vonnetek Automotive does not mislead people like me, $F(2, 620)=74.37, p=.00$," "I am very willing to let Vonnetek Automotive make decisions for people like me, $F(2, 620)=12.51, p=.00$," and "I think it is important to watch Vonnetek Automotive closely so that it does not take advantage, $F(2, 620)=28.20, p=.00$."

RQ1: Which interactive online medium, blog or streaming video, will report higher trust scores after organizational crisis treatments?

To answer Research Question 1, two-way ANOVAs were conducted to test for main effects of independent variable Media Type (Blog, Streaming Video). None of the 11 dependent variables reported statistically significant main effects.

RQ2: Will use of either blog or streaming video be better suited to maintain trust during particular types of crises?

To answer Research Question 2, further testing from Research Question 1 was required. Two-way ANOVAs were conducted to test for interaction effects of independent variables Crisis Type (Accident, Intentional, Victim) and Media Type (Blog, Streaming Video). One dependent variable reported statistically significant interaction effects: "I believe that Vonnetek Automotive takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions (Table 4-4b)," a dependability dimension measure.

For "I believe that Vonnetek Automotive takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions, $F(1, 620)=3.05, p=.05$," Streaming Video in Accident treatments (3.84) reported significantly higher means than Blog in Accident treatments (3.51) and Streaming Video in Victim treatments (4.26) reported significantly higher means than Blog in Victim treatments (4.11). However, Blogs in Intentional treatments (3.09) reported significantly higher means than Streaming Video in Intentional treatments (2.47) (Figure 4-1).

Based on the consistency with which measures of each trust dimension were reported either positively or negatively, it seems unlikely that they contain hidden meanings to respondents. In short, this research works to supports the future use of such measures as reliable instruments of trust.

The two-way ANOVAS indicated main effects for Crisis Type in several variables. Main effects were found for the following measures of Integrity: "Vonnetek Automotive treats people like me fairly and justly," "Whenever Vonnetek Automotive makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me," "Sound principles seem to guide Vonnetek Automotive's behavior," and "Vonnetek Automotive does not mislead people like me." Main effects for Dependability included "Vonnetek Automotive can be relied on to keep its promises," "I am very willing to let Vonnetek Automotive make decisions for people like me," and "I think it is important to watch Vonnetek Automotive closely so that it does not take advantage of people like me." Finally main effects were found for the following measures of Competence: "I feel very confident about this Vonnetek Automotive's skills," and "Vonnetek Automotive has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do." The main effects represent respondents feeling significantly different answering these questions based on the type of crisis the organization had undergone (accident, intentional, victim).

While it seems that blogs and streaming video are indeed widely used by organizations, their effects are unknown. Therefore this experiment includes both blogs and streaming video as media to begin studying their effects during organizational crisis. Does the method in which the crisis message is delivered matter and, if so, *how* does it matter? Is one better than another all of the time? In certain scenarios?

In order to find answers to some of these questions, two-way ANOVAs were conducted to test for main effects of Media Type. No main effects were found based on this research.

Interaction effects for Crisis Type and Media Type were found for “I believe that Vonnetek Automotive takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions” ($F=3.05$, $p=.05$). This measure was one of Hon and Grunig’s (1999) dependability dimension questions, “that [Vonnetek Automotive] will do what it says it will do.”

H1: All treatments will report lower trust scores after crisis than reports from pretest.

While it was hypothesized that a crisis of any type would damage public trust of the organization, this hypothesis was not supported. It was expected that an organization undergoing any crisis, regardless of who was responsible for it, would report lower test scores than an organization not in crisis (as in the Pretest).

In fact, Victim treatments reported higher mean scores than Pretest treatments in all dependent measures with statistical significance in 5 of 11 dependent variables: Three of these measures tested the Integrity dimension of the trust variable. Two statistically significant variables measured the Dependability dimension of the trust variable. Interestingly, none of the Competency measures were affected by the Crisis Type. This may indicate that Competency needs to have a historical basis, whereas Integrity and Dependability do not. For example, perhaps Vonnetek Automotive’s actions mentioned in, and including, the communication gave the respondents a feeling for if Vonnetek was acting with integrity and in a dependable way. It is possible that competence is based on past actions of the organization; in this case Vonnetek does not have any.

In summary, this data indicates that a organization who has been a “victim” of a crisis is likely to have its publics find it more trustworthy on scales of treating its publics fairly and justly, being concerned about people like the respondent, being reliable for keep its promises, considering opinions of its publics when making decisions, and being guided by sound principles, than before it ever being involved in a crisis at all. This is an intriguing finding, perhaps due to respondent sympathy for the organization as a victim of the crisis. In fact, that seems to be a very likely possibility. In this particular study, it is hard to imagine another reason for this result. However, this data also suggests that competency is not rated higher in Victim treatments than Pretest. It is possible that that a respondent could potentially feel sympathy for the organization but not report higher organizational competence scores.

FUTURE RESEARCH/IMPLICATIONS

While crisis attribution was manipulated in this experiment, other types of crisis could also potentially influence the results. For example, would the results be consistent using a crisis in which people were hurt or killed? Due to the dramatically different consequences of this type of crisis (compared with odometer tampering used in this study), it seems possible that participants could respond even more strongly.

For purposes of comparison, this study should be replicated using a real organization. It would be especially interesting to test with multiple organizations with pretest scores ranging from very low to very high. It may be that an organization that is rated very low on trust because of its past may report same or lower ratings after a crisis because the public thought they “had it coming.” Or perhaps an organization with extremely high pretest ratings gets lower scores because the crisis highlights a previously unknown flaw in the organization. While it may be that all organizations will report higher trust scores when a victim than in pretest (as resulted in this study), that will remain unknown without further research.

It was hypothesized that, no matter what the medium, intentional treatments would report lower trust scores after crisis. This was based on the thought that once respondents knew that the organization had undergone crisis due to its own intentional actions, they would essentially “punish” the organization with lower trust scores. In other words, an organization that would be in crisis due to an intentional act would surely not be trusted.

This hypothesis was fully supported. All dependent measures reported significantly lower mean scores in Intentional treatments than Accident treatments or Victim treatments. In short, for an organization to be trusted by its public, one thing that it must prevent is intentionally causing a crisis.

Based on the two-way ANOVAS, Media Type did not show any main effects: measures of dependent variables were not significantly affected by use of Blog instead of Streaming Video, or vice versa. In other words, neither blogs nor streaming video rose to the top as the consistently higher scorer in terms of trust scores. These results do not indicate that practitioners should stop using either blogs or streaming video. In fact, they simply suggest that there may not be a difference in public perception of organizational trust during crises.

Interaction effects were found for 1 of 11 dependent measures. Specifically, when an organization is in an Accident crisis scenario, its use of Streaming video would likely report higher values for “I believe that Vonnetek Automotive takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions,” a Dependability dimension of trust.

This may be due to the fact that the streaming video treatments were very similar in look to a newscast (they were, in fact, filmed in a news studio). Respondents may be more used to watching newscast that they consider trustworthy report accidents in newscasts. If so, there may be some projection of trust by the respondent from one source (news) to another (organization). If this experiment were conducted again, it should add another variable: “source.” Everything could be exactly replicated except to use two versions of each streaming video treatment, one in which the speaker identifies himself/herself as a newscaster and another in which they identify themselves as an organizational spokesperson. It is possible that the newscaster treatment receives significantly higher trust scores than the exact same treatment introduced as an organizational spokesperson.

The results alternatively indicate that if an organization is in the midst of an Intentional crisis scenario, based on this research its use of a Blog would likely report higher values for “I believe that Vonnetek Automotive takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.” This research strongly supports that an organization in an Accident or Victim crisis should use Streaming Video, but use a Blog in Intentional crisis situations. In this case, it may be that the respondents are looking for some answers or justification from the organization and blogs may seem to be more intimate. Future research should again test blogs but against streaming video of a news conference, for example, in which the same questions are answered. It could be that this too could fulfill the respondents’ potential desire for “answers.”

This study was conducted using the faculty and staff of a large southeastern university and members of a chamber of commerce for a city in the southeastern United States. In order to test whether this made a difference, testing was conducted to test for statistical significance between the university faculty and staff responses compared with the chamber of commerce members’ responses. The responses were not significantly different.

This research highlights a large void in “new media” effects research. While many, including scholars and practitioners, are interested in using in using both media, the effects are still unknown. As stated above, this study did not find any main effects for blogs or streaming video treatments. Beyond blogs and streaming video, there are many other interactive online media that need to be studied both in terms of general understanding and in terms of effects-specific research. Some of these include instant messaging, online social networking, virtual communities, as well as some that will surely be introduced in the near future. Further research is definitely needed to flesh out this area of study.

As interactive online media are introduced to both organizations and their publics, it will be important to continue studying their effects. For example, interactive online media have reputations for embodying certain attributes: blogs as intimate, instant messaging as quick, social networking sites as communities establishing their own distinct cultures, etc. While these descriptions may indeed be accurate, future research is necessary to prove such claims.

This study also makes several contributions to the body of academic knowledge of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Most important of these contributions is expanding the scope of the theory. Previous Situational Crisis Communication Theory research has not explored application within the scope of interactive online media – the same media increasingly being used as focus for research and standard practice for many professionals. While furthering experimental research in the area of crisis public relations, it also tested variables that had not been experimentally measured previously. As mentioned above, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), supposes that “crisis manager examining the crisis situation in order to assess the level of the reputational threat of a crisis” (p. 137), with this inherent “level of reputational threat” is expected to damage trust regardless of the crisis cluster, simply by its nature.

In other words, trust is expected to be damaged (to some extent) simply because of the presence of the crisis. The findings of this research, specifically Victim treatments reporting higher values in 11 of 11 dependent variables suggest that this is surely not the case.

This research is the first to test aspects of Situation Crisis Communication Theory and media effects. Due to the fact that most organizational crises are going to have a media component, this is an area where much more exploratory research must be conducted. It must be noted that the media suppliers are also steadily changing. It is not enough as an organization in crisis to simply understand that the traditional media now has interactive online components or that the organization can communicate via its own website. Increasingly, opinion leaders are emerging out of the Web 2.0. No longer does a journalist need to be hired by a large national newspaper to have his/her stories read, with the proliferation of Web 2.0 anyone with some knowledge of any subject, access to the Internet, and the time it takes to type a blog can become an opinion leader know worldwide – and many are! Understanding all of these different types of media is critical during organizational crisis, though it is also becoming necessary to simply operate from day-to-day successfully. Situational Crisis Communication Theory has provided a sufficient foundation on which to build these branches of crisis public relations research.

Based on the results of the manipulation checks, pilot test and this study itself, Coombs and Holladay's (2002) Situational Crisis Communication Theory crisis clusters seem to be very strong in their design. Respondents not only identified crisis types distinctly but also reported statistically significant reactions to them.

This experiment also acknowledges that Situational Crisis Communication Theory's "organizational history" component may be very important for understanding how an organization can best maintain trust during a crisis. It seems likely, as Situational Crisis Communication Theory suggest, that an organization with a reputation for acting responsibly would receive higher trust scores than an irresponsible organization. Furthermore, this research begins to make a case to consider integrating the trust dimension into Situational Crisis Communication Theory as well as acknowledge media effects within its construct. While Situational Crisis Communication Theory is already built in a way that can accommodate these variables, they are important enough to the scope of the theory itself that they should be implemented as fully functioning components.

While crisis public relations theory is still too young to be generally evaluated, the findings of this research build upon the field's understanding of each of the variables. This study supports researchers moving forward using Coombs and Holladay's clusters with increased confidence. Furthermore, simply by isolating the clusters outside of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory framework, confirming their own strength independently, and refolding them back into Situational Crisis Communication Theory, it strongly contributes to building upon Situational Crisis Communication Theory and by

extension the sub-discipline of crisis public relations as a theoretical whole. Finally, the power of the clusters retrospectively strengthens past research using them as well.

Finally, these effects on Situational Crisis Communication Theory should have a domino effect for Crisis Response Theory. This research illustrates that additional variables may be needed to effectively manage crises, whether using either theory. Situational Crisis Communication Theory attempts to predict results of crisis communication. Crisis Response Theory focuses on the responses themselves. When combined, they are complementary to one another by first identifying how best to communicate in crisis, followed by confirming that the chosen response should have its desired effect.

The results of this research further Relationship Theory by experimentally applying the trust dimension measures to crisis scenarios. Clearly trust is a critically important factor before, during and after organizational crisis and this research furthers our understanding of how trust is affected throughout this process. Organizations exist, at least in large part, to achieve success. This success is often measured by longevity and ability to make money. Trust is critical to both of these goals. While money can be made in the short term, even without trust, an organization performing in such fashion would not achieve longevity. Therefore, in order for an organization to be “successful,” it must be able to cultivate and maintain trust with its publics – publics that it strives to create and keep relationships with. It follows that without such relationships, an organization would not make money nor be able to survive for any decent length of time.

Hon and Grunig (1999) introduced the PR Relationship Measurement Scale which included guidelines for measuring relationships, an obvious component to Relationship Theory. They identified trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, communal relationship. In short, symmetrical relationships are those with the highest likelihood of maintaining the longevity mentioned above and these six elements seem to be present:

“The most productive relationships in the long run are those that benefit both parties in the relationship rather than those designed to benefit the organization only. Public relations theorists have termed these types of relationships symmetrical and asymmetrical, respectively.” (p. 19)

An effective way to test components of Relationship Theory is to take them out of their framework and test them independently of the overall theory. While this has been done with trust variables in the past, this is the first instance in which the trust dimensions were tested using crisis scenarios. A crisis can bring about the best and worst in people when it arises, similarly a crisis can also bring out the best and worst in a theory. It can disprove a theory, at least disprove it as being applicable during a crisis scenario. Or on the other hand, it can still remain a reliable theoretical foundation even when tested in crisis scenarios. In this case, the trust variables were tested in just such

a way. Trust is clearly important in any relationship but it can sometimes be the only thing holding an organizational -public relationship together when the chips fall. For each of the dependent measures, all of them trust dimensions from Hon and Grunig's research, trust measures seemed to be strong. This was due in large part to the fact that there were no instances in which trust scores were way out of sync with the majority.

Again, by testing the trust component of Relationship Theory outside of its "normal" framework, finding it effective, and folding it back into Relationship Theory should strengthen the overarching theory in general. As the saying goes, "a chain is only as strong as its weakest link." Therefore, each of the components should also be tested more independently. In fact, a replication of this study using a real organization would allow for all elements above to be tested and evaluated for strengths and weaknesses. This is especially true for trust, which could then be compared with the findings in this study.

Due to the explorative nature of this research (based on the unique combination of variables), it is difficult to make solid predictions for future studies using the trust scale. However, this research does succeed at serving as a roadmap for future research by identifying new areas for such study.

The literature reviewed in this study identified Excellence Theory as a precursor to Relationship Theory. The experiment conducted also seems to support the Excellence team's two-way models in terms of its critical importance to cultivating and maintaining trust. However, future research should consider asking respondents which of the four public relations models – press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, or two-way symmetrical – they actual feel each media type is (Grunig, et al., 1992). It could be, for example, that blog would be reported as two-way symmetrical and streaming video as public information but we cannot assume anything in this regard without testing this in future research. For the same reason, future research using media type as a variable should ask if respondents feel they are "traditional" or "interactive" to further our understanding of interactive online media perceptions. This is especially true with populations that are heavily personally invested in technology. Technology changes extremely quickly. With it, so too do the media used and the perceptions of them by their users. For example, there are likely publics of the same medium that may think a simple website is "interactive" and others who insist that it is just another version of "traditional" media. Understanding this on a more detailed level in future research could strongly enhance any potential findings.

Finally, this research gives further support to the Relationship-Theory-as-eventual-paradigm camp. The variables simply fit too well into public relations research to dismiss this possibility. In fact, it would be very difficult to think of a public relations research study in which it could not be logically applied.

This research also highlights important implications for public relations practitioners. The first is that practitioners should consider exactly what they really

know about interactive online media effects before spending potentially vast amounts of money on them. In some cases, the answer is probably “not that much.” It is well known that many agency practitioners and in-house organizational practitioners (as well as consultants and the like) believe that it is very important to have an interactive online presence, but to what effect? Budgets are not unlimited, especially in today’s economy. Public relations practitioners have long dealt with how to show their worth within an organization (Grunig, et al., 1992). Spending money with no real understanding of what the return-on-investment is will not help that cause. This is certainly not to say that public relations practitioners should not pursue such media, it must just be a priority to practitioners to be able to evaluate the value of each endeavor. For example, this research suggests that an organization in a Victim situation should make sure that it is communicating that “it is a victim” to its publics. If the results of this research do indeed predict practical application, it could essentially build trust instead of losing it. That is a measurable objective for any practitioner to take to his or her management.

The second contribution to public relations practice is further building the knowledge of how to practically manage public relations crises. This is a critical function within any organization and C-level executives are increasingly calling for crisis planning and management from their staff. Studies like this one can immediately translate into resources for such practitioner.

Beyond simply applying these findings to public relations planning and implementation, organizations like Edelman Public Relations, the university involved and the chamber of commerce involved have already expressed that they find this study to be extremely valuable. Each of them recognizes that this research will help to focus and streamline their crisis planning and management. Furthermore, this knowledge can be applied to any organization, or for that matter many organizations. And practical understanding of how an organizational practitioner should communicate during a crisis does not need to be asymmetrical communication. By maintaining trust throughout such crises, both organizations and their publics can benefit through openness, honesty, and clear lines of communication.

The methodology used in this study illustrated some strengths and weaknesses of attempting to use experimental method to measure interactive online media. First, while methodology should always be handled with care, special consideration should be taken when using interactive online media to test interactive online media. Future research should consider using other methods in tandem with interactive online media to ensure that this issue does not confound the variables.

Second, using Survey Monkey as the collection tool also provided some strengths and weaknesses. While the service does an adequate job of collecting the actual data and exporting it for use in statistical software, it is also not expressly designed for experimental research. Because of this, Survey Monkey had to be linked to from within the Vonnetek website. This was effective but it did not allow for visual consistency. The only way to achieve that would have been to design Vonnetek.com to match the Survey Monkey website, a design that may not suit many studies. A better data collection

website design would implement the actual design of all online components in order to create such consistency.

Finally, likely the strongest aspect of Survey Monkey is its user-friendliness and ability to store massive amounts of data in an easily manageable format. It also allows for exporting data into a variety of formats, which can save extra steps when preparing to analyze data.

The most important implication, and overall contribution to the body of knowledge, that this study makes is to begin to connect the logical variables of interactive online media, crisis type and trust. Perhaps most important in this regard is that it promotes the value of theory to practitioners. This research is the first to explore and attempt to create a roadmap for future studies analyzing how these three variables work together. This area of research is one that both scholars and practitioners agree is important and thus should help bridge the often present rift between academia and practice. The fact that this theoretical study was fully funded by Edelman Public Relations further supports this claim.

Finally, this research brings up the question, “Can the trust dimension stand on its own?” Based on the results of this study, the answer seems to be yes. The only way to find out for sure, however, will be to replicate this study with additional measures – perhaps other Relationship Theory dimensions – and test if the same results are reported.

One of the most interesting findings within this research is the fact that Victim treatment means were significantly higher than the Pretests. The reasons for this could be two-fold. First, it may be that the respondents felt sympathy for Vonnetek Automotive as a victim. However, it may be a result of Vonnetek Automotive being a fictional organization. Ki and Hon (2007) found that stakeholder publics with stronger evaluations of the relationship with an organization reported more positive attitudes toward it. Without a previous relationship with the organization, the respondents may have felt challenged in answering some Pretest questions resulting in lower Pretest scores or Pretest scores near the median. While the advantages of using a fictional organization included having full control over the website and its content and ease of manipulation checks, the limitations above must be considered.

Another limitation was the method of administration. While the emails containing the surveys were simultaneously sent for each organization, both organizations should have been administered the surveys simultaneously for all participants. The responses from the university participants were not significantly different than those of the chamber members but if they were it would have been difficult to tell whether it was due to their organizational membership and/or when they were administered the survey. Also while organizational members were emailed the surveys simultaneously, there was no practical way of achieving simultaneous administration of the actual instruments. This also likely had an effect on the low 5% response rate. While it was expected that the response rate would be lower due to the survey administration during the summer break

at the participating university (many faculty and staff on vacation), using the email method of administration also typically has a lower response rate than some other methods. Due to the time and budgetary constraints, however, it was deemed the most appropriate method for this study.

Additionally, future research should consider inclusion of “traditional” media types in order to act as control. This would both create opportunities for comparison as well as potentially further knowledge of those traditional media. The lack of a true control group in this design makes it difficult to confirm that the effects are due specifically to the interactive online media types and not simply “media.”

It seems unlikely that this study is the one to totally disprove McLuhan’s (1964) “The medium is the message,” though the results show very little in the way of significance between the media types used in this experiment. More preferable would be further test these findings by replication. This would be simple enough by replicating the study with more types of interactive online media.

As mentioned above, many people seem to believe that blogs are more intimate than other forms on interactive online media. This research introduced the question of whether respondents might have felt that the Blog treatments were more intimate (and less well-known) and Streaming Video treatments were widely known because of its similarity to broadcast television. In order to test, this study should be replicated using all streaming video treatments in which one treatment has the speaker state that they are an independent reporter and another in which the speaker states they are an organizational spokesperson.

This study could be replicated surveying the faculty and staff of another university to further the external validity of its findings. It would also be interesting to have the workforce of a large organization(s) as the sample for comparison. While no significant differences were found between the participants working at the university and the business members of the chamber of commerce, future research could focus more specifically on how more detailed demographics might affect the data.

Finally, it would be very interesting to create an experiment from a combination of this design and Coombs (2000) research findings that relationships are damaged during crisis by relational expectations and history between an organization and its publics. It would likely require an existing and known organization in order for the publics to have a relationship history with it. Would such a relationship still be damaged using the Victim treatments from this study?

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Boston, Massachusetts, August 2009.

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