



FACULTY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

# **THE IMPACT OF THE CONTENT AND TIMING OF ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION ON REPUTATION REPAIR**

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**2012**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR (PhD) IN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES: COMMUNICATION SCIENCES (UGENT) AND SOCIAL AND MILITARY SCIENCES (RMA)

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## DOCTORAL JURY

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – DANKWOORD

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Dit proefschrift vormt het sluitstuk van een aantal erg boeiende en leerrijke jaren, waarin ik bovendien de kans heb gekregen om samen te werken met bijzonder fijne mensen.

De eerste persoon die ik heel erg wil bedanken is mijn promotor, Prof. Dr. Verolien Cauberghe. Ik heb veel van je geleerd en ben ervan overtuigd dat ik dat ook in de toekomst nog zal doen. Je hebt mij van meet af aan gesteund en aangemoedigd. Je was onmisbaar voor dit doctoraat en ik ben je dan ook enorm dankbaar. Niet alleen omwille van alle zaken die je me hebt bijgebracht en alle feedback, maar ook omwille van de manier waarop je dit doet. Ik kon altijd bij je terecht wanneer het minder vlot ging of wanneer ik twijfels had. Ik vond het ongelooflijk fijn om samen te werken en hoop dit in de toekomst nog veel te kunnen doen.

Daarnaast wil ik mijn co-promotor en baas, Prof. Dr. Ir. Jan Leysen van de Koninklijke Militaire School bedanken. Eerst en vooral bedankt om mij de kans te geven om aan dit doctoraat te beginnen. U heeft me bovendien altijd alle mogelijkheden gegeven om het tot een goed einde te brengen. Ik ben ervan overtuigd dat ik door de samenwerking tussen de Ugent en de KMS het beste van twee werelden heb meegekregen.

Naast mijn promotor en co-promotor was Prof. Dr. Mario Pandelaere een onmisbaar lid van mijn begeidingscommissie. Door onze ontmoetingen en je feedback heb ik ongelooflijk veel bijgeleerd. Je input was enorm waardevol voor zowel mijn onderzoek als mijn papers. Ik kan nog erg veel van je leren en hoop dan ook dat we ook in de toekomst zullen kunnen samenwerken aan nieuwe onderzoeken.

Prof. Dr. Patrick Vyncke stond als promotor van mijn bachelorpaper en masterproef aan de wieg van mijn doctoraat. Bedankt om mijn eerste stappen in het onderzoek te begeleiden. Toen ik als derdejaarsstudent langskwam om mijn mogelijke onderwerpen toe te lichten was je onmiddellijk enthousiast toen ik de richting van crisiscommunicatie wilde uitgaan. Bedankt om van meet af aan in mij te geloven.

Another person that was indispensable for this PhD is Prof. Dr. Timothy Coombs. Your research was an inspiration for this PhD. The evolution you created in the research on crisis communication in terms of method and theory is one of the things that made this dissertation such a pleasure to work on. I consider it an honor that you are willing to be a member of my committee.

Ik wil ook mijn collega's van de Ugent bedanken. Liselot, bedankt voor je onmisbare hulp bij het afronden van dit proefschrift. Bedankt omdat je me altijd hebt gemotiveerd en gerustgesteld en voor het nalezen van mijn inleiding en conclusie en de goede feedback. Bedankt Fien voor de morele steun tijdens de laatste loodjes van dit doctoraat. Daarnaast wil ik mijn bureaugenoten bedanken en bij uitbreiding alle collega's uit de Volderstraat. Snezha, Lucia, Erlinde, Sarah, Mao Xi en Jeroen, heel erg bedankt voor de fijne jaren samen. De babbeltjes, lunches en koffies waren de best denkbare ontspanning. Bedankt ook voor de hulp en het begrip tijdens de laatste weken.

Ook alle andere collega's wil ik graag bedanken voor de erg fijne jaren. Katarina, voor alle hulp, maar niet in het minst ook voor de aperitiefjes na het werk. Dieter, ik ben enorm blij dat ik zo'n fijne collega als jij hebt gehad. Bedankt voor alle lunches en babbels. Eveline, bedankt voor alle leuke momenten samen. Ik heb me heel erg met jou geamuseerd zowel tijdens als buiten het werk. Je bent een fantastische collega en ik hoop dat we elkaar nog dikwijls gaan zien. Melanie, je bent een supercollega en ik ben je dankbaar om heel veel redenen. In de eerste plaats voor alle etentjes, koffietjes, cavaatjes en babbeltjes op en naast het werk. Maar ook omdat ik altijd bij je terecht kon als het minder ging en altijd op je kan rekenen. Daarnaast wil ook graag alle andere collega's van de Ugent bedanken voor de fijne momenten en hulp.

Ook aan de KMS heb ik veel leuke momenten beleefd, niet in het minst dankzij mijn bureaugenoten. In de eerste plaats wil ik dan ook Bob bedanken. Heel erg bedankt voor onze fijne gesprekken, om ook om de broodjes te gaan, voor de koffies/choco's, ... Ik wens je heel veel succes toe met je gezinnetje en je carrièrewending. Rafaella, I would like to thank you for your company the past two years. I really enjoyed the time we shared the office and your

patience in helping me improve my French. Daarnaast wil ik graag ook alle andere collega's van de KMS bedanken.

Naast de collega's wil ik ook een bijzonder woord van dank richten aan de mensen die me nauw aan het hart liggen. Ik wil graag mijn beste vrienden Gertie, Sarah, Merijn en Stéphanie bedanken. In het bijzonder Sarah om me af en toe te helpen met het Engels en Gertie voor de spellingshulp in het Nederlands. Gertie ook heel erg bedankt voor alle fijne zaterdagen tijdens de laatste loodjes van mijn doctoraat en om me te pushen om ook nog af en toe te gaan zwemmen tussen de drukte door. Daarnaast wil ik graag mijn schoonfamilie bedanken. Bedankt voor de leuke zondagen, etentjes, het ontspannende weekendje en de hulp. Bedankt ook Nelly om ervoor te zorgen dat de frigo in huis nooit leeg was en vooral voor de ontspannende pauzes.

Mijn gezin verdient een bijzonder woord van dank. Jullie zijn er altijd voor mij geweest doorheen zowel mijn studies als mijn doctoraat. Bedankt voor alle aanmoediging en om me te helpen waar nodig. In het bijzonder ook heel erg bedankt papa voor alle wijze raad. Altijd als ik het moeilijk had of twijfels had kon ik bij je terecht en altijd wist je me terug op weg te helpen. Bedankt om me tijdens mijn eerste jaren als student door de examens te helpen op de momenten dat ik het zelf niet meer goed zag komen. Bedankt om me tijdens mijn doctoraat altijd te steunen en advies te geven. Het is mede dankzij al die hulp dat ik dit doctoraat heb kunnen verwezelijken.

Een allerlaatste dankwoord gaat naar mijn mijn lief Benny. Je kent mij door en door en weet als geen ander hoe je me moet aanpakken. Je hebt me dan ook ongelooflijk geholpen tijdens de laatste maanden van dit doctoraat. Bedankt om al die tijd te steken in het grafische deel van mijn doctoraat en voor je eindeloze geduld. Bedankt voor het koken, bedankt om me te verdragen. Bedankt om er altijd voor mij te zijn.

An-Sofie, juni 2012





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**NEDERLANDSTALIGE  
SAMENVATTING**

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## NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

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Elke organisatie, of het nu gaat om een overheidsbedrijf, een non-profit organisatie of een commerciële onderneming, loopt het risico om vroeg of laat geconfronteerd te worden met een crisis (Coombs, 2002). Een crisis kan leiden tot ernstige reputatieschade (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Coombs, 2007). Bedrijven erkennen daarom steeds vaker het belang van crisiscommunicatie om hun reputatie te vrijwaren of herstellen. In 2007 werd speelgoedbedrijf Mattel geconfronteerd met een grootschalige terugroepactie van producten ten gevolge van het feit dat de verf op sommige producten te veel schadelijk lood bevatte en magneetjes van sommige andere producten konden loskomen en konden worden ingeslikt door kleine kinderen (Choi & Lin, 2009a, 2009b). Mattel heeft het belang van crisiscommunicatie ter harte genomen. Het bedrijf voorzag duidelijke informatie met betrekking tot de terugroepactie op de website, verspreidde een filmpje waarin de CEO de terugroepactie toelichtte en stuurde een advertentie de wereld rond met een boodschap aan alle ouders.

Maar ookal zijn bedrijven zich steeds meer bewust van het belang van crisiscommunicatie, vaak worden de verkeerde crisis communicatiestrategieën gehanteerd. Het feit dat Mattel bijvoorbeeld een deel van de schuld in de schoenen van Chinese toeleveranciers trachtte te schuiven werd niet positief onthaald door de consument. Bovendien lijken bedrijven wat crisis communicatiestrategieën betreft onvoldoende te leren uit het verleden. In 1989 veroorzaakte een olietanker, de Exxon Valdez, een enorme olievlek die heel wat milieuschade met zich meebracht (Williams & Olaniran, 1994). Exxon slaagde er toen niet in om de juiste crisis communicatiestrategieën toe te passen. Meer recent werd BP met een erg gelijkaardige crisis geconfronteerd toen een explosie plaatsvond op een boorplatform (Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011). Ook BP slaagde er echter niet in om efficiënt te communiceren. Meer nog, de vaak ongepaste crisis communicatiestrategieën van de toenmalige CEO van BP leidden tot bijkomende reputatieschade.

De assumptie dat de juiste communicatiestrategie reputatieschade voor bedrijven kan beperken en dat de foute communicatiestrategie tot extra reputatieverlies kan leiden, leidde reeds

een aantal decennia geleden tot een verhoogde academische interesse in het belang van crisiscommunicatie (cf. Benson, 1988). De interesse was aanvankelijk voornamelijk gericht op één specifiek type crisis communicatiestrategie, met name de crisis responsstrategie. Een crisis responsstrategie is erop gericht om de reputatieschade te beperken of herstellen (Coombs, 2007). Lange tijd bleef het onderzoek naar deze crisis responsstrategieën beperkt tot gevalstudies, waarbij men de communicatie van bedrijven als reactie op een specifieke crisis ging analyseren. Zo heeft men bijvoorbeeld de crisis responsstrategieën van Exxon als reactie op de olieramp geanalyseerd (Benoit, 1995). Op die manier kwam men te weten welke verschillende crisis responsstrategieën organisaties in de realiteit kunnen toepassen (vb., excuses aanbieden, ontkennen) (Hobbs, 1995).

Het nagaan van de verschillende crisis responsstrategieën die bedrijven kunnen hanteren tijdens een crisis was een belangrijke eerste stap binnen het onderzoek naar crisiscommunicatie. Critici stelden echter na verloop van tijd vast dat deze gevalstudies hun doel hadden bereikt, en dat experimenteel onderzoek nodig was om na te gaan wanneer bedrijven best welke strategie kunnen toepassen om hun reputatie zo efficiënt mogelijk te vrijwaren of herstellen (Coombs, 1999; Rowland & Jerome, 2004; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). Daarom werd de Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) ontwikkeld (Coombs, 2007). Het uitgangspunt van deze theorie is dat organisaties een crisis eerst moeten analyseren en zo hun verantwoordelijkheid ervoor moeten vaststellen. Op basis daarvan moeten bedrijven vervolgens een crisis responsstrategie selecteren. Wanneer een bedrijf de volledige verantwoordelijkheid voor een crisis draagt, moet het de volledige verantwoordelijkheid er ook voor opnemen en excuses aanbieden. Wanneer een bedrijf echter geen schuld heeft aan een crisis, kan het de verantwoordelijkheid voor de crisis ontkennen. Deze theorie is echter nog in ontwikkeling en het is van belang om de validiteit ervan verder te onderzoeken.

Bovendien mag onderzoek naar crisiscommunicatie zich niet beperken tot één enkel type crisis communicatiestrategie. Want naast de inhoud van crisiscommunicatie kan ook de manier waarop de boodschap wordt gebracht in termen van onder andere consistentie en snelheid van groot belang zijn (Coombs, 1999). Een belangrijk element is in dit opzicht de tijd, meer bepaald het moment waarop een organisatie voor het eerst over een crisis communiceert (Arpan &

Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Bedrijven die worden geconfronteerd met een crisis hebben vaak de neiging om een afwachtende houding aan te nemen en pas te communiceren over een crisis als deze reeds werd bekendgemaakt door een derde partij (vb. media). Echter, bedrijven kunnen ook proactief communiceren en een crisis zelf bekendmaken van zodra men hiervan op de hoogte is. In het eerste geval spreekt men over een ex-post crisis timing strategie, in het tweede geval over een ex-ante crisis timing strategie. Voorgaand onderzoek geeft aan dat deze crisis timing strategieën van even groot belang zouden kunnen zijn als de crisis responsstrategieën. In tegenstelling tot de crisis responsstrategieën, is naar deze crisis timing strategieën echter nog erg weinig onderzoek gevoerd. Bovendien is weinig geweten over de theoretische achtergrond die kan verklaren waarom de ene crisis timing strategie efficiënter zou zijn dan de andere. Terwijl het onderzoek naar crisis responsstrategieën een hele evolutie heeft doorgemaakt, is dit voor crisis timing strategieën niet het geval.

De algemene doelstelling van dit proefschrift is om na te gaan wat de impact is van crisis communicatiestrategieën, zowel crisis reponsstrategieën als crisis timing strategieën, op de reputatie van een organisatie na een crisis. Vijf onderzoeksvragen worden gesteld om deze impact te bestuderen. In de eerste plaats wordt getracht de kennis over de richtlijnen van de SCCT uit te diepen. Het is van belang na te gaan wat de validiteit is van de richtlijnen van de SCCT om crisis responsstrategieën te koppelen aan crisis types. Voorgaand onderzoek heeft deze theorie getest op basis van oude typologieën van crisis responsstrategieën en crisis types, en steeds werd slechts een deel van de theorie bestudeerd (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Huang, 2006). Vervolgens is een tweede onderzoeksvraag erop gericht na te gaan of er bepaalde factoren zijn, meer bepaald de betrokkenheid van consumenten met een crisis enerzijds en de manier waarop een boodschap wordt gekaderd anderzijds, die bepalen wanneer het al dan niet van belang is voor bedrijven om de richtlijnen van de SCCT toe te passen.

Een derde doelstelling van het proefschrift is om na te gaan hoe crisis responsstrategieën en crisis timing strategieën zich ten opzichte van elkaar verhouden. Is het belang van een reputatieherstellende crisis responsstrategie afhankelijk van de toegepaste crisis timing strategie? Een vierde opzet is het verklaren van het onderliggende mechanisme van de crisis timing strategieën. Want al wordt de impact van crisis responsstrategieën verklaard vanuit de SCCT, er

is geen eenduidigheid over en onvoldoende onderzoek naar de theoretische verklaringen voor crisis timing strategieën (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Een laatste doelstelling omvat het relatieve belang van crisiscommunicatie ten aanzien van de voorgaande reputatie van een bedrijf. Meer specifiek wordt nagegaan wat het belang is van een goede pre-crisis reputatie voor bedrijven die worden geconfronteerd met een crisis. Want al is crisiscommunicatie cruciaal voor het herstellen van reputatieschade, een algehele goede relatie met de consument kan heel wat reputatieschade vermijden.

Het tweede hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift (Hoofdstuk 2: *Restoring reputations in times of crisis: An experimental study of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory*) omvat een inleidende studie naar de algemene effectiviteit van de richtlijnen van de SCCT. Een experimenteel onderzoek toont in de eerste plaats aan dat bedrijven, zoals wordt verondersteld op basis van de SCCT (Coombs, 2007), het meeste reputatieschade zullen lijden wanneer ze veel verantwoordelijkheid dragen voor een crisis. Bovendien zal de verantwoordelijkheid die bedrijven dragen voor een crisis mee bepalen of de ernst van de crisis de reputatie al dan niet in negatieve zin beïnvloedt. Factoren zoals de ernst van de crisis kunnen de negatieve impact van een crisis namelijk versterken (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). Deze relatie tussen de ernst van de crisis en de post-crisis reputatie wordt echter enkel waargenomen wanneer het bedrijf ook enigszins verantwoordelijk wordt geacht voor die crisis. Wanneer een bedrijf geen enkele schuld heeft aan een negatieve gebeurtenis, zal de ernst ervan geen impact hebben op de post-crisis reputatie.

Een derde bevinding is dat bedrijven de reputatieschade best kunnen herstellen door middel van crisis responsstrategieën waarmee men veel verantwoordelijkheid opneemt (vb., excuses aanbieden). De voornaamste conclusie op basis van de resultaten van de eerste studie is echter dat de richtlijnen van de SCCT niet bevestigd worden. Bedrijven hebben er immers geen baat bij hun crisis responsstrategie aan te passen aan het crisis type, op basis van de richtlijnen van de SCCT. Deze laatste bevinding strookt niet met eerder onderzoek dat vond dat bedrijven best een aangepaste crisis responsstrategie kunnen communiceren (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Huang, 2006). Een tweede onderzoek bestudeert daarom mogelijke modererende variabelen die deze relatie tussen crisis type en crisis responsstrategie verder kunnen verklaren.



Het derde hoofdstuk (Hoofdstuk 3: *What makes crisis response strategies work? The impact of crisis involvement and message framing*) gaat daarom na of deze conflicterende bevindingen kunnen worden verklaard vanuit de mogelijkheid dat het belang van een gepaste crisis responsstrategie afhankelijk is van een aantal factoren gerelateerd aan de crisis en de crisiscommunicatie. Een eerste factor die werd onderzocht in het tweede experimentele onderzoek van dit proefschrift is de mate waarin consumenten betrokken zijn bij de crisis. De literatuur rond crisis communicatie wees eerder reeds op het belang dat de betrokkenheid van consumenten met een crisis kan hebben voor crisiscommunicatie (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Choi & Lin, 2009a). Deze studie bevestigt de assumptie dat de betrokkenheid van consumenten bij een crisis een belangrijke factor is voor de impact van crisiscommunicatie.

Daarnaast bevestigt deze studie ook onderzoek binnen marketing en consumentengedrag dat stelt dat de betrokkenheid van consumenten met een bepaalde aangelegenheid een impact heeft op de mate waarin de inhoud van communicatie erover dan wel de vorm van de boodschap hun attitude zal beïnvloeden (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schuman, 1983; MacInnis, Rao, & Weiss, 2002). De resultaten geven aan dat wanneer consumenten sterk betrokken zijn bij een crisis, het van belang is voor bedrijven om hun crisis responsstrategieën aan te passen aan het crisis type volgens de richtlijnen van de SCCT. Wanneer consumenten echter laag betrokken zijn bij een crisis is het volgen van deze richtlijnen van minder belang.

Een tweede factor die van belang is voor de impact van een crisis responsstrategie die past bij het crisis type, is de manier waarop organisaties hun boodschap kaderen of *framen*, eerder emotioneel of eerder rationeel. Dit is van belang omdat boodschappen die emotioneel worden geframed trachten de emoties van de consument aan te spreken, terwijl rationeel geframede boodschappen mensen aan het denken proberen te zetten (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). De tweede studie toont aan dat wanneer bedrijven hun communicatie rationeel framen, het van belang is dat ze de gepaste crisis responsstrategie geven. Wanneer de communicatie echter emotioneel wordt geframed, speelt het geen rol of de crisis responsstrategie is aangepast aan het crisis type of niet.

Deze studie toont in de eerste plaats aan dat de impact van de richtlijnen van de SCCT afhankelijk is van een aantal factoren, namelijk de betrokkenheid met de crisis en de manier

waarop informatie wordt gekaderd . Daarnaast illustreren de resultaten ook dat bedrijven niet alleen rekening moeten houden met de inhoud van de boodschap (crisis responsstrategie) maar ook met de framing. Terwijl academici binnen de crisiscommunicatie steeds meer aandacht besteden aan de emoties die consumenten ervaren ten gevolge van een crisis of crisiscommunicatie (e.g., Jin, 2009; Choi & Lin, 2009b; Jin & Hong, 2010), suggereert deze studie dat ook de mate waarin bedrijven in crisis emotie uiten van belang kan zijn.

Nadat de eerste twee empirische hoofdstukken dieper zijn ingegaan op het belang van het volgen van de richtlijnen van de SCCT, gaat hoofdstuk vier (Hoofdstuk 4: *Crisis response and crisis timing strategies, two sides of the same coin*) na of bedrijven in crisis wel altijd een crisis responsstrategie moeten geven. Meer bepaald wordt door middel van een experiment nagegaan of het noodzakelijk is voor bedrijven in crisis om een reputatieherstellende crisis responsstrategie toe te voegen aan objectieve informatie met betrekking tot de crisis in het geval van een ex-ante crisis timing strategie. Crisis responsstrategieën worden veelal beschouwd als reacties op beschuldigingen (Coombs, 1998; Hearit, 2006). In deze hoedanigheid werd hun impact dan ook veelal getest in de context van een ex-post crisis timing strategie (e.g., Huang, 2006).

Voorgaand onderzoek toont aan dat wanneer een bedrijf wordt geconfronteerd met een crisis waarvoor het zelf verantwoordelijk is en het reageert op beschuldigingen of aanvallen, het van belang is om niet louter objectieve informatie te geven over de crisis maar ook een crisis responsstrategie toe te voegen (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Deze responsstrategieën zijn van belang omdat ze een organisatie toelaten verantwoordelijkheid op te nemen of af te wijzen. De literatuur rond crisis timing strategieën geeft echter aan dat ook deze strategieën bedrijven toelaten om, zij het meer impliciet, verantwoordelijkheid op te nemen of af te wijzen (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Bijgevolg gaat een derde experiment na of een bedrijf dat geconfronteerd wordt met een crisis waarvoor het zelf verantwoordelijk is, gepast kan communiceren door ofwel de juiste crisis responsstrategie te gebruiken ofwel door de juiste crisis timing strategie toe te passen.

De resultaten bevestigen in de eerste plaats voorgaand onderzoek voor wat betreft de context van een ex-post crisis timing strategie. In dit geval zal een organisatie negatiever worden

geëvalueerd door de consument wanneer er enkel objectieve informatie wordt gegeven, zonder toevoeging van de correcte crisis responsstrategie. Indien men een ex-post crisis timing strategie toepast, is het dus van groot belang om een crisis responsstrategie toe te voegen. Echter, wanneer een bedrijf een ex-ante crisis timing strategie toepast, die toelaat impliciet verantwoordelijkheid op te nemen, speelt het geen rol of men al dan niet een gepaste crisis responsstrategie toevoegt aan de objectieve informatie. Met andere woorden, bedrijven in crisis kunnen vermijden om expliciet de verantwoordelijkheid voor een crisis op te nemen wanneer ze de crisis gewoon zelf als eerste bekendmaken.

Om dieper in te gaan op de werking van deze crisis timing strategieën gaan twee experimenten in hoofdstuk vijf (*Hoofdstuk 5: Old news is no news: How commodity theory explains the desirability and impact of negative publicity depending on organizational crisis timing strategies*) na hoe de impact ervan theoretisch kan worden verklaard. Meer bepaald wordt nagegaan of de commodity theorie een verklaring kan bieden voor een verminderde negatieve impact van een externe aanval in het geval van een ex-ante crisis timing strategie in vergelijking met een ex-post crisis timing strategie (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Mauet, 2007). De commodity theorie geeft aan dat mensen meer waarde hechten aan informatie wanneer deze zeldzaam of moeilijk te verkrijgen is (Brock, 1968). Een ex-post crisis timing strategy kan ertoe leiden dat men informatie over de crisis zeldzaam acht, omdat het bedrijf niet zelf het initiatief neemt om te communiceren. Een ex-ante crisis timing strategie heeft volgens deze theorie dan ook een positieve impact omdat het die perceptie van zeldzaamheid wegneemt, waardoor het belang van de externe aanval vermindert. De resultaten van het eerste experiment bevestigen dat de waarde van een externe aanval voor consumenten daalt wanneer ze worden geconfronteerd met een ex-ante crisis timing strategie.

Deze daling in waarde is tweeledig. Enerzijds kan worden besloten op basis van dit proefschrift dat consumenten minder geneigd zullen zijn aandacht te besteden aan een externe aanval wanneer een bedrijf de crisis zelf heeft bekendgemaakt. Anderzijds wordt er een daling in de impact van de externe aanval waargenomen. Wanneer consumenten toch aandacht besteden aan een externe aanval, zal deze aandacht zich bij een ex-ante crisis timing strategie niet vertalen in een negatievere post-crisis reputatie. Bij een ex-post crisis timing strategie zal de post-crisis

reputatie echter wel meer lijden naarmate consumenten meer aandacht besteden aan een externe aanval. De resultaten van een tweede experiment bieden een dieper inzicht in deze twee soorten informatiewaarde en de impact van crisis timing strategieën. Meer bepaald wordt daarin nagegaan wat de modererende impact is van de betrokkenheid die consumenten hebben met een crisis. De resultaten tonen aan dat in het geval van een ex-post crisis timing strategie de aandacht voor een externe aanval laag zal zijn wanneer consumenten weinig betrokken zijn bij een crisis. Betrokkenheid met de crisis beïnvloedt dus de aandacht voor een externe aanval bij een ex-post crisis timing strategie, echter niet bij een ex-ante crisis timing strategie.

Dit betekent echter niet dat organisaties gerust een ex-post crisis timing strategie kunnen toepassen wanneer de betrokkenheid van consumenten met een crisis laag is. Want de impact van crisis timing strategieën op de impact van de externe aanval wordt niet beïnvloed door de betrokkenheid met de crisis. Wanneer laag betrokken consumenten bij een ex-post crisis timing strategie de aanval toch lezen, zal deze aandacht voor de aanval leiden tot een meer negatieve post-crisis reputatie. Bijgevolg zal een ex-post crisis timing strategie ook bij lage betrokkenheid nefaster zijn dan een ex-ante timing strategie

In hoofdstuk zes (Hoofdstuk 6: *The advantage of stealing thunder: Framing crises in the most beneficial way*) wordt nagegaan hoe bedrijven de efficiëntie van een ex-ante crisis timing strategie verder kunnen verhogen op basis van de framing hypothese. Deze framing hypothese veronderstelt dat een ex-ante crisis timing strategie het voordeel biedt dat bedrijven de negatieve informatie op de meest voordelige manier kunnen framen, gezien het bedrijf als eerste over de crisis communiceert (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993). Bij een ex-post crisis timing strategy zal framing echter minder voordelig zijn gezien een externe partij hiertoe reeds de kans kreeg. Gevalsstudies over de crisiscommunicatie van individuen en organisaties geven aan dat men baat kan hebben bij het emotioneel framen van crisiscommunicatie (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Kauffman, 2008; Legg, 2009). Deze studie illustreert dat in het geval van een ex-ante crisis timing strategie de boodschap best emotioneel wordt geframed. Bijgevolg laat een ex-ante crisis timing strategie bedrijven toe om hun reputatie verder te vrijwaren of herstellen door middel van emotionele framing. Bij een ex-post crisis timing strategie werd geen impact waargenomen van framing.

Bedrijven moeten tijdens een crisis dus niet alleen rekening houden met de inhoud en de timing van hun boodschappen, maar ook met hoe ze deze boodschap brengen: emotioneel of rationeel. Bovendien toont deze studie aan hoe dit positieve effect van emotionele framing bij een ex-ante crisis timing strategie kan worden verklaard. Wanneer een bedrijf emotioneel communiceert, zullen consumenten geneigd zijn deze organisatie oprechter te percipiëren, wat vervolgens resulteert in een betere post-crisis reputatie. Deze studie bevestigt dan ook het vermoeden dat oprechtheid van groot belang kan zijn voor het welslagen van crisiscommunicatie (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002).

Tot slot onderzoekt het zevende en laatste empirisch hoofdstuk (Hoofdstuk 7: *The impact of the halo effect in organizational crisis communication: The benefits of a good reputation*) het belang van een algehele positieve reputatie van een organisatie voor de crisis, in het voorkomen van crisisschade. De resultaten tonen aan dat, zelfs wanneer een bedrijf een ex-ante crisis timing strategie hanteert, het erg voordelig kan zijn om een goede reputatie te hebben voorafgaand aan de crisis. Bedrijven met een positieve pre-crisis reputatie zullen minder reputatieverlies lijden door een crisis dan bedrijven met een negatieve pre-crisis reputatie. Deze bevinding bevestigt het bestaan van een halo-effect van een positieve reputatie in tijden van crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006). Bovendien toont het onderzoek aan dat dit halo-effect kan worden verklaard door de attributies van verantwoordelijkheid die consumenten toekennen aan het bedrijf in kwestie. Wanneer een bedrijf een positieve pre-crisis reputatie had, zal het minder verantwoordelijk worden geacht voor de crisis en bijgevolg minder reputatieverlies lijden.

Naast bescherming tegen de crisis op zich, kan een positieve pre-crisis reputatie een organisatie ook beschermen tegen externe aanvallen. Want enkel indien een bedrijf een negatieve voorgaande reputatie heeft, zal een externe aanval tot meer reputatieschade leiden dan wanneer er geen aanval aanwezig is. Wanneer een bedrijf een positieve pre-crisis reputatie heeft zal een externe aanval geen invloed uitoefenen op de post-crisis reputatie. Pre-crisis reputatie wordt door de SCCT (Coombs, 2007) een versterkende factor genoemd, gezien het de impact van een crisis kan verminderen of versterken, evenals de impact van crisiscommunicatie. Deze laatste studie bevestigt het belang van de pre-crisis reputatie van een bedrijf als versterkende factor. Wanneer een bedrijf een ex-ante crisis timing strategie toepast, kan een daaropvolgende aanval toch nog

nefast zijn indien het bedrijf een negatieve pre-crisis reputatie had. Naast het belang van pre-crisis reputatie als versterkende factor geeft deze studie aan dat zelfs wanneer bedrijven de best mogelijke crisis communicatie strategie hanteren, het van groot belang is om dag na dag te zorgen voor een positieve reputatie om zo schade in crisistijden te beperken.

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**CHAPTER 1**  
**INTRODUCTION**

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# CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

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## 1 DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The past few decades, several cases have illustrated the impact that communication can have on stakeholders' perceptions of organizations in crisis. In 1989 an oil tanker, the Exxon Valdez, hit a reef in Alaska causing a huge oil spill (Williams & Olaniran, 1994). Following that spill, Exxon got involved in a public relations nightmare. Exxon failed however, in its attempt to communicate the most appropriate response strategy to the public. In 2010, the oil-rig Deepwater Horizon - a platform licensed to BP - exploded, resulting in the deaths of eleven workers and an enormous oil-spill in the Gulf of Mexico (Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011). The consequences of this crisis surpassed those of its predecessor, the Exxon Valdez, in terms of the amount of oil being discharged into the water. The public relations efforts of BP were no more effective however, than those of Exxon (cf. Figure one). The case of BP illustrates that organizations nowadays have not learned from the past and are still insufficiently aware of the impact, both positive and negative, that communication can have in times of crisis (Benson, 1988; Coombs, 2007a).



Fig. 1: Examples of redesigned BP-logos as criticism on how BP handled the oil spill

(Retrieved from <http://climatechangesocialchange.wordpress.com/2010/06/20/bp-restricts-media-can%E2%80%99t-restrict-oil/>,  
<http://therealviews.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/bp-ready-for-lengthy-oil-spill-trial/>,  
<http://www.logodesignlove.com/bp-logo-redesign>)

It is important to make organizations aware of the implications of certain crisis communication strategies since they are not only concerned with reputational concerns but also with legal and financial ones (Coombs, 2007b). These latter concerns may hinder them from communicating in the most optimal way. Legal departments might for instance be reluctant to offer an apology, since this is associated with higher costs due to potential litigation (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). An admission of guilt could be used against organizations in crisis during lawsuits (Huang & Su, 2009). In addition, legal departments may also tend to discourage the self-disclosure of crises, hoping that a crisis can stay hidden. However, not communicating in the most appropriate way can cause huge reputational damage (Coombs, 2004). Communication managers should therefore be given a certain level of autonomy in times of crisis, so they can set out the correct strategy. Only when the communication department in an organization has the freedom to implement the necessary strategies, the informational needs of the relevant audiences will be served adequately and the organizational reputation can be safeguarded or restored (Marra, 1998).

This dissertation aims at investigating the efficacy of different dimensions of crisis communication in order to make organizations aware of the importance of crisis communication on the one hand, and to offer guidelines for applying crisis communication strategies on the other hand. Before discussing the specific research questions that this dissertation tries to answer, the determinants of an organizational crisis are discussed in order to define the research context. Then, a general description is offered of crisis communication and of the specific crisis communication strategies organizations can apply to minimize reputation damage. An overview of the most important literature on each crisis communication strategy is subsequently offered. This literature results in a number of research questions which form the starting point for this dissertation. The end of the introduction offers a brief overview of each chapter.

## 1.1 Organizational crisis

Organizations are very likely to be confronted with a crisis during their life cycle (Shrivastava & Siomkos, 1989). Coombs (2007c) synthesized definitions of a crisis as follows: *“A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of*

*stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes*" (p. 2-3). This definition stresses three important elements related to crises. Namely that a crisis is unpredictable, that it is determined by the way stakeholders perceive it and that it results in negative outcomes. A stakeholder is anyone that can affect or be affected by an organization's actions (Mitchell, Angle, & Wood, 1997). Organizations usually consider shareholders, employees, customers, governments and communities as important stakeholders (Agle, Mitchell, & Sonnenfeld, 1999). The most important stakeholders in terms of organizational crisis communication with the aim of reputation repair are consumers (Yuksel & Mryteza, 2009; Lin, Chen, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). This stakeholder group forms the focus of this dissertation.

The first important characteristic of a crisis is that it is unpredictable. Some crises can be anticipated (Benoit, 1997). However, even if companies know that a certain crisis could hit, it is fairly impossible to assess when it will occur (Coombs, 2007b). As such, oil companies such as Exxon and BP could have foreseen the possibility of an oil spill. However the moment and circumstances in which it would happen are usually unpredictable. Even though a significant part of crisis management is devoted to preventing crises, it is a misunderstanding that an organization can avoid or prevent all possible crises (Coombs, 1999).

A second important notion in the definition of a crisis is the importance of how stakeholders perceive them (Coombs, 2007c). The importance of this perceptual nature of crises is illustrated by the Coca Cola crisis. In 1999, Belgian school children became ill after drinking Coca Cola (Taylor, 2000). While research could not find any harmful substances in the product, consumers were worried and the Belgium government ordered a recall of all bottles of Coca Cola. The organization was in crisis, because stakeholders had the perception that it was culpable even when it was not.

A third crucial element in the definition is that crises result in negative outcomes for the organization. A crucial negative outcome of a crisis is reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Coombs, 2007a). Corporate reputation, or how stakeholders perceive an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), is an important factor for

competitive advantage of organizations (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2002). It influences commercial opportunities, sales and profit (Groenland, 2002). Whether an organization is commercial, governmental or not-for-profit, a good reputation paves the organizational path to approval by stakeholders (Watson, 2007). The detrimental impact of a crisis on organizational reputation is the focus of most crisis communication research, since the correct communication may minimize these reputational harms (Coombs, 2002).

These three elements determine whether organizations are in crisis and if they should communicate about it. The moment in which crisis communication should be initiated is determined by the crisis life cycle (Coombs, 2007c). Most crises involve three stages (Coombs, 2007c, Falkheimer & Heide, 2006), each of which demands a specific approach (Coombs, 2007c). The first stage is the *pre-crisis stage*. In this stage, organizations detect signals which alert them about an upcoming crisis. The pre-crisis stage involves actions taken to prevent the crisis or, if necessary, to prepare the organization for the upcoming crisis. The second stage is the *crisis event*. This stage begins with a trigger event that forms the start of the crisis. It ends when the crisis has resolved. Crisis communication strategies are usually situated in this stage of the crisis. It is the stage in which the pressure on the organization is highest (Larkin, 2003). The third and last stage is the *post-crisis stage*, in which the crisis is resolved and the organization must take evaluative actions (Coombs, 2007c). The organization draws conclusions, based on which it takes steps to be better prepared for a future crisis.

## 1.2 Organizational crisis communication

Communication can influence how stakeholders interpret a crisis and the organization in crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Crisis communication can serve two functions. First, organizations should use crisis communication to inform stakeholders. Second, crisis communication can also serve to repair the reputation damage caused by a crisis. Before organizations attempt to protect their reputation by means of communication, their first priority in any crisis should be to protect stakeholders (Coombs, 2007a). Organizations should first offer stakeholders instructing and adjusting information (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

*Instructing information* involves information that stakeholders can use to protect themselves from the physical threat of a crisis (Coombs, 2004, 2007a). Organizations confronted with product failure should for instance offer information about products that are being recalled. *Adjusting information* helps stakeholders deal with stress resulting from the crisis by expressing concern for the victims, explaining what happened, and taking corrective action when possible. In 2007, toy manufacturer Mattel was confronted with a product recall due to the fact that some toys contained poisoned lead paint and others contained magnets that could come off and get swallowed by little children. In response to these events Mattel initiated a three-stage safety check in their production process to make sure such a crisis would never happen again. This adjusting information was clearly indicated on a special web page (cf. Figure two). The studies in this dissertation involve crises which are already passed the urgent state in which instructing and adjusting information is needed. The focus is on the reputation restoring phase of crisis communication.



Fig. 2: Mattel product recall, adjusting information

(Retrieved from <http://prspeak.wordpress.com/2007/10/01/mattel-a-pr-fiasco/>)

Organizations often attempt to restore their reputation by means of crisis response strategies. *Crisis response strategies* refer to how organizations communicate and act after a crisis

(Coombs, 2004, 2007a). These strategies attempt to convince stakeholders there is no crisis (e.g., denial), make stakeholders perceive the crisis as less negative (e.g., justification) or by make them evaluate the organization more favorably (e.g., apology) (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). In essence, crisis response strategies are the content of organizational crisis communication. According to Coombs (1999), reputation restoring crisis communication can have an impact through its content on the one hand and through its form on the other hand. Most of the crisis communication literature focuses on the content. The other focus is the manner in which crisis communication is presented. One of the main recommendations in terms of the presentation of crisis communication is that it should be active and open. This concern is reflected in the research on crisis timing strategies, which has received little research attention so far.

*Crisis timing strategies* refer to the timing when crisis information is released, which can be equally important as the content (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). In this respect, research recommends proactive crisis communication (Coombs, 1999), since communication is less effective the further along the crisis life cycle it is initiated (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). It is important to investigate the outcomes of these crisis timing strategies as well as those of crisis response strategies, and to study the conditions under which they are more or less effective (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011). A thorough investigation of the impact of crisis communication on organizational reputation restoration therefore entails the consideration of both crisis response and timing strategies.

## 2 CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES

### 2.1 Precursors

The research on crisis response strategies originated in the field of rhetorical speech and in the domain of social sciences. Research on rhetorical **apologia**, “*the speech of self-defense*” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 273), was a first step in descriptive research examining the possible crisis response strategies available to individuals and organizations when accused of a misdeed (Benoit, 1995). Four major apologia strategies were identified. In the case of *denial*, the rhetor



declares having done nothing wrong. *Bolstering* implies that a speaker tries to associate him- or herself with a different object or action, which is evaluated more positively by the audience. *Differentiation* attempts to differentiate between the rhetor and the negative event, hoping that the audience would no longer be hostile toward the speaker. Finally, *transcendence* places the negative event into a broader and more favorable context by appealing to higher values as a rationale for the misdeed (Benoit, 2006).

Besides in the field of rhetorics, the basics for the current research on crisis response strategies in organizational crisis communication can also be found in the social science research on **accounts** (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1998). An account is “*a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior*” (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p.46). The purpose is to save face and maintain social relationships (Buttny, 1993). According to this field of research, people are concerned with their image, and want others to view their behavior as favorable (Benoit, 1995). When a threat to their image arises due to a misdeed, they offer accounts in order to resolve an unbalance in their relationship with others. Accounts are generally classified as either excuses or justifications (Benoit, 1995). *Excuses* attempt to minimize the actor’s responsibility for a negative event while *justifications* attempt to convince an audience that the events were not as negative as they are perceived to be (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Benoit, 1995). When an account is honored, the response was effective and the equilibrium in the social relationship is restored (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

The first attempt in developing a theoretical framework of crisis response strategies in the context of crisis communication research was the **image restoration theory** (Benoit, 1995). The theory was developed for both individuals and organizations in crisis. According to Benoit (1997), the basic communication strategies in times of crisis are the same for both individuals and organizations. The only difference may be that, for instance, the legal department of organizations may advise them to avoid certain strategies in order to minimize the litigation risks. The image restoration theory is based on the assumption that crisis communication serves the goal of restoring reputational damage (Benoit, 1995). In addition, the theory argues that individuals or organizations should use crisis response strategies when a crisis results from an undesirable act and when the person or the organization is responsible for it. This theory is

deeply rooted in both the literature on apologia and accounts. The main purpose of the image restoration theory is also to investigate the crisis response strategies that individuals or organizations in crisis use to react to crises (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007a). Benoit synthesized the lists of crisis response strategies developed from apologia and accounts in order to form a typology of so called image restoration strategies (cf. Table one).

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Key Characteristic</i>
<i>Denial</i>	
Simple Denial	Did Not Perform Act
Shift the Blame	Act Performed by Another
<i>Evasion of Responsibility</i>	
Provocation	Responded to Act of Another
Defeasibility	Lack of Information or Ability
Accident	Act Was a Mishap
Good Intentions	Meant Well in Act
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</i>	
Bolstering	Stress Good Traits
Minimization	Act Not Serious
Differentiation	Act Less Offensive
Transcendence	More Important Considerations
Attack Accuser	Reduce Credibility of Accuser
Compensation	Reimburse Victim
<i>Corrective Action</i>	Plan to Solve or Prevent Problem
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize for Act

Table 1: Image restoration strategies

(Benoit, 1997, p. 179)

The typology of image restoration strategies offered by Benoit (1995, 1997) comprises of five broad categories of which three have subcategories. First, people or organizations can use *denial* by either simply denying the occurrence of an act or the responsibility for it. Second, an option is to *evade responsibility*, by stating that the act was provoked, that one had little control over the situation, that it was accidental or that one's intentions were good. Third, people or

organizations in crisis can try to *reduce the offensiveness* experienced by an audience by strengthening the audience's positive affect for the rhetor, minimizing the negative affect associated with the events, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser or offering compensation. Fourth, the response can involve communication about a *corrective action* that was taken to restore the situation as it was before the crisis. Finally, the accused can admit full responsibility and ask for forgiveness by means of *mortification*. If the audience considers that the apology is sincere, it may forgive the negative events (Benoit, 1997).

Benoit's (1995) typology has mainly been applied to case studies, in order to analyze the crisis communication of individuals and organizations. Some examples of organizational crises that were analyzed are the product recall of tires from the Bridgestone-Firestone Corporation (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002) and Duke University's response to the charges of rape against members of its lacrosse team (Fortunato, 2008). Most case studies however involve politicians, such as George Bush's communication about the casualties in Iraq (Benoit, 2006) or celebrities, such as the appearance of a picture of Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps smoking from a marijuana pipe in a British tabloid (Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). These case studies usually analyze which of Benoit's (1995, 1997) image restoration strategies were applied. Then, based on for instance information of surveys conducted by news media (Benoit, 2006), the effectiveness of the strategy is estimated.

The case studies conducted based on the image restoration theory offered a good starting point for research on crisis communication by determining the available crisis response strategies (Hobbs, 1995). Critics argue however, that this method is too descriptive and that the theory does not indicate how organizations should use the strategies (Coombs, 1999). Still, a lot of research focuses on descriptive case studies based on the image restoration theory. A number of problems can be identified when taking these case studies into regard. First, only a few case studies examine the contents of media reports (e.g., articles, press releases) systematically (Holladay, 2009). Often conclusions are drawn without any empirical proof. For instance, a case study on the crisis communication of the Catholic Church, after an excommunicated bishop, who had denied the existence of the Holocaust, was allowed back into the Church, concluded that the Pope's image was damaged (Garcia, 2010). However, the impact of the crisis was not

empirically established. The author noted that “*there was no empirical data about how the Pope’s image may have been eroded from this incident*” (Garcia, 2010, p. 71).

Secondly, many of the case studies that appear nowadays attempt to claim theoretical relevance by arguing that they investigate the apology or image restoration strategies for a new domain. The relevance of case studies has for example been based on the premise that little research had been conducted to analyze the response strategies in the context of sports (Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011), pedophile scandals (Courtright & Hearit, 2000), health crises (Park, 2008) and nations (Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009). However, most of these studies draw conclusions about the apology or image restoration strategies in a certain domain based on only one specific case. Even when they compare the results of several case studies within the same context, these analyses are not conducted systematically. In addition, the analyses are not compared to the results of case studies in other contexts. Therefore, these case studies cannot conclude if or how crisis communication differs between different contexts or domains.

While these case studies have definitely been useful as a first step in crisis communication to determine the available crisis response strategies, recent research has initiated the examination of how organizations should use them (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). In a desire to establish how the characteristics of each specific crisis determine the effectiveness of each crisis response strategy, Coombs (2007a) developed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT).

## 2.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The SCCT (Coombs, 2007a) wants to offer guidelines to select a crisis response strategy that is appropriate for the crisis type. While the image restoration theory offers no conceptual link between the crisis situation and the crisis response strategies, the SCCT offers a framework that matches both (Coombs, 2007a). The SCCT’s basic premise is that an organization should apply a crisis response strategy which allows taking as much responsibility for the crisis as stakeholders have attributed to the organization. In order to be able to do this, the SCCT established three

crisis clusters based on the amount of responsibility attributed to the organization and three clusters of crisis response strategies based on the amount of responsibility the organization takes.

The SCCT divided the crisis types into three clusters based on attribution theory. Attribution theory focuses on the universal concern with explanation (Weiner, 2000): It “*is a theory about how people make causal explanations, about how they answer questions beginning with “why?”*” (Kelley, 1973, p. 107). Stakeholders that are confronted with an organizational crisis are likely to act like naïve scientists; searching underlying causes for the events they observe (Kelley, 1973; Dean, 2004). More specifically, stakeholders will attribute a certain degree of crisis responsibility to the organization in crisis (Coombs, 2007a). The threat of a crisis is mainly a function of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007b). The more stakeholders attribute crisis responsibility to the organization, the more the organizational reputation suffers (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

Coombs and Holladay (2002) conducted a cluster analysis of several crisis types based on the attributed organizational responsibility (cf. Table two). Three crisis type clusters were developed: the victim, the accidental, and the preventable cluster (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007a). The *victim cluster* entails crises with weak attributions of organizational responsibility (e.g., product tampering). In this case, the organization is a victim of the crisis as well as its stakeholders, not a cause of the crisis. The *accidental cluster* involves crises with a certain, but low level of responsibility attribution to the organization (e.g., technical-error product recall). In these crisis types the organization did not intend for the negative events to occur. Many organizations are confronted with accidental crises because they often result from a danger associated with the organization’s operation. The *preventable cluster* incorporates crises with high perceptions of crisis responsibility (e.g., organizational misdeed with injuries). These crisis types imply that the organization intentionally placed stakeholders at risk, knowingly violated laws or regulations or did not take necessary precautions to prevent the crisis.

<p>Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.  (Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Natural disaster:</i> Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.</li> <li><i>Rumor:</i> False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.</li> <li><i>Workplace violence:</i> Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.</li> <li><i>Product tampering/Malevolence:</i> External agent causes damage to an organization.</li> </ul> <p>Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.  (Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Challenges:</i> Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.</li> <li><i>Technical-error accidents:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.</li> <li><i>Technical-error product harm:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.</li> </ul> <p>Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation.  (Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Human-error accidents:</i> Human error causes an industrial accident.</li> <li><i>Human-error product harm:</i> Human error causes a product to be recalled.</li> <li><i>Organizational misdeed with no injuries:</i> Stakeholders are deceived without injury.</li> <li><i>Organizational misdeed management misconduct:</i> Laws or regulations are violated by management.</li> <li><i>Organizational misdeed with injuries:</i> Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.</li> </ul>
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Table 2: Crisis types  
(Coombs, 2007a, p. 168)

In addition to the crisis type, organizations should take some *intensifying factors* into account. These factors are characteristics of the crisis other than the crisis type which may affect perceptions of organizational responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007a). While the first step in estimating the reputational threat is to determine the initial organizational responsibility generated by the crisis type, the second step involves an analysis of the crisis history of the organization, its pre-crisis reputation and the severity of the crisis. While the crisis type determines the basic amount of crisis responsibility that is attributed to the organization, the presence of these intensifying factors may require an increased estimation of responsibility.

*Crisis history* is determined by whether or not an organization was confronted with similar crises in the past (Coombs, 2007a). If so, this would suggest that the organization may have an ongoing problem which urgently needs to be addressed. The *pre-crisis reputation* is how

stakeholders perceived the organization before the crisis hit. An additional important factor which has been suggested as a potential intensifying factor in the past is the *severity of the crisis* (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Severity is defined as the amount of financial, human and environmental damage that is inflicted by a crisis. When an organization has a crisis history or an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation, or when the crisis is highly severe, the reputational threat intensifies because the organization will be considered more responsible (Shrivastava & Siomkos, 1989; Coombs, 2007a). Consequently, if one of these factors is present, a victim crisis should be treated like an accidental crisis and an accidental crisis like a preventable crisis.

Similar to the crisis types, Coombs (2007a) divided the crisis response strategies into three clusters which can be placed on a continuum based on the amount of responsibility that the organization takes or rejects for the crisis. The origin of this continuum stems from attribution theory and prior studies in crisis communication (Coombs, 1998). While previous research has attempted to range the crisis response strategies on continuums (McLaughlin, Cody, & O'Hair, 1983; Marcus & Goodman, 1991) these lacked any connection to the typologies of crisis types (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Coombs (2007a) developed his typology of crisis response strategies based on attribution theory. Responsibility forms a link between the two typologies (cf. Table three).

*Primary crisis response strategies*

Deny crisis response strategies

*Attack the accuser:* Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.

*Denial:* Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.

*Scapegoat:* Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

Diminish crisis response strategies

*Excuse:* Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

*Justification:* Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

Rebuild crisis response strategies

*Compensation:* Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.

*Apology:* Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

*Secondary crisis response strategies*

Bolstering crisis response strategies

*Reminder:* Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.

*Ingatiation:* Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.

*Victimage:* Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

Table 3: Crisis response strategies

(Coombs, 2007a, p. 168)

The first type of crisis response strategies are *rebuild strategies* (Coombs, 2007a). These strategies attempt to improve the organization's reputation by offering material and/or symbolic aid to stakeholders. The organization takes full responsibility for the crisis. The communication manager takes action and communicates in a way which is beneficial to stakeholders in order to diminish the harms of the crisis. There are two specific strategies in this first cluster, namely offering compensation and apologizing for the crisis (Coombs, 2004). When News of the World, a British Sunday Tabloid, was impeached because of a large scale eavesdropping scandal that involved hacking into voicemails in order to get scoops, CEO Rupert Murdoch offered a public apology (cf. Figure three).





Fig. 3: Apology Rupert Murdoch for eavesdropping scandal News of the World  
(Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jul/15/rupert-murdoch-sorry-ad-campaign>)

A second cluster of crisis response strategies is the *diminish cluster*, in which the organization tries to minimize either the severity of the crisis by means of justification or it tries to minimize its own responsibility for the crisis by means of excuses (Coombs, 2004). This way the organization attempts to weaken the connection between the organization and the crisis or to make stakeholders view the crisis less negatively, in order to reduce the detrimental impact of the crisis (Coombs, 2007a). A recent example of an attempt to offer justification was the communication of former CEO of BP, Tony Hayward, in response to the oil spill. He claimed that the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was relatively small compared to the very large ocean.

The third cluster involves the *deny crisis response strategies*, by means of which organizations try to deny the existence of a crisis or try to show that they are not responsible for it (Coombs, 2004). When a violent storm hit the Belgian festival Pukkelpop in 2011, several visitors got hurt and some of them died due to the fact that constructions on the festival terrain and camping fell down. The organizer, Chokri Mahassine, said that the festival is one of the safest there is and refuted all responsibility. Deny strategies are thus used when an organization refutes all responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2007a). Crisis damage may be averted when stakeholders accept the denial.

In addition to these three basic strategies, organizations can add *bolstering strategies* (Coombs, 2004). These bolstering strategies offer an opportunity to additionally conduct reputation repair (Coombs, 2007a). Organizations can remind stakeholders of past good works and their positive relationship in the past. For instance, when Mattel was confronted with a large product recall the organization reminded consumers of its long standing safety record (cf. Figure four). Another option is to praise stakeholders for the efforts they have made during the crisis. The organizer of the Belgian festival Pukkelpop for instance repeatedly thanked the visitors of the festival for their understanding and patience during the first moments after the storm, when information was scarce. Finally, organizations may try to evoke sympathy if they are able to cast themselves as a victim of the crisis. After the storm, Pukkelpop was cancelled. Visitors got the opportunity to recover part of the money they paid for the ticket. However, the organization stressed that the festival would have to struggle for the next couple of years due to the events. Visitors were told that they could help to support the future of the festival by not retrieving the compensation.

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**because your children are our children, too**

Dear Fellow Parents,

Many of us at Mattel are parents ourselves. And like you, we know that nothing is more important than the safety of our children. As you may know, Mattel has recently voluntarily recalled some products for two different reasons: impermissible use of lead paint and risks associated with small, high-powered magnets.

We want to ensure that every parent is aware of these issues, returns affected products to us and knows that we have already taken significant actions to further ensure the safety of our toys.

We hope that we don't have to recall any more products, but if we do, we pledge to address the matter promptly and to inform you quickly.

Our long record of safety at Mattel is why we're one of the most trusted names with parents. And it is our sincere hope that the actions we are taking now will maintain that trust in the future.

Thank you for your continued trust.

Bob Eckert  
Chairman & Chief Executive Officer  
Mattel, Inc.

**MESSAGE FROM CHAIRMAN & CEO**

**RECALL DETAILS & TOY LISTINGS**

Please carefully review and share facts with family and friends who may benefit from the information.

**Products Affected By Lead Paint**

- › [Fisher-Price \(multiple products\)](#)
- › ["CARS" Sarge Character \(2 products\)](#)

Fig. 4: Mattel product recall, bolstering crisis response strategy

(Retrieved from <http://marksilva.wordpress.com/2007/08/17/pr-search-optimization-mattel-case/>)

These bolstering strategies are secondary strategies that are best used as supplements to the three primary strategies (i.e., rebuild, diminish or deny) (Coombs, 2007a). Concerning the primary strategies, organizations should maintain consistency. Crisis response strategies are most effective when they are only combined with strategies from the same cluster. Mixing deny crisis response strategies with diminish strategies or rebuild strategies for instance erodes the effectiveness of the organizational response. The choice between the primary response strategies should be based on the crisis type (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs, 2007a). The basic premise of the SCCT is that organizations should select a crisis response strategy based on the amount of responsibility for the crisis that is attributed to them by stakeholders (Coombs, 2007a). This implies that organizations should use a deny crisis response strategy in the case of a victim crisis, a diminish crisis response strategy in the case of an accidental crisis and a rebuild crisis response strategy in the case of a preventable crisis.

So far, little research has been conducted to test the guidelines of the SCCT for matching crisis response strategies to crisis types. Coombs and Holladay (1996) conducted a study based on previous typologies of crisis types and crisis response strategies and confirmed that matched responses result in more positive organizational images than either no response strategy or a mismatched response. These results provide some experimental support for the basic premises of the SCCT. Huang (2006) drew similar conclusions from content analyses of political crisis situations and the strategies politicians used to manage them. The typology used by Huang (2006) slightly differed from the one proposed by the SCCT (Coombs, 2007a). But the study also found that a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis types in terms of the taken responsibility for the crisis resulted in more positive media coverage than mismatched responses. However, more experimental research is needed in order to confirm the matching principle of the SCCT. Also, no studies have examined the conditions under which it is more or less important for organizations to offer a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis type.

The development of the SCCT resulted in increased experimental research on crisis response strategies (Avery, Lariscy, & Hocke, 2010). Most of those studies are inspired by or based on the theory (e.g., Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). Even though these response strategies are very important for organizations that want to restore a damaged reputation in times of crisis, crisis managers should beware of using them in order to dodge responsibility (Coombs, 2002). Even if stakeholders perceive the level of organizational responsibility for a crisis low, it is not wise to apply a crisis response strategy which does not reflect the actual level of responsibility. When a company is at fault, it should admit this immediately, because this is the morally correct thing to do. An attempt to deny the crisis responsibility may backfire in the end (Benoit, 1997). Moreover, in today's corporate world secrets are likely to surface eventually. Revelations of deception by an organization in crisis may trigger a new reputational crisis and inflict further reputational damage (Coombs, 2002). When a female PhD-student was raped on a Belgian research ship by a military, the Belgian Defense did not communicate this to the press. When a newspaper found out about these events, the story that was written did not focus on the criminal offense that was committed. The newspaper accused the Belgian Defense of trying to cover-up the events. Organizations can avoid such crises by disclosing negative events at the right moment and applying the best crisis timing strategy.

### 3 CRISIS TIMING STRATEGIES

#### 3.1 Definition

Crisis communication literature stresses the importance of activeness of crisis communication (Seeger, 2006; Huang & Su, 2009). Active crisis communication implies that organizations take the initiative in a crisis and actively communicate the information they have. This way, stakeholders may consider the organization honest and evaluate it more favorably. This importance of activeness is reflected in the research on crisis timing strategies (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Organizations can basically apply two crisis timing strategies. They can either use an ex-ante crisis timing strategy or choose to be less proactive by means of an ex-post crisis timing strategy. The former is commonly referred to as *stealing thunder*, which implies that an organization “*breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties*” (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425). Stealing thunder in the context of crisis communication involves the admission of a mistake or failures before external parties announce it. The latter crisis timing strategy is referred to as *thunder*, and implies that an organization waits for inquiries from the media or other external sources and responds afterwards (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

It is generally advised for organizations to apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, since this reduces the negative impact of crisis information on stakeholders (Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Mauet, 2007). The use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is highly feasible when organizations are aware that the spread of incriminating information is unavoidable (Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995). Moreover, research in social psychology suggests it is most crucial to self-disclose negative events whenever one is highly responsible for them (Jones & Gordon, 1972; Archer & Burleson, 1980). Since we live in a corporate world where secrets are likely to surface eventually, and revelations of such secrets can trigger new reputational crises (Coombs, 2002), the self-disclosure of crises is a reasonable option. If organizations choose to apply an ex-post crisis timing strategy the crisis damage might be all the more detrimental when the crisis surfaces (Mauet, 2007). Several theoretical streams have been offered to explain both the

positive and negative effects of the application of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy in comparison to an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

### 3.2 Potential risks of self-disclosure

Research supports the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy in minimizing organizational reputational damage due to crises (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011). Nevertheless, communication professionals often have conflicting views regarding this strategy (Kline, Simunich, & Weber, 2009). Literature offers a number of theoretical explanations for the potential negative impact of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. A first potential risk involved in the strategy is a backfiring effect. When stakeholders consider the ex-ante crisis timing strategy to be merely a public relations trick, the intended effect can diminish completely (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). This is however a consideration which can be made for every form of organizational communication and should not be a reason to discount the potential of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy.

A second demer is that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can create a negative schema. Research on crisis timing strategies in the field of trial studies remarks that the information heard at the beginning of a trial is likely to create a primacy effect by setting up a schema that jury members may use to interpret any later evidence (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993). A self-disclosure can create a negative early impression and bias people's perception of the remaining evidence (Dolnik et al., 2003). However, this argumentation can also be reversed. If an organization is considered positively due to its self-disclosure (Huang & Su, 2009), stakeholders may be biased in favor of that organization for the remaining of the crisis.

A third potential disadvantage may be that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy reduces all potential doubts about the veracity of the negative information offered (Dolnik et al., 2003). However, organizations may choose to reveal incriminating information before someone else does and then refute it (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962; Wan & Pfau, 2004). Or they can simply offer objective information about a negative event without taking explicit responsibility for it. A fourth and last consideration is that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy might be detrimental

because it makes negative information increasingly available. This consideration is made because an ex-ante crisis timing strategy implies that the organization self-discloses information before an external party does. The same negative information is thus communicated twice, causing it to be more salient and better remembered by stakeholders (Williams et al., 1993; Dolnik et al., 2003).

### 3.3 Explanatory mechanisms for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy

Despite the potential negative effects, a number of theoretical frameworks has been offered to explain the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy in minimizing reputational damage. On the one hand, the change of meaning hypothesis and disconfirmation of expectations theory explain how the mere application of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can have a positive impact on stakeholders' evaluations of the organization compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Commodity theory and inoculation theory on the other hand argue that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can also be beneficial since it has the potential to diminish the detrimental impact of negative publicity subsequent to the crisis. Finally, the framing hypothesis illustrates an additional benefit of applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy.

A first theoretical explanation for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is offered by the **disconfirmation of expectations theory** (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). It proposes that the impact of messages is affected by the reasons people attribute to communicators' advocated positions (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). Stakeholders expect communicators to exhibit both a knowledge bias and reporting bias during crises. The former implies that spokespersons' messages may be biased since the information they have stems from the organization, which is a concerned party. The information is therefore expected to be colored and one-sided. The latter means that spokespersons' willingness to convey certain forms of information is compromised (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Due to these biases, stakeholders expect that spokespersons only communicate what is good for the organization.

When organizations apply an ex-post crisis timing strategy, the biases of the stakeholders are confirmed. When organizations in crisis apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, stakeholders'

negative expectancies are disconfirmed however, which results in greater credibility of the organization (Williams et al., 1993; Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Research on organizational crisis communication confirms the explanatory value of the disconfirmation of expectations theory. As such, news reporters were found to consider public relations practitioners more credible in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003) and stakeholders consider an organization applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy more credible, leading to lower perceptions of crisis severity (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

The positive impact of the application of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy on stakeholders' evaluations of an organization in crisis is also explained by the **change of meaning hypothesis**. This explanatory mechanism assumes that stakeholders find it odd when an organization self-discloses negative information (Williams et al., 1993). This self-disclosure is expected to result in an inconsistency in the eyes of those stakeholders, who attempt to resolve that inconsistency by changing the meaning of the disclosure in order to make it more consistent to their expectations of the organization (Williams et al., 1993; Arpan & Pompper, 2003). They may consider the disclosure as less severe, which is consistent to their expectation that organizations would not self-disclose severely negative information about themselves. Arpan and Pompper (2003) did not find proof for the change of meaning hypothesis in a context of organizational crisis communication. They investigated the impact of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy versus an ex-post crisis timing strategy on perceptions of crisis severity by news reporters. The study revealed that journalists did not downplay the crisis severity when the events were self-disclosed by an organization.

**Inoculation theory** posits that people protect their beliefs against dissonant information the same way they would try to protect themselves from diseases (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962). Just as people build disease resistance by means of a vaccine that pre-exposes them to a weakened form of the virus, organizations in crisis can develop resistance to the impact of negative publicity by pre-exposing stakeholders to weakened forms of an external attack (Easley et al., 1995). Past research has shown that the principles of the inoculation theory can be applied to crisis communication (Wan & Pfau, 2004). However, inoculation theory, contrary to literature on crisis timing strategies, claims that in order for self-disclosure to be effective in diminishing



the harms of negative publicity, the negative information disclosed should be refuted by the organization (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962). Yet, while organizations that apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy could refute incriminating information about the negative event that is being disclosed, this is not necessary. Prior research shows that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy results in a better post-crisis reputation than an ex-post crisis timing strategy even when incriminating information is not refuted (Dolnik et al., 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

Another theory which can explain how an ex-ante crisis timing strategy diminishes the harms of an external attack is commodity theory. **Commodity theory**'s basic premise is that "*any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is unavailable*" (Brock, 1968, p.246). Williams et al. (1993) argue that the value attached to information is comparable to the value attached to a commodity. As such, similar to commodities, the scarcer the information stakeholders receive on a certain topic, the more valuable it is expected to be. Consequently, if an organization tries to conceal a negative event, the information about it will be more effective when used in an attack, because stakeholders consider it to be more valuable. Once an organization disclosed the negative information however, there might not be much conflict left to write or read about (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Dolnik et al. (2003) refer to the application of commodity theory to crisis timing strategies as the *old-news-is-no-news* hypothesis. When negative information is disclosed by an external party, stakeholders might believe that the organization tries to withhold information. In that case, the information is scarce, and consequently more valuable. If however the organization had self-disclosed the information earlier on, the negative publicity becomes old news, and therefore will have less impact. Commodity theory has been applied to several fields of research such as marketing (Lynn, 1991; Jung & Kellaris, 2004; Eisend, 2008) and censorship (Fromkin & Brock, 1973; Worchel, 1992). However, despite its potential explanatory value for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, it has not yet been examined in the context of organizational crisis timing strategies.

Besides commodity theory, a final theoretical explanation for ex-ante crisis timing strategies, the **framing hypothesis**, needs further research. According to Williams et al. (1993),

an important advantage of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is that it allows people or organizations to frame the crisis in their own terms and downplay its significance. When American talk show host David Letterman was blackmailed due to his extramarital relationships with employees, he was able to minimize negative public perceptions (Wigley, 2011). Letterman self-disclosed the information during his talk show in a very humoristic manner, making it sound like a funny anecdote rather than a personal crisis event. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, a third party has already been given the opportunity to frame the crisis (Williams et al., 1993).

Even though Dolnik et al. (2003) did not find that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy with framing was more effective than an ex-ante crisis timing strategy without framing in a trial context, this explanation should not be discounted. Their study manipulated message framing in terms of a diminish crisis response strategy. Therefore, in terms of crisis communication the study tested the impact of a crisis response strategy instead of actual message framing. In order to determine the value of the framing hypothesis it is necessary to conduct a study in which the substantive content of the crisis communication is kept stable and only the actual framing is manipulated (cf. Mayer & Tormala, 2010). While prior studies illustrate that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is likely to be more effective at minimizing reputational damage than an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), it is possible that the correct type of message framing increases the positive effects of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy further.

Prior studies on the explanatory mechanisms of the impact of crisis timing strategies on post-crisis organizational evaluations have confirmed that the mere application of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can have a positive impact on stakeholders' attitudes compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). While the change of meaning hypothesis was not supported by research on the impact of organizational crisis timing strategies (Arpan & Pompper, 2003), the disconfirmation of expectations theory was sustained (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). No support has been given however to the assumption that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can also minimize the harms of negative publicity subsequent to a crisis. Inoculation theory cannot explain why an ex-ante crisis timing strategy in which incriminating information about the organization is not

refuted minimizes crisis damage compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Therefore, research needs to investigate the explanatory value of commodity theory.

In addition, the framing hypothesis needs to be investigated as well. Research has shown that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is more effective at reputation restoration than an ex-post crisis timing strategy when the message is not framed (e.g., Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). However, based on the framing hypothesis it can be expected that the correct type of message framing is likely to have a more positive impact on post-crisis organizational reputation in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Research should therefore examine what the impact is of message framing under the condition of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy on the one hand and an ex-post crisis timing strategy on the other hand.

#### **4 RESEARCH AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The general research aim of this dissertation is to investigate the impact of organizational crisis communication strategies on stakeholders' perception of the organizational post-crisis reputation. More specifically, studies will be carried out in order to test the efficacy of the content of crisis communication on the one hand (i.e., crisis response strategies) and the timing on the other hand (i.e., crisis timing strategies). In addition, two studies include organizational message framing, which may be considered a third dimension of crisis communication in addition to the content and framing.

The first focus of this dissertation is the study of the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. Recent studies focused on the SCCT and investigated whether the guidelines of the SCCT are being applied by practitioners (Sisco, 2012a; Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). Other studies examined the impact of pre-crisis organizational reputation on attributions of responsibility (Jeong, 2009), the relative impact of medium and message (i.e., crisis response strategy) on crisis communication effectiveness (Schultz, Utz, &

Göritz, 2011) and the impact of crisis response strategies for a non-profit organization (Sisco, 2012b).

However, the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT to match crisis response strategies to crisis types is still unclear and lacks adequate testing. The only experiment that has been conducted in order to test this assumption, to our knowledge, is based on a dated typology of crisis types and crisis response strategies that was developed in the preface of the current SCCT-typologies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). In addition, the study only investigated the match between two crisis types and two crisis response strategies, while the current typology involves three crisis types and three clusters of crisis response strategies. Before conducting research that builds on this theory, it is important that its' basic premises are adequately tested. Only then it is possible to estimate its value for both theory and practice. The starting point of this dissertation therefore involves a study that tests the crucial propositions made by the SCCT, based on its latest typology (cf. Coombs, 2007a).

*RQ 1: What is the effectiveness of the matching principle of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory?*

Besides a basic test of the propositions made by the SCCT, it is also highly relevant to investigate under which conditions it is essential for communication managers to apply the matching principle and under which conditions it is less crucial. First, the dissertation investigates the moderating impact of a characteristic of the crisis which is not included in the SCCT, that is, stakeholders' *involvement with the crisis*. While crisis communication researchers have stressed the importance of involvement of stakeholders with the crisis (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Choi & Lin, 2009a), its role in determining the impact of crisis response strategies, and more specifically whether they are matched to the crisis type or not, has not yet been studied. However, this factor is likely to impact the importance for organizations to offer the correct crisis response in terms of SCCT-guidelines. In the context of marketing and consumer behavior, involvement with issues has shown to affect the importance of the content of communication in affecting stakeholders' attitudes (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schuman, 1983; MacInnis, Rao, & Weiss, 2002). Even though organizations cannot control

stakeholders' crisis involvement, they can use the information from this dissertation to analyze the stakeholder groups and adapt their crisis communication to them.

A second moderating variable is the organizational *message framing*. Contrary to stakeholders' crisis involvement, this is a factor that organizations in crisis can control. Although a growing amount of crisis communication research is focusing on the impact that crises and crisis communication have on stakeholders' felt emotions during a crisis (e.g., Jin, 2009; Choi & Lin, 2009b; Jin & Hong, 2010), case studies indicate that crisis communication can also express emotions by means of framing. Individuals or organizations in crisis situations often tend to communicate emotionally rather than rationally (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Kauffman, 2008; Legg, 2009). Yet, no research has been conducted so far on the impact of emotional vs. rational message framing by organizations in crisis. Psychological research has illustrated that even when the content of a persuasive message remains stable, framing the message in terms of thoughts or in terms of feelings can result in differential effects (Mayer & Tormala, 2010). Moreover, message framing can affect the importance that stakeholders attach to the content of messages (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Organizations could minimize or maximize the importance of offering a matching crisis response strategy by means of message framing. Therefore, the second research question in this dissertation involves the conditions under which the matching of crisis response strategies to crisis types is more or less important for organizations in crisis in terms of reputation repair:

*RQ 2: Under which conditions is following the matching principle of the SCCT more or less important for reputation repair?*

While most research has focused on the content of crisis communication in terms of crisis response strategies, there is a growing interest in the importance of crisis timing strategies for reputation management (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Most studies that test the impact of crisis response strategies on post-crisis reputation, investigate situations in which individuals or organizations respond to allegations or attacks from third parties (Huang, 2006; Jeong, 2009; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). Moreover, crisis response strategies originated as a reaction to criticism (Coombs, 1998; Hearit, 2006). Consequently, the impact of crisis response strategies is

generally situated in the context of an ex-post crisis timing strategy. It remains entirely unclear how stakeholders respond to these crisis response strategies when they are offered in the context of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. Does the application of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy make the use of reputation restoring crisis response strategies less important? If so, organizations that use an ex-ante crisis timing strategy may be redeemed from the necessity of taking explicit responsibility for a crisis when they are at fault. This results in the following research question:

*RQ3: What is the moderating impact of the timing of crisis disclosure on the effect of crisis response strategies on organizational post-crisis reputation?*

The research that has been conducted on crisis timing strategies in the context of crisis communication has mainly focused on finding proof for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy over an ex-post crisis timing strategy in minimizing crisis damage (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011). However, more research is needed about the underlying mechanisms which can explain this effect (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). This dissertation aims to study two specific underlying mechanisms which have received little or no research attention.

The literature on crisis timing strategies provides a number of potential explanations (Williams et al., 1993; Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Dolnik et al., 2003). Research in the context of organizational crisis communication has studied the theoretical explanations which can account for the positive impact that the mere use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy has on stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis or the organization in crisis (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). However, more research is needed on the explanatory value of those theories which can account for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy in minimizing the detrimental effects of an external attack. Prior research has already established that the inoculation theory can provide an explanation for this effect (Wan & Pfau, 2004). However, the inoculation theory posits that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can only reduce the detrimental impact of an external attack when it refutes the negative information from that attack (McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962). Consequently, the inoculation theory does not account for the finding that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy that solely discloses the information that is later on offered in an

attack is more effective than an ex-post crisis timing strategy (e.g., Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). In this dissertation, we test an alternative theory that may explain this finding and that received no research attention in the context of crisis timing strategies: commodity theory (Brock, 1968).

Another theoretical explanation for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy that needs further examination is the framing hypothesis (Williams et al., 1993; Dolnik et al., 2003). Research on crisis timing strategies has suggested that stealing thunder not only has a positive impact on stakeholders' evaluations of the crisis and a negative impact on the effectiveness of external attacks in damaging the organization, it also offers the additional advantage of being able to frame the crisis. Because when an organization self-discloses a crisis, it is the first to communicate about potentially incriminating information and has the possibility to frame that information in the most beneficial way. While in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, an external party got the first chance to communicate and therefore had the opportunity to frame the information in a certain manner, which leaves the organization no other option than to respond to these allegations (Williams et al., 1993; Coombs, 2007a).

Studying these two theoretical explanations for crisis timing strategies offers a deeper insight into the under researched area of crisis timing strategies. Even though several studies have investigated the theoretical explanations for the effectiveness of crisis response strategies, this was not the case for the timing of information disclosure. Proactive crisis communication is often considered to be common sense or best practice (Coombs, 1999; Seeger, 2006). This dissertation studies explanatory mechanisms behind crisis timing strategies in order to better understand the impact of crisis timing strategies. Therefore, the dissertation aims at answering the following research question:

*RQ4: What underlying mechanisms can account for the impact of crisis timing strategies?*

Finally, this dissertation tries to look beyond what organizations can do in terms of communication in order to minimize or restore crisis damage, and investigates the impact of the pre-crisis organizational reputation. Even if an organization is proactive and uses an ex-ante

crisis timing strategy, it is very likely that it will still suffer some reputational damage caused by the crisis. However, the amount of reputational damage depends on how the organization is perceived by stakeholders before the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Ulmer, 2001). Organizations' pre-crisis reputation affects how stakeholders attribute organizational responsibility one the one hand (Dick, Chakravarti, & Biehal, 1990) and how much reputational damage the organization suffers on the other hand (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

A favorable pre-crisis reputation can protect organizations from reputational damage. An unfavorable pre-crisis reputation however, may serve as an intensifying factor and increase the harms of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007a). Therefore, the dissertation studies how the pre-crisis organizational reputation impacts both stakeholders' attributions of responsibility and organizational reputation loss. This impact is studied in an ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition, which is the crisis timing strategy that minimizes crisis damage best. By doing so, this dissertation illustrates that while the correct use of crisis communication strategies is crucial for reputation restoration, organizations should also try to prevent part of the crisis damage by maintaining a favorable pre-crisis reputation.

*RQ5: What is the role of the pre-crisis organizational reputation in stakeholders' evaluation of crises and the post-crisis reputation?*

## **5 DISSERTATION OUTLINE**

The general aim of this dissertation is to test the impact of crisis communication strategies on the post-crisis reputation of organizations in crisis. Previous studies mainly used case studies to develop theoretical frameworks on crisis communication (Coombs, 1999). However, case studies are not the best method to test the causality between crisis communication strategies and reputational outcome variables (Coombs, 2007a). In order to answer the need for more experimental research on crisis communication (Rowland & Jerome, 2004) and in order to more robustly develop theory, this dissertation uses experimental research as the main research method. The designs consist of between-subjects designs with two or more factors, each



manipulated or tested at two levels or more. This implies that for example different crisis communication strategies were manipulated using different scenarios, after which respondents were exposed to one of these scenarios and their perception of the organizational reputation was measured. The dissertation encompasses six empirical chapters. Chapters two, three and four focus on the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. Chapters five and six investigate the underlying mechanisms of crisis timing strategies. The seventh and last chapter examines the impact of pre-crisis organizational reputation.

Chapter two, *Restoring reputations in times of crisis: An experimental study of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory*, investigates the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT. An experiment manipulated both crisis type and crisis response strategy and investigated their impact on post-crisis organizational reputation. The results show that a preventable crisis results in the highest crisis damage and that a rebuild crisis response strategy generally offers the highest level of reputation repair. In addition, correlational analyses illustrate that while crisis severity is negatively related to organizational post-crisis reputation when an organization bears responsibility for the crisis (i.e. accidental crisis and preventable crisis), it is not when the organization is attributed no responsibility (i.e. victim crisis). This is in line with the assumption that increased attributions of responsibility have a negative impact on stakeholders' perceptions of a crisis (Coombs, 2007a). In addition, this finding suggests that intensifying factors such as crisis severity may only be detrimental when there is a basic attribution of responsibility to begin with. In addition, contrary to the expectations of the SCCT, no interaction effect was found between crisis type and crisis response strategy. Consequently no support could be offered for the crisis type- crisis response strategy matching principle of the SCCT. These results indicate that there might be some important moderating variables to consider when assessing the importance of offering a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis type.

Chapter three, *What makes crisis response strategies work? The impact of crisis involvement and message framing*, examines the moderating impact of stakeholders' crisis involvement on the one hand and organizational message framing on the other hand on the impact of a matched or mismatched crisis response strategy on post-crisis organizational evaluations. The results illustrate that when stakeholders are highly involved with a crisis or when organizations frame

their communication rationally, crisis response strategies that match the crisis type result in more positive organizational evaluations than crisis response strategies that are a mismatch. When stakeholders are low in involvement however, or when organizations frame their crisis communication emotionally, the effectiveness of a matched or a mismatched crisis response strategy does not differ.

Chapter four, *Crisis response and crisis timing strategies, two sides of the same coin*, studies when it is important to use a reputation restoring crisis response strategy at all. The study investigates the interaction effect between an organizational crisis response and crisis timing strategy on post-crisis organizational reputation. The findings illustrate that organizations that use an ex-post crisis timing strategy should add a reputation restoring crisis response strategy (cf. SCCT) to their crisis communication, in addition to offering objective information about what happened. However, when organizations apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, it is not necessary to do so. In this case, the post-crisis reputation will be equal when an organization offers objective information as when it adds a crisis response strategy. This interaction effect is mediated by stakeholders' perception of organizational credibility.

Chapter five, *Old news is no news: How commodity theory explains the desirability and impact of negative publicity depending on organizational crisis timing strategies*, studies the explanatory value of commodity theory for the impact of crisis timing strategies. Two experimental studies with an eye-tracking device confirm that when an organization offers an ex-ante crisis timing strategy instead of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, stakeholders will consider an external attack against the organization less valuable. Moreover, the results indicate that this decrease in value is expressed in two ways. First, stakeholders pay less attention to negative publicity; they are less likely to read an article containing an external attack. Second, the negative publicity does not result in reputation damage. Conversely, in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, negative publicity receives more attention and leads to more reputation damage.

A second experimental study shows an interaction between crisis timing strategy and stakeholders' crisis involvement on their attention for an external attack. In the case of an ex-ante

crisis timing strategy, stakeholders pay less attention to negative publicity and this negative publicity does not affect the post-crisis reputation, irrespective of the level of involvement. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, stakeholders with low crisis involvement are likely to pay little attention to the external attack as well. However, the negative publicity will have a detrimental effect on post-crisis reputation. Consequently, these studies confirm commodity theory's explanatory value for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy (Williams et al., 1993). An ex-ante crisis timing strategy minimizes the detrimental impact of an external attack compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Finally, the findings support the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, even under conditions of high involvement.

Chapter six, *The advantage of stealing thunder: Framing crises in the most beneficial way*, investigates the moderating impact of organizational message framing on the effectiveness of crisis timing strategies. The framing hypothesis posits that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy will be more effective at restoring an organizational post-crisis reputation when it is framed in a beneficial way than when it is not. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy message framing is expected to be less influential. The findings confirm that in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, emotional message framing generally does not result in a better post-crisis reputation than rational message framing. In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy however, emotional message framing results in a better post-crisis reputation than rational message framing. This positive impact of emotional message framing can be explained by a mediating effect of perceived organizational sincerity.

Chapter seven, *The impact of the halo effect in organizational crisis communication: The benefits of a good reputation*, investigates the influence of pre-crisis organizational reputation on stakeholders' crisis evaluations in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. In addition, it examines the underlying mechanism of this effect and whether it implies that a favorable pre-crisis reputation can protect organizations against attacks from external parties. The results indicate that organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation are likely to suffer less reputational loss than those with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. This effect is explained by a mediating effect of attributed crisis responsibility. When an organization has a favorable pre-crisis reputation, it is considered less responsible for the crisis and consequently, suffers less

reputational loss. Finally, the findings illustrate that a favorable pre-crisis reputation not only protects the organization against the damage resulting from a crisis, it also diminishes the detrimental impact of external attacks subsequent to the crisis compared to an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation.

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**CHAPTER 2**  
**RESTORING REPUTATIONS IN TIMES OF**  
**CRISIS**

**AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDIE OF THE**  
**SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION**  
**THEORY**

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## CHAPTER 2 RESTORING REPUTATIONS IN TIMES OF CRISIS: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF THE SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY<sup>1</sup>

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This study attempts to provide empirical evidence for Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which offers guidelines for matching crisis response strategies to crisis types to best decrease organizational reputational damage in times of crisis. The impact of crisis type and crisis response strategy on perceptions of post-crisis organizational reputation is measured for 316 participants in a 3 (crisis type: victim crisis, accidental crisis, preventable crisis) × 3 (crisis response strategy: deny strategy, diminish strategy, rebuild strategy) between-subjects experimental design. The results show that preventable crises have the most negative effects on organizational reputation. The rebuild response strategy leads to the most positive reputational restoration. Moreover, the more severe people judge a crisis to be, the more negative their perceptions of the organization's reputation are in all crises, except for the victim crisis type. The interaction effect between crisis type and crisis response strategy on corporate reputation is not significant. So, no support was found for the matching principle proposed by the SCCT.

**Keywords:** crisis types, crisis response strategies, perceived crisis severity, post-crisis reputation

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter two has been published as "Claeys, A.-S., Cauberghe, V., & Vyncke, P. (2010). Restoring reputations in times of crisis: An experimental study of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the moderating effects of locus of control. *Public Relations Review*, 36(3), 256-262."

Chapter two has been published as "Claeys, A.-S., Cauberghe, V., & Vyncke, P. (2011). Determinants of the impact of crises on organizational reputation: An experimental test of crisis communication strategies and the moderating impact of locus of control. In S. Okazaki (Ed.), *Advances in Advertising Research (Vol.2)* (pp. 249-262. Wiesbaden: Gabler."

This paper has been presented at the International Conference on Research in Advertising (ICORIA) in Madrid (25-26<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The SCCT was developed recently to investigate which crisis response strategy managers should apply in specific crisis situations to manage an organization's reputation in the best possible way (Coombs, 2007). This is essential, considering that no organization is spared having to go through crises during its lifetime (Spillan, 2003). These crises challenge organizational reputations and credibility (Arpan, 2002; Weiner, 2006). Prior research has rarely applied experimental, quantitative designs to investigate the topic of crisis response strategies (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007). Therefore, the main goal of this study is to experimentally test the primary guidelines proposed by the SCCT. In what follows, we present a theoretical overview and develop the hypotheses. Then, we discuss the method of the experiment and the results.

## 2 SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

The SCCT divides crisis types into three crisis clusters (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This distinction is based on attribution theory, according to which people look for the causes of negative events that occur (Kelley, 1973; Dean, 2004). When organizations are confronted with a crisis stakeholders attribute responsibility to that organization (Coombs, 2007). The victim cluster is defined as crises with weak attributions of organizational responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The accidental cluster involves crises in which a certain, but low, level of responsibility is attributed to the organization. The preventable cluster includes crises for which the organization is perceived as being responsible (cf. Table one). The more responsibility that is attributed to the organization with respect to the crisis, the more negative is the impact on the organizational reputation (Coombs, 1998). Therefore, different types of crisis inflict different amounts of reputational damage. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H1a.** When an organization is not considered responsible for a crisis (victim crisis) it suffers less reputational damage compared to when it is considered moderately (accidental crisis) or highly (preventable crisis) responsible.



**H1b.** When an organization is considered moderately responsible for a crisis (accidental crisis) it suffers moderate reputational damage compared to when it is not considered responsible for a crisis (victim crisis) or when it is considered highly responsible (preventable crisis).

**H1c.** When an organization is considered highly responsible for a crisis (preventable crisis) it suffers more reputational damage compared to when it is not considered responsible for a crisis (victim crisis) or when it is considered moderately responsible (accidental crisis).

Crisis types	Crisis response strategies
<i>Victim cluster</i> Natural disaster Rumor Workplace violence Product tampering/Malevolence	<i>Deny strategies</i> Attack the accuser Denial Scapegoat
<i>Accidental cluster</i> Challenges Technical-error accidents Technical-error product harm	<i>Diminish strategies</i> Excuse Justification
<i>Preventable cluster</i> Human-error accidents Human-error product harm Organizational misdeed with no injuries Organizational misdeed management misconduct Organizational misdeed with injuries	<i>Rebuild strategies</i> Compensation Apology

Source: adapted from: Coombs (2007), p. 168 and 170.

Table 1: Match between crisis types and crisis response strategies

Within the range of crisis response strategies, several clusters have also been detected (Coombs, 2004, 2007; Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005) (cf. Table one). These clusters differ in the amount of responsibility an organization takes for a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Deny strategies claim that no crisis exists (denial) or declare that the organization has no responsibility for it (scapegoat) (Coombs, 2007). Diminish strategies argue that a crisis is not as serious as people think (justification) or minimize organizational responsibility (excuse). Rebuild crisis response strategies offer compensation for the crisis or apologize. Research has shown that offering an apology—a rebuild crisis response strategy—leads to more effective reputation restoration than the more defensive deny or diminish crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Thus:

**H2.** The reputation of an organization taking full responsibility for a crisis (rebuild crisis response strategy) is more positive than the reputation of an organization taking partial responsibility (diminish crisis response strategy) or no responsibility (deny crisis response strategy) for a crisis.

The reputational threat is determined by the crisis type, which is defined in terms of the perceived responsibility attributed by stakeholders to the organization (Coombs, 2004, 2007). This idea is based on attribution theory (Coombs, 2007). Crisis managers should select crisis response strategies that are appropriate for the potential extent of reputational damage a certain crisis may inflict (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In an experimental study, Coombs and Holladay (1996) found that when crisis communication responses match the crisis type in terms of responsibility attribution, this leads to a more positive post-crisis reputation perception than either no response or a mismatched response. Their research found that organizational reputation benefits when diminish strategies are used in response to accidental crises and when rebuild strategies are matched with preventable crises.

Previous research has examined the match between crisis type and a single crisis response strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). However, Benoit (1997) suggests that the use of a combination of strategies can increase the effectiveness of image restoration. The SCCT advises crisis managers to combine crisis response strategies from the same cluster (Coombs, 2007). In line with the SCCT, the best option appears to be a combination of several strategies from the same response cluster into a crisis response, depending on the crisis type. On the basis of previous SCCT-related research, we expect deny strategies to match with victim crises, diminish strategies to match with accidental crises, and rebuild strategies to match with preventable crises (Coombs, 2007). Thus:

**H3.** Matching crisis type and crisis response strategy leads to a less negative effect on post-crisis organizational reputation than mismatches between crisis type and crisis response strategy.

### 3 INTENSIFYING FACTORS

Besides the crisis type, other characteristics of the crisis or the organization in crisis can affect stakeholders' attributions of responsibility and reputational damage, these are called *intensifying factors* (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). A first factor is the organizational crisis history, which is determined by whether or not an organization was confronted with (similar) crises in the past (Coombs, 2007). If so, stakeholders may think that the organization has an ongoing problem which urgently needs to be addressed. A second factor which has been subject of prior research is the pre-crisis reputation, which is the result of how well or poorly the organization treated stakeholders before the crisis hit (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006). A third factor which has been suggested as a potential intensifying factor in the past is the severity of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Crisis severity is defined by the SCCT as the amount of financial, human and environmental damage that is inflicted by a crisis.

According to the SCCT, more severe crises have a more negative impact on organizational reputations than crises with trivial damage (Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Although prior research has not been able to empirically prove that the severity of a crisis has an incrementally negative effect on reputational damage, results have indicated that the impact of crisis severity may depend on the amount of responsibility that is attributed to the organization (Coombs, 1998). Crisis severity had a negative impact on post-crisis reputation in case the organization is fully responsible for the crisis. If on the other hand stakeholders consider the company itself as a victim of the crisis, crisis damage will not negatively impact post-crisis reputation. Based on the current typology of crisis types offered by the SCCT (Coombs, 2007), this would imply that organizations confronted with a victim crisis, do not need to fear that crisis damage will have a negative impact on post-crisis reputation. In the case of an accidental or preventable crisis however, post-crisis reputation may suffer more when the crisis severity is perceived as higher. Therefore, the following is expected:

**H4a.** The perceived severity of a crisis has a negative impact on the post-crisis organizational reputation if the organization has some (accidental crisis) or full (preventable crisis) responsibility for the crisis.

**H4b.** The perceived severity of a crisis is not related with the post-crisis organizational reputation if the organization has no responsibility for the crisis (victim crisis)

## 4 METHOD

### 4.1 Design and stimuli

We used a 3 (crisis type)  $\times$  3 (crisis response strategy) between-subjects factorial experimental design to investigate the hypotheses. We manipulated crisis type and crisis response strategy using various crisis scenarios. The study used a fictitious organization in the scenarios to avoid potential confounding effects of pre-existing knowledge and prior reputation (Laufer & Jung, 2010). The organization was an American company that produces fruit juice. The product is also sold on the German market. We manipulated crisis type by the selection of one crisis from each of the three clusters (victim cluster, accidental cluster, preventable cluster). We chose the crisis types on the basis of a practical consideration—namely, being able to describe each crisis type realistically. From the victim cluster, we selected product tampering (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). From the accidental cluster, we used technical-error product harm. From the preventable cluster, we chose organizational misdeed with injuries. The objective crisis severity was held stable in all situations, namely, by mentioning the death of two adults.

To manipulate the crisis response strategy, two strategies were selected from each cluster. From the diminish cluster, we combined excuse and justification into one reaction (Coombs, 2007). From the rebuild cluster, we combined compensation and apology. We used only one crisis response strategy from the deny cluster because all three deny strategies tend to conflict. Combining strategies will only enhance their individual impacts when the responses are compatible (Huang, 2006). Therefore, we describe the scapegoat reaction for the deny scenario.

## 4.2 Participants and procedure

We conducted two pre-tests to ensure that the manipulations were effective. For the actual study, we collected data from 316 respondents using an online questionnaire. We randomly divided the respondents across the nine conditions and instructed them to read a scenario containing a combination of a crisis type with a crisis response. After reading the scenario, respondents filled in the questionnaire. Participants were Dutch-speaking Belgian men and women with an average age of 35 years ( $SD = 14.46$ ; range = 13–70 years). Approximately 47% were male, and 53% were female.

## 4.3 Measures

Organizational responsibility for a crisis was measured using the four-item 10-point Likert scale from the work of Griffin, Babin and Darden (1992) (e.g., “*How responsible was the organization with respect to the crisis?*”) ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

The organizational post-crisis reputation was measured with a combination of the Reputation Quotient scale from the work of Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2000) and McCroskey’s (cited in Coombs & Holladay, 1996) scale of character which was used in previous research on crisis communication to measure reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs, 1999). The scale consisted of 14 items measured on a 10-point Likert scale (e.g., “*I trust this company*”) ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

To measure the possible effects of the perceived crisis severity, respondents answered one question on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all severe) to 10 (very severe): “*How severe do you consider the damage caused by this crisis?*”

## 5 PRE-TESTS

We conducted two pre-tests to test the manipulated variables crisis response strategy and crisis type.

## 5.1 Pre-test 1

Twelve respondents participated in an order task to check the internal validity of the crisis response strategies. The respondents were instructed to read each of the three crisis response scenarios and then to estimate if the content reflected a crisis response strategy and if so, which strategy was reflected, based on a list containing all five-crisis response strategies. Some neutral sentences were mistakenly interpreted as strategies. We removed these lines from the crisis responses used in the main experiment.

## 5.2 Pre-test 2

According to the SCCT typology (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002), we can manipulate crisis types through the assessment of crisis responsibility. Therefore, the second pre-test assessed (with a seven-point scale) the manipulation of corporate responsibility for each crisis type. Twenty-one respondents participated. The questionnaire used a within-subjects design, and all respondents saw the three crisis types. The results show that in the victim crisis ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ), respondents perceived the company as less responsible than in the accidental crisis ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = .98$ ;  $t(40) = 2.56$ ,  $p = .015$ ) and the preventable crisis ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ;  $t(40) = 3.75$ ,  $p = .001$ ). However, there were no significant differences between the accidental crisis ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) and the preventable crisis ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ;  $t(40) = 1.55$ ,  $p = .13$ ). We adapted all scenarios for the main study on the basis of these results.

# 6 RESULTS

## 6.1 Manipulation checks

We performed a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to check for the manipulation of crisis type, measured by the amount of crisis responsibility. The mean difference in crisis responsibility among the three crisis types is significant ( $F(2, 313) = 82.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The Scheffé follow-up procedure shows that the victim crisis ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ) results in significantly lower attributions of responsibility to the organization than the accidental crisis ( $M$

= 6.81,  $SD = 1.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the preventable crisis ( $M = 8.07$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the accidental crisis results in significantly lower attributions of crisis responsibility than the preventable crisis ( $M_{\text{accidental crisis}} = 6.81$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ;  $M_{\text{preventable crisis}} = 8.07$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## 6.2 Impact of crisis type and response strategy on reputation

To address the main effects of crisis types (H1) and crisis response strategies (H2) on post-crisis organizational reputation and to test the interaction effect of crisis type and crisis response strategies predicted in H3, we use a univariate two-way ANOVA (general linear model). Two main effects occur. Both crisis type ( $F(8, 307) = 94.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and crisis response strategy ( $F(8, 307) = 4.68$ ,  $p = .01$ ) have a main effect on organizational reputation (cf. Figure one). To detect the significant differences between the three conditions of crisis type and crisis response strategy pairwise, we also conduct separate one-way ANOVA's with Scheffé follow-up tests. This enables us to assess H1 and H2. The results of a separate one-way ANOVA ( $F(2, 313) = 95.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ) show that respondents perceive the organization's reputation less favorably in the case of a preventable crisis ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) than in the cases of both the victim crisis ( $M = 5.95$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the accidental crisis ( $M = 5.48$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No significant difference in reputation occurs between the victim crisis ( $M = 5.95$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) and the accidental crisis ( $M = 5.48$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ,  $p = .18$ ). These results support H1c and offer partial support for H1a and H1b. Preventable crises, in which the organization is responsible for a crisis, have the most negative impact on organizational reputation.

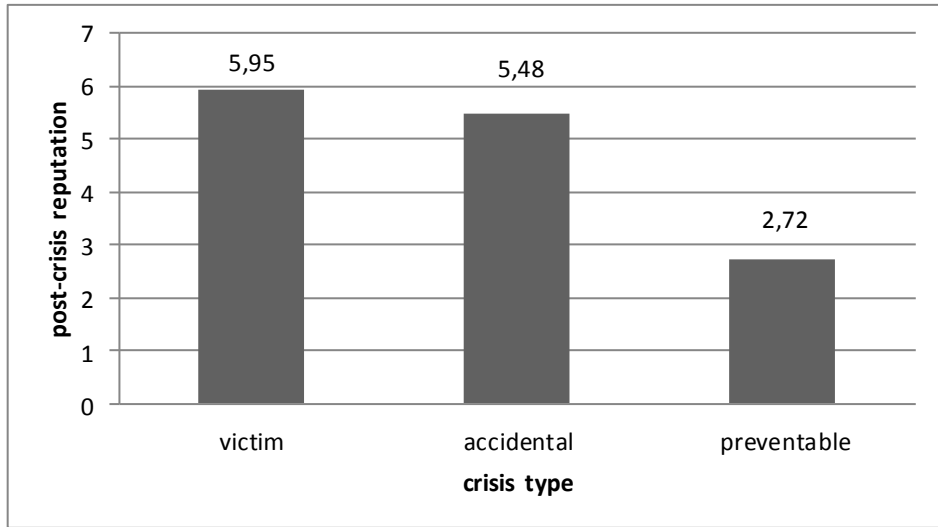


Fig. 1: Impact of crisis type on post-crisis reputation

The findings also confirm the main effect of crisis response strategy on organizational reputation ( $F(2, 313) = 4.52, p = .012$ ) (cf. Figure two). The Scheffé procedure reveals that rebuild strategies ( $M = 5.26, SD = 2.36$ ) significantly lead to a more positive reputation than diminish strategies ( $M = 4.35, SD = 2.24, p = .018$ ). The difference between the rebuild strategies and the deny strategies is only marginally significant ( $p < .1; M_{\text{rebuild strategies}} = 5.26, SD = 2.36; M_{\text{deny strategies}} = 4.57, SD = 2.28, p = .087$ ). Therefore, H2 is partially supported. Respondents assess the reputation of organizations using rebuild strategies (i.e., when firms accept responsibility) more positively than the reputation of organizations using diminish strategies (i.e., when organizational responsibility is minimized).



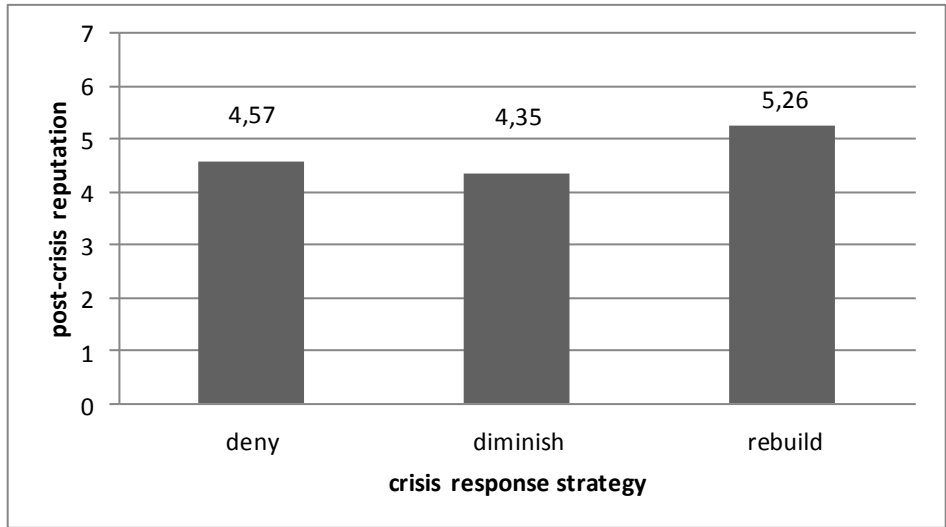


Fig. 2: Impact of crisis response strategy on post-crisis reputation

The interaction effect of crisis type and crisis response strategy on reputation is not significant ( $F(8, 307) = 1.28, p = .28$ ). Crisis responses that are matched to the crisis type, in accordance with the SCCT recommendation, do not differ in their impact on organizational reputation compared with mismatched responses. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) illustrates that in the case of an accidental crisis ( $M_{\text{deny}} = 5.69, SD = 1.91; M_{\text{diminish}} = 5.10, SD = 2.17; M_{\text{rebuild}} = 5.62, SD = 2.04; F(2, 100) = .83, p = .44$ ) or a preventable crisis ( $M_{\text{deny}} = 2.42, SD = .95; M_{\text{diminish}} = 2.69, SD = 1.40; M_{\text{rebuild}} = 3.11, SD = 1.79; F(2, 101) = 2.09, p = .13$ ) the impact of crisis response strategies does not differ. In the case of a victim crisis, there is a difference in effectiveness of crisis response strategies ( $F(2, 106) = 4.56, p = .013$ ). A rebuild crisis response strategy ( $M = 6.65, SD = 1.73$ ) leads to a better post-crisis reputation than a diminish strategy ( $M = 5.36, SD = 2.04, p = .018$ ). However, no difference occurs between a deny strategy ( $M = 5.72, SD = 1.96$ ) and a rebuild strategy ( $M = 6.65, SD = 1.73, p = .11$ ) or a diminish strategy ( $M = 5.36, SD = 2.04, p = .74$ ). H3 is not supported.

### 6.3 Relationship between crisis severity and post-crisis reputation

To investigate the impact of the perceived severity of the crisis on post-crisis organizational reputation, correlation coefficients were calculated. A significant negative correlation appeared between the severity of the crisis and organizational post-crisis reputation in the case of both an

accidental ( $r(103) = -.312, p = .001$ ) and a preventable crisis ( $r(104) = -.308, p = .001$ ). These results support H4a. However, the perceived severity of a crisis was not related with the post-crisis organizational reputation in the case of a victim crisis, for which the organization has no responsibility ( $r(109) = -.04, p = .68$ ). These results support H4b. Therefore, the perceived severity of a crisis will only correlate negatively with the subsequent organizational reputation, in case stakeholders find that the organization itself was at least partially responsible for the events.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The SCCT advises communication managers to select crisis response strategies that match the specific crisis type in terms of responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). However, matching crisis types and crisis responses did not lead to a more positive perception of post-crisis organizational reputation than mismatches. This contradicts Coombs and Holladay's (1996) findings. One possible explanation for this might be the difference in methodology. Coombs and Holladay (1996) use a within-subjects design, whereas we use a between-subjects design. Perhaps if participants are able to compare the potential crisis response strategies they are more likely to evaluate a matched response strategy better than a mismatch. Another explanation may be that we combine two response strategies into one response, whereas Coombs and Holladay (1996) only use one strategy. However, given the fact that content analyses from political crisis situations also indicated that a matched crisis response strategy is more effective than a mismatched crisis response strategy (Huang, 2006), the results from this study might be attributed to other factors. The importance of applying a crisis response strategy that is in accordance with the matching principle of the SCCT may depend on certain conditions.

This study did find two main effects for crisis type and crisis response strategy in relation to post-crisis organizational reputation. First, corporate reputation was least favorable when organizations are confronted with a preventable crisis. In this type of crisis, companies are considered responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). We found no significant difference in reputational perceptions between the accidental crisis and the victim

crisis. Therefore, if an organization is considered to be fully responsible for a crisis, its reputation is likely to suffer more than if it is not entirely responsible. Second, there is a main effect of crisis response strategy on organizational reputation. Specifically, the reputations of organizations using rebuild crisis response strategies are more positive than the reputations of organizations using diminish strategies. Two implications result from this finding. Firstly, organizations can best restore their reputation when they take full responsibility for a crisis. Secondly, applying a crisis response strategy which does not explicitly take or reject responsibility for a crisis may be detrimental. Stakeholders may just want organizations to take a clear stand.

The results also provide evidence for the relationship between the perceived severity of the crisis and post-crisis organizational reputation, confirming Coombs and Holladay's (2002) assumption. However, an important finding of this study is that this relationship depends on the amount of responsibility that is attributed to the organization and thus on the crisis type. The more severe people perceive a crisis to be, the more negative are their perceptions of the organization's reputation in the case of both accidental crises and preventable crises. However, no relationship was found between perceived crisis severity and post-crisis reputation when the organization was not considered responsible for the crisis whatsoever, in the case of a victim crisis. Consequently, the intensifying factors as described by the SCCT (Coombs, 2007) may only be detrimental to the organization if it bears some responsibility for the crisis.

## **8 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The limitations of the current study provide some possibilities for further research. Firstly, we measured reputation after only one exposure to a fictitious company. Therefore, it can be argued that the reputation measure resembles more of an attitude rather than a reputation developed over time. Secondly, the current study does not incorporate a condition in which the company does not offer a crisis response strategy. This would be worthwhile to measure in further research to detect the impact of a company's reaction to a crisis with or without the inclusion of a reputation restoring crisis response strategy. Thirdly, we based the selection of

respondents on a convenience sample. Further research should use a more systematic procedure to select the respondents. Fourthly, the current study compared the impact of matching response strategies and crisis types across the different clusters of each. It would be worthwhile to examine the impact of each of the different strategies within each cluster.

Finally, further research could investigate if there are conditions under which the matching principle of the SCCT is more or less important for organizations that want to restore their reputation. Marketing and consumer research suggests that people's involvement with an issue for instance may determine the importance of the content of issue-related messages in affecting their perceptions (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schuman, 1983; MacInnis, Rao, & Weiss, 2002). In addition, research on advertising has indicated that the way in which a message is framed can also affect the impact of the content of messages (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Therefore, the importance of matching the crisis response strategy to the crisis type may be affected by stakeholders' involvement with the crisis or the manner in which an organization frames its communication.

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**CHAPTER 3**  
**WHAT MAKES CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES**  
**WORK?**

**THE IMPACT OF CRISIS INVOLVEMENT AND**  
**MESSAGE FRAMING**

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## CHAPTER 3 WHAT MAKES CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES WORK? THE IMPACT OF CRISIS INVOLVEMENT AND MESSAGE FRAMING<sup>2</sup>

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This study investigates the moderating impact of crisis involvement and message framing on the effect of crisis response strategies on post-crisis attitude toward an organization. In the experiment, 274 respondents participate in a 2 (crisis response strategy: match vs. mismatch) × 2 (crisis involvement: low vs. high) × 2 (message framing: emotional vs. rational) between-subjects factorial design. The results show that in the case of high crisis involvement or in the case of rational framing of crisis communication, crisis response strategies that match the crisis type increase the post-crisis attitude toward the organization. In the case of low crisis involvement or in the case of emotional framing of crisis communication, the impact of a matched or mismatched crisis response strategy on the post-crisis attitude toward the organization does not differ. In addition, the study suggests that crisis involvement has a moderating impact on the efficacy of message framing in terms of post-crisis attitude toward the organization, which depends on whether the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type or not.

**Keywords:** crisis response strategies, crisis involvement, emotional vs. rational framing, post-crisis attitude toward the organization

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter three is currently under review as “Claeys, A.-S., & Cauberghe, V. (In second review round). What makes crisis response strategies work? The impact of crisis involvement and message framing. *Journal of Business Research*”

This paper was presented at the Second International Conference on Crisis Communication at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Aarhus (6-8<sup>th</sup> October 2011)

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Organizations in crisis face severe reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). As a response to these crises, organizations best communicate in the most appropriate way to minimize the damage and to restore their organizational reputation (Coombs, 2004). Early research in crisis communication conducted case studies in order to develop typologies of the crisis response strategies used in practice (e.g., Benoit, 1995). More recently however, scholars focus on experimental research in order to study under which conditions these crisis response strategies are most effective in restoring an organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Previous experimental research on crisis communication focuses on the impact of situational variables, such as the type of crisis and the severity of the crisis, on the effectiveness of crisis response strategies (e.g., denial, apology) in restoring an organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). This line of research led to the development of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which distinguishes three clusters of crisis types differing in the amount of crisis responsibility that stakeholders attribute to the organization, and three clusters of crisis response strategies differing in the amount of responsibility that the organization takes for the crisis in its crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). In sum, the SCCT provides guidelines for matching crisis response strategies to crisis types by taking the level of organizational crisis responsibility into account, in order to restore the crisis damage.

However, previous studies contradict each other concerning the efficacy of these SCCT guidelines for restoring organizational reputations in crisis. While some studies find that a matched crisis response strategy results in a better post-crisis reputation than a mismatched crisis response strategy (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996), others do not (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; chapter two). This study adds value by investigating two factors that may moderate the efficacy of matching crisis response strategies to crisis types in restoring organizational reputations.

The first moderator under investigation is stakeholders' crisis involvement. Recent studies in crisis communication stress the importance of involvement during crises (Arpan & Roskos-

Ewoldsen, 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Choi & Lin, 2009a). The results of a case study in the context of crisis communication suggest that individuals with high crisis involvement scrutinize crisis information more in depth than those who are low in involvement (Choi & Lin, 2009a). This finding is in line with consumer research literature according to which individuals' involvement with products/issues influences the depth in which they process information (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). As a consequence, the importance of the content of messages differs for consumers' with low versus high involvement. The current study experimentally investigates this proposition for crisis communication, in order to show that organizations should take stakeholders' involvement with a certain crisis into account when determining their crisis communication strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2005).

The second moderator under investigation is the message framing. Marketing research shows that the presentation of information (i.e., emotional versus rational framing) influences individuals' willingness to thoroughly evaluate the content of advertising messages (McKay-Nesbitt, Manchanda, Smith, & Huhmann, 2011). This study investigates if the framing of crisis communication has an impact on the way stakeholders evaluate the organizational communication and, more specifically, if framing has an impact on the importance of using a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis type. Prior studies in a marketing and advertising contexts focus extensively on the persuasive impact of emotions in communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Geuens, De Pelsmacker, & Fasseur, 2011). The field of crisis communication however, focuses on the emotions stakeholders feel during crises (Jin, 2009; Choi & Lin, 2009b; Jin & Hong, 2010), but not on the possible effects of emotional framing of the message. The current study demonstrates the importance of message framing as a crisis communication strategy in addition to the content (Coombs, 2007) and its potential moderating impact on the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT for applying crisis response strategies.

This study contributes to the research field of crisis communication in four ways. Firstly, it fulfills the need for more experimental research on crisis communication (Rowland & Jerome, 2004; Coombs, 2007). Secondly, it establishes under which conditions it is crucial, and under which conditions it is less crucial, for communication managers to take the SCCT guidelines into account. Hereby, this study also adds to the current academic knowledge about the SCCT, which

can be considered one of the most important theories in crisis communication (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). Thirdly, experimentally testing the impact of crisis involvement on stakeholders' organizational evaluations allows the formulation of clear guidelines to crisis communication managers. When organizations are able to establish if a crisis evokes a high or low level of involvement with certain stakeholder groups, they can use the results of this study to tailor their crisis communication. Finally, this study establishes the impact of emotional versus rational message framing in crisis communication. This is beneficial to the research field because it changes the focus from stakeholders' felt emotions during crises to the strategic use of emotions by organizations in crisis communication. In addition, the study shows the relative importance of content versus framing in crisis communication.

## **2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

### **2.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

Coombs (2007) developed the SCCT in order to provide crisis managers with guidelines to match crisis response strategies to different crisis types. According to the SCCT, the amount of responsibility individuals attribute to the organization in crisis determines the reputational threat a crisis causes (Coombs, 2007, 2004). The SCCT includes three clusters of crisis types based on individuals' attributions of responsibility to the organization in crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The victim cluster entails crises with weak attributions of organizational responsibility (e.g., product tampering). The accidental cluster involves crises with a certain, but low level of responsibility attribution to the organization (e.g., technical-error product harm). The preventable cluster incorporates crises with high perceptions of crisis responsibility (e.g., organizational misdeed with injuries). According to the SCCT, the more responsibility that stakeholders accredit to the organization with respect to the crisis, the more its reputation suffers (Coombs, 1998).

The SCCT matches these crisis types, differing in organizational responsibility, with three clusters of crisis response strategies, differing in the amount of responsibility that the

organization takes for the crisis in its communication (Coombs, 2007). When using deny strategies, the organization rejects all responsibility for the crisis. Diminish strategies minimize the organizational responsibility or the crisis damage. With rebuild strategies organizations admit full responsibility. Crisis managers should select crisis response strategies that match the amount of potential reputational damage that a certain crisis inflicts (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). As such, the SCCT advises organizations to use deny strategies in the case of a victim crisis, diminish strategies in the case of an accidental crisis and rebuild strategies in the case of a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007).

## 2.2 The moderating impact of crisis involvement on the effect of crisis response strategies on post-crisis attitude toward the organization

Past experimental research on the role of stakeholder involvement during crises focuses on the importance of involvement with the organization in crisis and its products, and shows that high involvement with an organization and its products leads to lower levels of perceived severity of the crisis (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). More recently, crisis communication researchers additionally stress the importance of stakeholders' involvement with the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Choi & Lin, 2009a). These authors introduce crisis involvement as a potential moderating variable of the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT for matching crisis response strategies to crisis types in minimizing crisis damage. Choi and Lin (2009a) investigate how stakeholders with high crisis involvement (i.e., parents) report about the 2007 Mattel product recalls on online platforms compared to how newspapers report about the crisis in their articles. Hereby, several dimensions of organizational reputation and attributions of responsibility manifested by both parents and newspapers were compared. The results show that both parties differ strongly in their perceptions about the crisis. A difference which is explained by the fact that stakeholders with high crisis involvement process crisis messages more actively. Choi and Lin's (2009a) study does not however, compare the crisis evaluation of stakeholders with high involvement to stakeholders with low involvement. The assumptions they make about the impact of crisis involvement on the degree to which crisis information is processed stems from consumer behavior research.

Different features of communication are more or less effective in influencing people's attitudes depending on their level of involvement (Petty et al., 1983). Individuals with high involvement devote a higher amount of attention to the content of a message than individuals with low involvement (MacInnis, Rao, & Weiss, 2002). Issue involvement increases a person's motivation to engage in a thorough consideration of issue-relevant information that an organization presents, in order to form an attitude about a product (Petty et al., 1983).

The results of these previous studies in the marketing domain allow making predictions of the effect of involvement on the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT to match crisis response strategies to crisis types. This study predicts that the content of a crisis response and more specifically its match with the crisis type has a positive impact on a stakeholder's attitude toward the organization for individuals with high involvement, but not for individuals with low involvement. Based on Petty et al. (1983) it is expected that if organizations offer stakeholders with high crisis involvement a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis type, they may consider the crisis response as convincing and subsequently form a more favorable post-crisis attitude toward the organization. However, if the crisis response does not match the crisis type, stakeholders with high crisis involvement are likely to generate counterarguments to the crisis response given by the organization (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979) and form an unfavorable attitude.

For individuals with low crisis involvement, the content of the crisis response does not attract as much attention as for the individuals with high crisis involvement. Instead, individuals with low crisis involvement tend to process the crisis response strategy more superficially (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). This proposition leads to the following hypotheses:

**H1a.** A matched crisis response strategy leads to a more positive post-crisis attitude toward the organization than a mismatched crisis response strategy in the case of high crisis involvement.

**H1b.** Crisis response strategies (match vs. mismatch) do not impact the post-crisis attitude toward the organization in the case of low crisis involvement.

### 2.3 The moderating impact of message framing on the effect of crisis response strategies on post-crisis attitude toward the organization

Coombs and Holladay (2005) claim that the study of crisis communication needs to focus on the importance of affect. However, until now, the crisis research focus mainly lies on the emotional responses of stakeholders (Jin, 2009). As such, studies investigate the impact of attributions of responsibility on the emotions (e.g., anger, sadness) stakeholders experience during crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Choi & Lin, 2009b). Some of these emotions relate negatively to organizational reputation (Choi & Lin, 2009b). In addition, content analyses of newspaper stories investigate the primary emotions organizations express during crises (e.g., Jin, Park, & Len-Rios, 2010).

However, emotional framing may also serve as a crisis communication strategy in addition to the content of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007) as advertisers commonly use emotional framing in their persuasive communication to convince consumers (Cotte & Ritchie, 2005). Research in political psychology describes the strategic use of emotional framing in political campaigns as well (Ridout & Searles, 2011). Politicians often use positive or negative emotional framing in their messages to gain votes.

Messages with emotional framing appeal to individuals' emotions by using drama and including subjective, evaluative properties (Stafford & Day, 1995; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Messages can also be framed in a rational manner however. Messages with rational framing appeal to the rationality of the receiver by presenting information in an objective and straightforward manner. How organizations present or frame crisis information may influence stakeholders' willingness to attend to the content of an organizational message (i.e., the crisis response strategy) (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). Yoo and MacInnis (2005) found that rational versus emotional ad formats cause consumers to form their brand attitude in different ways. The primary responses to emotional frames are likely to be feelings as they appeal to receivers' emotions (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005; McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). Rational frames however trigger consumers to evaluate the credibility of a message as they appeal to individuals' cognitions (MacInnis et al., 2002; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005; McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). Hence, if an organization frames its crisis response in a rational way, organizations should match the crisis

response strategy to the crisis type so that stakeholders regard the crisis response strategy as credible and meaningful (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). These propositions lead to the following expectations:

**H2a.** A matched crisis response strategy leads to a more positive post-crisis attitude toward the organization than a mismatched crisis response strategy in the case of a rationally framed crisis response

**H2b.** Crisis response strategies (match vs. mismatch) do not impact the post-crisis attitude toward the organization in the case of an emotionally framed crisis response

#### 2.4 The moderating impact of crisis involvement on the effect of message framing on post-crisis attitude toward the organization depending on the crisis response strategy

Studies in the marketing domain show that issue involvement might have a moderating influence on the persuasive effects of message framing (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Gallagher, Updegraff, Rothman, & Sims, 2011). When crisis involvement is low, stakeholders base their attitudes on simple inferences (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). Individuals with low crisis involvement expend little effort to think about issue-relevant information (i.e., crisis response strategies) (Petty et al., 1983). They rather focus on non-message elements such as the emotional framing of a message (Petty et al., 1983; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005).

Under high involvement however, message content determines persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) and therefore the messages with rational framing persuade more, as they focus on the content (i.e., the crisis response strategy) (Stafford & Day, 1995; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). The moderating impact of crisis involvement on organizational message framing depends however, on whether the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type or not.

When the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type, stakeholders react differently to the message framing depending on their level of involvement. For stakeholders with low crisis involvement, the post-crisis attitude towards the organization most likely does not differ depending on the message frame used. Emotional message framing succeeds in appealing to their emotions (Petty et al., 1983; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Rational message framing attracts the attention to the content (Stafford & Day, 1995; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005), making them realize



that the response matches the crisis type. The persuasion of people with high involvement on the other hand is determined by the message content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Since rational message frames focus on this content, stakeholders with high crisis involvement have a better post-crisis attitude toward the organization if it frames a matched crisis responses strategy in a rational manner than in an emotional manner.

**H3a.** When the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type, rational message framing leads to a more positive post-crisis attitude toward the organization than emotional message framing in the case of high crisis involvement.

This effect will not be apparent in the case of low crisis involvement.

A different trend occurs when organizations use a crisis response strategy that is a mismatch according to the SCCT guidelines. In this case, stakeholders with low crisis involvement may less likely perceive this mismatch when emotional framing is offered. When organizations use rational message framing however, stakeholders with low crisis involvement will perceive the mismatch since the rational framing forces their attention to the content, which results in a lower attitude toward the organization. Considering stakeholders with high crisis involvement, emotional message framing appeals less to them (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005), therefore, this type of framing cannot compensate for the mismatch between the crisis response strategy and crisis type. A rational framing highlights the mismatch to stakeholders with high crisis involvement, leading to the following:

**H3b.** When the crisis response strategy does not match the crisis type, emotional message framing leads to a more positive attitude toward the organization than rational message framing in the case of low crisis involvement.

This effect will not be apparent in the case of high crisis involvement.

### 3 METHOD

#### 3.1 Design and stimuli

This study uses a 2 (crisis response strategy: match vs. mismatch)  $\times$  2 (crisis involvement: low vs. high)  $\times$  2 (message framing: emotional vs. rational) between-subjects experimental factorial design to investigate the hypotheses. Eight fictitious scenarios manipulated crisis involvement, crisis response strategy, and message framing.

A fictitious organization was described in order to prevent any confounding effects of pre-crisis reputation (Laufer & Jung, 2010). The crisis situation involved the pollution of drinking water since this product is used by all respondents. The scenario of the crisis referred to a preventable crisis, which is the type of crisis which poses the highest level of threat to organizations and their reputation (Coombs, 2007). The crisis type was manipulated by explicitly stating in the newspaper article that the organization responsible for the water treatment installation was to blame for the incident. In addition, the article explained that the company had received plenty of warning signs that enabled it to avoid the problem, but had refused to take action when necessary.

Crisis involvement was manipulated in line with the approach of Petty et al. (1983). They propose to make high involvement subjects believe that a certain issue affects them personally, whereas for low involvement subjects the issue has no personal impact. The high involvement group of Belgian respondents read about the pollution of drinking water in The Netherlands, due to a company that is also responsible for the water treatment installations in Belgium. The article on the crisis also included a comment of Belgian scientists warning people for the risk of the same crisis occurring in Belgium. The low involvement group read about the same crisis occurring in India, and scientists assured people that a similar crisis could not occur in Belgium.

After reading about the crisis, the respondents received the communication response to the crisis offered by the CEO of the organization that was responsible for controlling the water treatment installation. In the matched crisis response strategy condition, the organization takes

full responsibility and apologizes (i.e., rebuild strategy). In the mismatched crisis response strategy condition, the organization denies any responsibility for the pollution of the drinking water (i.e., deny strategy).

In line with Stafford and Day (1995), the message with emotional framing includes subjective, evaluative properties and emotional adjectives (e.g., “*I find it horrible that such a tragedy happened*”). The message with rational framing on the other hand is more direct and presents the same information in a more straightforward and objective manner (e.g., “*We regret that this incident occurred*”).

### 3.2 Participants and procedure

A convenience sample of 274 respondents participated in the study. Respondents received an email inviting them to fill in an online questionnaire. The website randomly divided the respondents across the eight experimental conditions and instructed them to read a scenario. The scenario first described an article that appeared in either a Dutch or an Indian newspaper on the pollution of drinking water, which manipulated the crisis involvement. Then, respondents read a text containing a reaction of the CEO of the organization responsible for the water treatment installation, manipulating both the crisis response strategy and the message framing. After reading the scenario, respondents filled in a questionnaire containing the manipulation checks, measures of the dependent variables and socio-demographical variables. Participants were Dutch-speaking Belgian men and women with an average age of 32 years ( $SD = 12.27$ ; range = 17-70 years). Approximately 46% were males, 54% were females.

### 3.3 Measures

A seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (completely disagree) to seven (completely agree) measures crisis involvement (Kopalle & Lehmann, 2001) ( $\alpha = .87$ ). This scale consists of three items (e.g., “*These events are very important to me*”).

To measure the crisis response strategy as a manipulation check, respondents rated the degree to which they felt the organization took its responsibility for the crisis on a one-item

seven-point Likert scale. This item relates to the SCCT (Coombs, 2007), which states that crisis response strategies differ in the amount of responsibility organizations take.

A four-item seven-point semantic differential scale based on the work of Liu and Stout (1987) measures the emotional versus rational framing ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Respondents rated the organizational reaction on each of the items (e.g., *rational vs. emotional; objective vs. subjective*).

A four-item seven-point Likert scale of Griffin, Babin and Darden (1992) measures respondents' attributions of responsibility ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Two of the items measure the blame and responsibility of the organization; the others measure the blame and responsibility of external circumstances.

Finally, a four-item seven-point semantic differential scale (Mitchell & Olson, 1981) measures the post-crisis attitude toward the organization ( $\alpha = .96$ ). This way, respondents gave their general impression of the organization (e.g., *unfavorable vs. favorable*). Previous research on the impact of crisis involvement during the Mattel crisis has focused on the organizational reputation (Choi & Lin, 2009a). Given the fact that the organization presented in the current study was fictitious however, respondents are more likely to form an attitude rather than an actual perception on the organizational reputation, which covers several dimensions (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000).

## 4 PRE-TEST

A pre-test tested the effectiveness of the manipulations of the crisis response strategies, crisis involvement and message framing. The pre-test ( $N = 135$ ) used a between-subjects design. First, respondents rated to what extent they perceived that the organization took its responsibility for the crisis. The results show that, in line with expectations, respondents in the matched response condition (cf. rebuild strategy) perceived that the organization took more responsibility for the crisis than respondents in the mismatch response condition (cf. deny strategy) ( $M_{\text{match}} = 6.3$ ,  $SD = 1.17$  vs.  $M_{\text{mismatch}} = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ;  $t(133) = -22.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A second analysis measured the attributions of responsibility to establish the crisis type, in order to ensure that the rebuild crisis response strategy offers a matched condition and that the deny crisis response

strategy offers a mismatched condition. On average, respondents feel like the company is highly responsible for the crisis ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ) and therefore the issue at hand involves a preventable crisis.

In addition, the results show that in the low crisis involvement condition, respondents feel less involved with the crisis than in the high crisis involvement condition ( $M_{\text{low involvement}} = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 1.20$  vs.  $M_{\text{high involvement}} = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ;  $t(133) = 13.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, the last analysis of the pre-test checked the manipulation of message framing. The results show that in the emotional framing condition, respondents feel like the organizational communication is more emotional than in the rational framing condition ( $M_{\text{emotional}} = 5.4$ ,  $SD = .90$  vs.  $M_{\text{rational}} = 2.3$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ;  $t(133) = 18.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In sum, the scenarios manipulate all independent variables as intended.

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 Manipulation check

The study tests the manipulation of the independent variables through an independent samples t-test. In the matched condition (cf. rebuild strategy), respondents think that the organization takes more responsibility for what happened than in the mismatched condition (cf. deny strategy) ( $M_{\text{match}} = 6.3$ ,  $SD = 1.53$  vs.  $M_{\text{mismatch}} = 1.6$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ;  $t(272) = 28.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In line with the findings of the pretest, the attributions of responsibility of the organization for the crisis are moderately high ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ). Hence, the crisis described is a preventable crisis and the rebuild strategy a matched response, whereas the deny strategy proves to be a mismatched response. The results also show the effective manipulation of crisis involvement. Crisis involvement is higher for respondents in the high crisis involvement condition than for those in the low crisis involvement condition ( $M_{\text{low involvement}} = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 1.4$  vs.  $M_{\text{high involvement}} = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ;  $t(269) = -5.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To conclude, the independent samples t-test shows that respondents in the emotional framing condition consider the CEO's response more emotional than respondents in the rational

framing condition ( $M_{\text{emotional}} = 4.9$ ,  $SD = 1.25$  vs.  $M_{\text{rational}} = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $t(272) = 10.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## 5.2 Tests of hypotheses

Two separate univariate two-way ANOVA's (general linear model) analyze the hypotheses of the moderating impact of crisis involvement and message framing on the effect of crisis response strategies on post-crisis attitude toward the organization. Figure one shows an interaction effect between crisis involvement and the matching of the crisis response strategy to the crisis type on respondents' post-crisis attitudes ( $F(1, 263) = 10.62$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The interaction effect shows that the impact of matching the crisis response strategy to the crisis type on stakeholders' attitude towards the organization is moderated by their level of crisis involvement. Two independent-samples t-tests allow looking at this moderating effect of crisis involvement in detail. The results show that in the case of high crisis involvement, the post-crisis attitude toward the organization is higher in the case of a matched crisis response strategy as compared to a mismatched crisis response strategy ( $M_{\text{match}} = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 1.59$  vs.  $M_{\text{mismatch}} = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ;  $t(133) = 3.30$ ,  $p = .001$ ). These results support H1a. In the case of low crisis involvement however, no difference in attitude toward the organization occurs depending on the use of either a matched or a mismatched crisis response strategy ( $M_{\text{match}} = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 1.33$  vs.  $M_{\text{mismatch}} = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ;  $t(130) = -1.30$ ,  $p = .20$ ), supporting H1b.

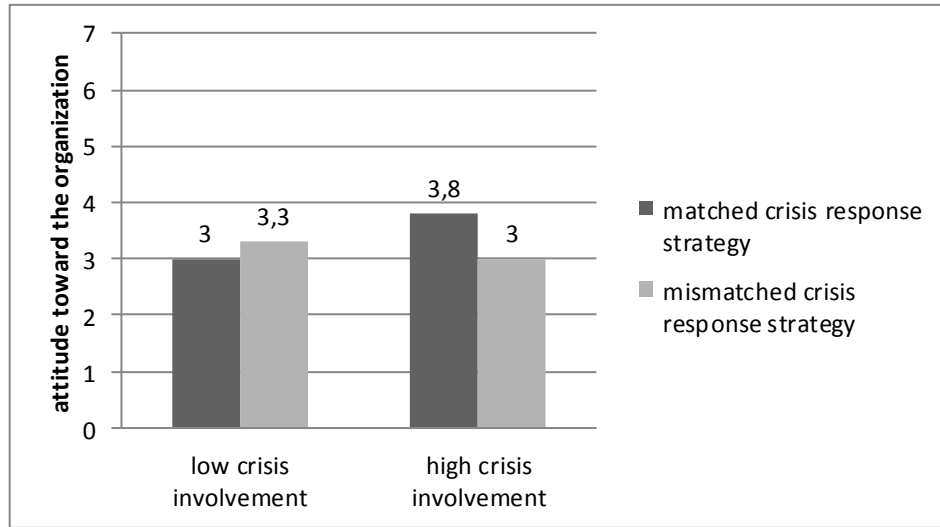


Fig. 1: Interaction between crisis involvement and crisis response strategy on post –crisis attitude toward the organization

Secondly, an interaction effect appears between message framing and the match-mismatch between crisis response strategy and crisis type on post-crisis attitude toward the organization ( $F(1, 263) = 9.10, p = .003$ ) (cf. Figure two). This effect illustrates that the impact of offering stakeholders either a match between the crisis response strategy and the crisis type or a mismatch on their attitude towards the organization, is moderated by the organization’s message framing. Looking at this interaction effect more in detail, an independent samples t-test shows that in the case of a rationally framed crisis response, the attitude toward the organization is better in the case of a matched crisis response strategy than in the case of a mismatched crisis response strategy ( $M_{\text{match}} = 3.7, SD = 1.64$  vs.  $M_{\text{mismatch}} = 2.9, SD = 1.14; t(134) = 3.15, p = .002$ ). These results support H2a. In addition, in the case of an emotionally framed crisis response the attitude toward the organization after the crisis does not differ depending on whether the crisis response strategy is matched to the crisis type or not ( $M_{\text{match}} = 3.1, SD = 1.30$  vs.  $M_{\text{mismatch}} = 3.3, SD = 1.48; t(129) = -1.15, p = .25$ ). These results support H2b.

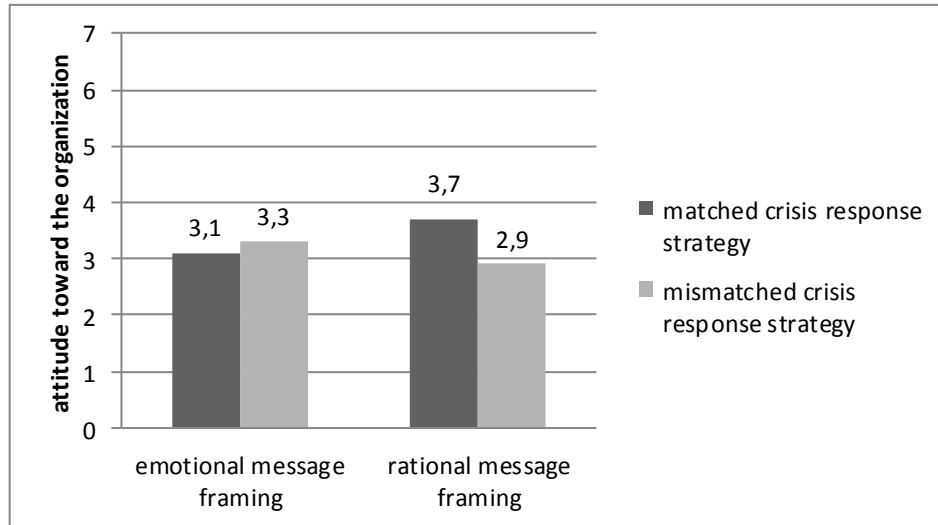


Fig. 2: Interaction between message framing and crisis response strategy on post-crisis attitude toward the organization

The last hypothesis expects that crisis involvement moderates the impact of organizational message framing on post-crisis attitude toward the organization, but that this interaction depends on whether the crisis response strategy matches or mismatches with the crisis type (cf. Figure three). A univariate three-way ANOVA (general linear model) tests this assumption. The results show that the overall three-way interaction between crisis response strategy, crisis involvement and message framing is not significant ( $F(1, 259) = .30, p = .59$ ). The results of four separate independent sample t-tests suggest however, that the impact of crisis involvement on the efficacy of message framing on post-crisis attitude toward the organization may differentiate based on the crisis response strategy offered.

In the case of a matched crisis response strategy, the post-crisis attitude toward the organization is higher when the message is framed rationally than when it is framed emotionally for stakeholders in a high crisis involvement condition ( $M_{\text{emotional}} = 2.9, SD = 1.10$  vs.  $M_{\text{rational}} = 4.6, SD = 1.57; t(66) = -5.11, p < .001$ ). No effect of message framing occurs in the case of low crisis involvement ( $M_{\text{emotional}} = 3.2, SD = 1.50$  vs.  $M_{\text{rational}} = 2.8, SD = 1.16; t(65) = 1.05, p = .29$ ). These results offer support for H3A.



In the case of a mismatched crisis response strategy, the results illustrate that the post-crisis attitude toward the organization is higher when the message is framed emotionally than when it is framed rationally for stakeholders in a low crisis involvement condition ( $M_{\text{emotional}} = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.50$  vs.  $M_{\text{rational}} = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ;  $t(63) = 3.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No effect of message framing occurs in the case of high crisis involvement ( $M_{\text{emotional}} = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 1.24$  vs.  $M_{\text{rational}} = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ;  $t(65) = -1.46$ ,  $p = .15$ ), supporting H3B

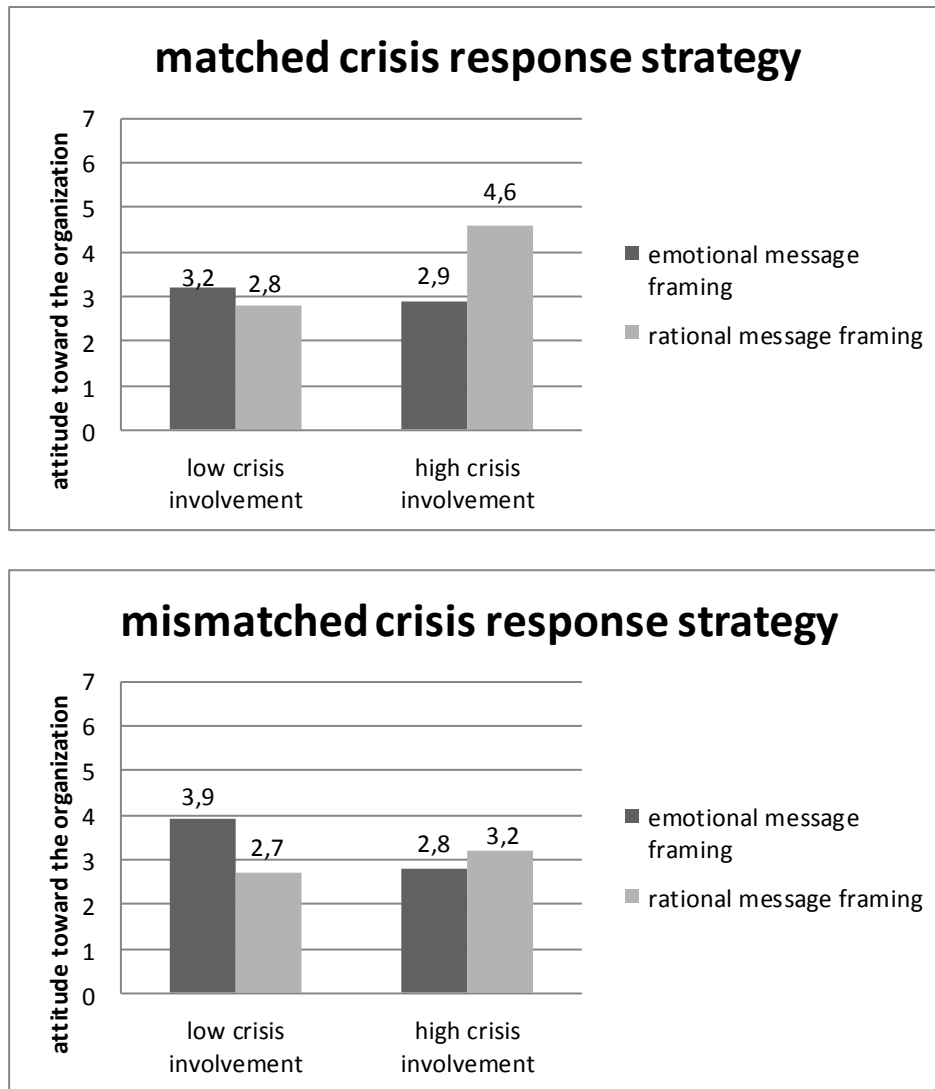


Fig. 3: Interaction between crisis involvement and message framing on post-crisis attitude toward the organization depending on the crisis response strategy

## 6 DISCUSSION

This study investigates the impact of crisis involvement and message framing on the effectiveness of guidelines developed by the SCCT to match crisis response strategies to crisis types (Coombs, 2007). In addition, the results show that stakeholders' crisis involvement moderates the impact of emotional versus rational message framing on post-crisis attitudes toward the organization, depending on whether the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type or not.

The first set of hypotheses expected that the impact of a matched versus a mismatched crisis response strategy, based on the guidelines of the SCCT (Coombs, 2007), depends on stakeholders' crisis involvement. Stakeholders with high crisis involvement pay more attention to the content of relevant messages than those with low crisis involvement (Petty et al., 1983; MacInnis et al., 2002). The results of this study correspond to research on persuasion according to which consumers with high involvement generate counterarguments when a persuasive message is unconvincing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). If however, consumers with high crisis involvement consider a crisis response as persuasive, the crisis response strategy results in positive attitudes toward the organization. Hence, the results show that a matched crisis response strategy positively influences the post-crisis attitudes toward the organization of stakeholders with high crisis involvement as compared to a mismatched crisis response strategy. Additionally, the results show that the matching versus mismatching of crisis response strategies and the crisis type does not affect the post-crisis attitude toward the organization of stakeholders with low crisis involvement. These findings offer experimental support to the proposition made by Choi and Lin (2009a), that stakeholders with high crisis involvement scrutinize crisis information more thoroughly than those with low crisis involvement.

The results of the study also show that the framing of crisis responses has an impact on the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT. The presentation of information by an organization, the message framing, influences people's evaluation of organizational messages (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). The results show that when an organization emotionally frames crisis information, the resulting post-crisis attitude toward the organization does not differ

depending on a match or mismatch between crisis response strategy and crisis type as proposed by the SCCT guidelines. According to Yoo and MacInnis (2005), rational framing however, results in evaluative thoughts of people regarding the organizational message's credibility. Consequently, the results show that in the case of rational framing organizations should match the crisis response strategy to the crisis type based on the SCCT guidelines.

The moderating impact of both crisis involvement and message framing on the efficacy of the guidelines of the SCCT is noteworthy because it can explain why some previous studies found that a matched crisis response strategy restores organizational reputations better than a mismatched crisis response strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Huang, 2006) and others did not (Claeys et al., 2010). This study shows that the SCCT guidelines may only be effective in restoring organizational reputations during crises when stakeholders' crisis involvement is high or when organizations frame their response rationally.

Finally, the study suggests that the impact of individuals' crisis involvement on the effectiveness of message framing may depend on whether the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type or not. Stakeholders who are low in crisis involvement tend to focus on non-content elements of a message such as emotional message framing (Petty et al., 1983; Stafford & Day, 1995; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Hence, when an organization does not match its crisis response strategy to the crisis type, stakeholders with low crisis involvement will have a more favorable post-crisis attitude toward the organization in the case of emotional message framing than in the case of a rational message. Respondents with high involvement however, tend to focus more on the content. They therefore prefer rational framing of the crisis response over emotional framing since rational framing focuses more directly on the content of the message (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005; Stafford & Day, 1995). However, when the rationally framed message involves a mismatch, stakeholders with high crisis involvement notice that the response does not suit the crisis type. Consequently, they are expected to form counterarguments which results in a negative attitude (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). The results illustrate that the post-crisis attitude toward the organization does not differ depending on the message framing for stakeholders with high involvement, in the case of a mismatch.

A different pattern emerges when organizations in crisis match their crisis response strategy to the crisis type. The rational statement focuses on the content and therefore clearly meets with the need for information expressed by stakeholders with high crisis involvement (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). In addition, a rationally framed message makes the match between the crisis type and the crisis response strategy apparent for these stakeholders, resulting in a more positive attitude toward the organization in crisis compared to an emotionally framed response. When a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis type is offered to stakeholders with low crisis involvement however, the emotional message framing will lose its additional value over the rational message framing, since the latter stresses the matched response (Stafford & Day, 1995).

## **7 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Some limitations of this study offer suggestions for further research. Firstly, this study measures stakeholders' evaluation of an organization in crisis by means of their post-crisis attitude toward that organization, instead of using a measure of reputation like previous research on the impact of involvement during crises did (Choi & Lin, 2009a). It is difficult for respondents however, to rate the reputation of a fictitious organization, since this is a multidimensional construct (Fombrun et al., 2000). Reputation also develops over time and is therefore hard to measure after one exposure to a fictitious organization. Secondly, this study uses only one (rather specific) product/organization, namely a drinking water cleaning organization. Future research should consider different types of products and organizations.

In addition, the study focuses on the match between a preventable crisis type and a rebuild crisis response strategy on the one hand and the mismatch between a preventable crisis and a deny strategy on the other hand. This study focuses on a preventable crisis because this is the crisis type that results in the most reputational loss and therefore poses the highest level of threat to organizations (Coombs, 2007; Claeys et al., 2010). Further research needs to replicate these effects however, based on different types of matches and mismatches (cf. Coombs, 2007). In addition, the attributions of responsibility in this study are only moderately high for a

preventable crisis type; future research focusing on a preventable crisis can describe a crisis for which the attributions of responsibility are even higher.

Future studies might also consider the inclusion of a control group in which no crisis response strategy is offered. However, because the main focus of this study was to investigate under which conditions it is important for organizations to match their crisis response strategy to the crisis type and when it is not, no control group was added to the design. Also, due to the forced exposure nature of the experiment, all subjects may have been induced in a high involvement processing state, even those subjects exposed to the low crisis involvement situation. In case of a non-forced exposure study, those subjects in the low crisis involvement condition might not be motivated to process the message at all. Previous research (Shiv, Britton, & Payne, 2004) suggests that in the case of low processing motivation and low processing opportunity, message frame-related heuristics are inaccessible to respondents. However, when processing opportunity is high, the impact of framing increases. Subsequently, there are reasons to expect that, if the experiment had a non-forced exposure nature, with high processing opportunity, there would still be an impact of message framing.

The findings of this study offer some directions for further research. The results first illustrate that the importance of applying the SCCT-guidelines depends on stakeholders' crisis involvement. Further research should study what characterizes a low or high involvement crisis. Secondly, concerning the strategic use of message framing in crisis communication, future studies should focus not only on the impact of framing on the effectiveness of crisis response strategies, but also on the effectiveness of crisis timing strategies. Although most research in crisis communication focuses on the content of an organizational communication response and its proper use to restore or maintain organizational reputations (Avery et al., 2010), another line of research that is fruitful to investigate are studies on the proper timing of information release during crises (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011). Further research should explore the impact of emotional versus rational framing under different conditions of crisis timing.

In addition, future studies should investigate what impact organizations' emotional framing has on stakeholders' felt emotions, since these can impact organizational reputation as a mediating variable (Choi & Lin, 2009b). Finally, this study shows that emotional message framing can be beneficial for organizations in crisis during the post-crisis stage, when organizations attempt to restore their reputation. Further research should investigate if emotional message framing might backfire when it is applied during the crisis event, when management should show they can handle and control the crisis situation.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

This study contributes to the research field of crisis communication for several reasons. Firstly, the study answers the need for more experimental research on crisis communication (Rowland & Jerome, 2004; Coombs, 2007). A second and more important merit of this study is that it shows under which conditions the guidelines of the SCCT should be applied by communication managers, and when they are less effective. These findings are not only noteworthy in the light of the further development of the SCCT; they also offer more clear directions for practice.

In addition, crisis involvement (Choi & Lin, 2009a) and message framing (Coombs & Holladay, 2005), have not been tested experimentally before in a crisis context. The results show that the guidelines of the SCCT are crucial when stakeholders are highly involved with a crisis. Consequently, organizations should attempt to differentiate between stakeholder groups based on their crisis involvement, in order to tailor their crisis communication to the needs of each stakeholder group.

This chapter also illustrates that communication managers should not only consider the content of their crisis communication, but also the framing of their message. The efficacy of the SCCT-guidelines concerning the content can depend on the message frame used. Matching the crisis response strategy to the crisis type is likely to be highly important in the case of rational message framing, but not in the case of emotional message framing. Emotional message framing

could therefore offer a solution for companies that are unable to establish their crisis responsibility and therefore unable to match the crisis response strategy to the crisis type. This could be the case in the very beginning of a crisis.

Finally, this study suggests that even though involvement has a moderating impact on the persuasive effects of message framing (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Gallagher et al., 2011), the direction of this effect in crisis situations is dependent of whether the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type. Rational framing is only beneficial for the post-crisis organizational attitude of stakeholders with high crisis involvement when the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type. Emotional framing can be beneficial in the case of a mismatch for stakeholders with low crisis involvement, but loses its added value compared to rational framing when the response matches the crisis type.

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**CHAPTER 4**  
**CRISIS RESPONSE AND CRISIS TIMING**  
**STRATEGIES, TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN**

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## CHAPTER 4 CRISIS RESPONSE AND CRISIS TIMING STRATEGIES, TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN<sup>3</sup>

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This chapter investigates the moderating impact of the timing of crisis disclosure on the effect of crisis response strategies on organizational post-crisis reputation. It proposes that self-disclosing a crisis allows organizations to avoid explicitly taking or rejecting responsibility by means of a crisis response strategy. A 2 (crisis timing strategy: ex-ante crisis timing strategy vs. ex-post crisis timing strategy) × 2 (crisis response: response strategy vs. objective information only) between-subjects factorial design was conducted among 137 participants. The results show that organizations that do not steal thunder better use a reputation restoring crisis response strategy than just providing stakeholders objective information about what happened. In addition, the results demonstrate that if an organization steals thunder, it is not necessary to offer reputation restoring crisis response strategies such as an apology. These findings stress the importance of timing to disclose crisis information in addition to the content of crisis communication strategies.

**Keywords:** crisis response strategies, crisis timing strategies, post-crisis reputation, perceived organizational credibility

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<sup>3</sup> Chapter four has been published as “Claeys, A.-S., & Cauberghe, V. (2012). Crisis response and crisis timing strategies, two sides of the same coin. *Public Relations Review*, 38(1), 83-88”

This paper has been presented at the International Conference on Research in Advertising (ICORIA) in Berlin (24-25<sup>th</sup> June 2011)

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Organizations in crisis face severe reputational threats. The more responsible an organization is for a crisis, the larger the reputational damage will be (Coombs, 2007). This damage can be minimized by the correct public relations strategy, more specifically by saying the right words at the right moment (Coombs, 2004). According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), when the reputational threat as the result of a crisis is mild, it is sufficient that an organization offers objective information to minimize the reputational damage. If the reputational threat is severe, it is strongly advised that the organization integrates reputation restoring crisis response strategies (e.g., apology, denial) into its communication strategy.

The choice between these crisis response strategies is often difficult (Coombs, 2007). Public relations practitioners might find it hard to convince their management and the legal department of the organization of the importance of taking responsibility for a crisis. By offering an explicit apology, organizations open themselves to lawsuits and consequently to financial losses (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Coombs and Holladay (2008) have found however, that compensation and sympathy are as effective as an apology in shaping stakeholders' perceptions of the organization taking responsibility for the crisis, because these crisis response strategies focus on the victims' needs. Self-disclosing a crisis (a crisis timing strategy), as an alternative to crisis response strategies however, can be equally effective in minimizing crisis damage (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Similarly to crisis response strategies, crisis timing strategies are used strategically to reduce crisis damage (Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003) and differ in the amount of responsibility an organization in crisis is perceived to take (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

## **2 CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

Corporations use crisis communication strategies to protect their reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In general there are two types of crisis communication strategies: (1) the crisis

response strategies (e.g., denial, apology) (Coombs, 2007) and (2) the crisis timing strategies (e.g., stealing thunder) (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

## 2.1 Crisis response strategies

According to the SCCT, organizations should select a crisis response strategy that is determined by the amount of crisis responsibility attributed to the organization (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Research has confirmed that in case of a preventable crisis (a crisis that could be prevented by the organization which therefore holds a high degree of responsibility for the crisis), crisis managers should use accommodating rebuild strategies (e.g., apology). In case of a victim crisis (a crisis for which the organization holds a low degree of responsibility), managers can use defensive denial strategies (e.g., denial, scapegoat) (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Huang, 2006).

However, according to the SCCT, in the case of a crisis that inflicts a mild reputational threat, it is enough to provide stakeholders with only objective information about the crisis without adding an additional crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2004). If there is a severe reputational threat however, it is necessary to integrate a suitable reputation restoring crisis response strategy in addition to the objective information of the crisis. The more responsible the organization is, however, and the more severe the reputational threat, the more responsibility an organization should take in its crisis response (Coombs, 2007). Yet, the use of highly accommodative strategies is often discouraged by legal advisors; because of the financial liabilities they might incur (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). It is therefore interesting to find an alternative that allows organizations in a preventable crisis to minimize the reputational damage by offering objective information only.

## 2.2 Crisis timing strategies

Stealing thunder is a proactive crisis timing strategy defined as follows: “*When an organization steals thunder, it breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties*” (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425). The goal of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy (i.e. stealing thunder) is to reduce crisis damage (Dolnik et

al., 2003), because if an organization does not disclose incriminating information, its opponents will, with twice as much impact (Mauet, 2007). Studies focusing on the importance of crisis timing strategies were initiated in the context of research on lawsuits (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Participants in the ex-ante crisis timing condition were less likely to find a defendant guilty than those in the ex-post crisis timing condition (i.e., thunder) (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993). In line with these results, crisis communication research found that organizations that use an ex-ante crisis timing strategy are perceived as more credible than those who use an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

Several explanations for the positive effects of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy have been proposed. According to the inoculation theory, stealing thunder offers organizations the opportunity to warn stakeholders about an upcoming attack, and inoculate them with a weaker version of the attack (Williams et al., 1993). The change of meaning hypothesis on the other hand proposes that when organizations reveal negative information, stakeholders will attempt to reconcile the apparent paradox by changing the meaning of the disclosure, in order to make it consistent with their existing beliefs about the organization (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Other possible explanations that have received attention are the framing hypothesis, according to which an ex-ante crisis timing strategy works because it allows organizations to frame the crisis in their own terms and downplay its severity (Williams et al., 1993), and the commodity theory, according to which an external attack loses its value after an organization has self-disclosed the same information first (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

### **3 HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

Both the content and the timing of crisis communication allow organizations to actively manage their reputations in crises. Crisis timing strategies have received far less attention than crisis response strategies, but are of equal importance to minimize crisis damage (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Similar to the crisis response strategies, crisis timing strategies allow organizations to either reject or take responsibility. An ex-post crisis response strategy implies that the organization does not take full responsibility. An ex-ante crisis timing strategy on the



other hand suggests that an organization takes responsibility for the crisis, which is recommended in case of preventable crises (cf. Archer & Burleson, 1980).

Research on crisis response strategies tested the different types of crisis response strategies in an ex-post crisis timing strategy condition (Coombs, 2004; Huang, 2006). In these ex-post crisis timing strategy situations, the use of crisis response strategies significantly reduces the crisis damage compared to giving only objective information about the crisis (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). However, the impact of the different types of crisis responses has not yet been tested in an ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition. If an organization steals thunder or uses a rebuild crisis response strategy to repair the reputational damage, the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis. Since the SCCT proposes that for preventable crises the organization should take a large amount of responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2007) both rebuild crisis response strategies and ex-ante crisis timing strategies will match this type of crisis in terms of responsibility taken by the organization. Since crisis timing strategies can be equally effective as crisis response strategies (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), it can be expected that in the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition, offering only objective information will have the same impact on crisis damage as using a rebuild crisis response strategy. Hence we expect that:

**H1a.** In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, providing objective crisis information versus using a crisis response strategy has no significant different impact on the organizational credibility.

**H1b.** In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, providing objective crisis information will have a more significantly negative impact on organizational credibility compared to using a crisis response strategy.

An ex-ante crisis timing strategy can lower perceptions of crisis severity (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005) and of guilt or responsibility (Williams et al., 1993) through an increase in perceived organizational credibility. Organizational credibility is closely related to perceptions of reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). It is therefore expected that the positive effect of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy on organizational reputation is mediated by organizational credibility.

**H2.** Organizational credibility mediates the interaction effect between crisis response and crisis timing on post-crisis reputation.

## **4 METHOD**

### **4.1 Design and stimuli**

A two (crisis timing strategy: ex-ante crisis timing strategy vs. ex-post crisis timing strategy) × two (crisis response: response strategy vs. objective crisis information only) between-subjects factorial experimental design was used to investigate the hypotheses. Four different scenarios of a fictitious organization, active in computer hardware, were used to manipulate the content and timing of organizational crisis communication. The crisis involved a fictitious fraud case (a preventable crisis) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In the ex-ante crisis timing condition, the organization itself reveals the information about the fraud, whereas in the ex-post crisis timing condition, the Public Prosecutor brings out the crisis information and the organization simply reacts to these allegations. In all scenarios, the organization offers objective information on the crisis. In the crisis response strategy condition the organization adds an apology, a rebuild crisis response strategy, which matches with the preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007).

### **4.2 Participants and procedure**

Data were collected online from 137 respondents through a convenience sample taken from a random group of Dutch-speaking Belgian individuals. The respondents were contacted through email and were invited to participate in the study by following a link to the online questionnaire which was drafted in Dutch. They were randomly exposed to one of the four experimental conditions. They read the scenario that described the crisis, the timing of disclosure and the content of the organizational response. The average age of the participants was 34 years ( $SD = 15.01$ ; range = 19–86 years). Approximately 44% were male, 56% were female.

### 4.3 Measures

Organizational reputation was measured with the Reputation Quotient scale of Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2000) ( $\alpha = .89$ ) (e.g., “*I have a good feeling about this company*”). The twenty items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale.

Organizational credibility was measured through a 7-point semantic differential scale based on Beltramini’s (1982) believability scale ( $\alpha = .91$ ) (e.g., *honest vs. dishonest*).

Organizational responsibility for a crisis was measured using a 7-point four-item Likert scale of Griffin, Babin, and Darden (1992) (e.g., “*How responsible was the organization with respect to the crisis?*”) ( $\alpha = .74$ ) to allow to establish that the fraud was considered as a preventable crisis. According to the SCCT, preventable crises inflict high attributions of responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002); as a consequence they will inflict severe crisis damage.

### 4.4 Pre-test and manipulation check

A pre-test using a within-subjects design was performed with 20 respondents in order to check the manipulations of the crisis response and the timing strategy. A multiple-choice questionnaire was used. First, respondents had to evaluate the content of the crisis communication and indicate if the organization used a crisis response strategy or offered objective crisis information only. All respondents in the pre-test matched the content of the crisis response to the scenarios correctly. Similar results were obtained for the manipulation of crisis timing strategies, which were matched correctly to each scenario by all respondents. Responsibility was perceived sufficiently high ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = .95$ ) for a preventable crisis type (on a 7-point Likert scale).

The crisis type proved to be manipulated correctly in the manipulation check as well ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). Concerning crisis timing, of respondents in the ex-ante crisis timing condition, 77% judged that the organization had self-disclosed the crisis. About 96% of respondents in the ex-post crisis timing condition felt like the Public Prosecutor disclosed the crisis. For the manipulation check of organizational response, 85% of all respondents in the information-only condition claimed that the organization only offered information. In the crisis response strategy condition, 94% of the respondents claimed that the organization offered an apology.

## 5 RESULTS

To address the interaction effect of the crisis response strategy and crisis timing strategy on organizational credibility, a univariate two-way ANOVA was conducted. There appears to be a significant interaction effect on organizational credibility ( $F(1, 133) = 3.70, p = .056$ ) (cf. Fig. 1). When an organization in crisis uses an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, it does not matter if it uses a crisis response strategy ( $M = 3.41, SD = 1.25$ ) or just gives objective information ( $M = 3.29, SD = .76; t(71) = .45, p = .65$ ). If the organization uses an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, its credibility decreases if it only gives information about the crisis ( $M = 2.58, SD = 1.10$ ) compared to when it adds a crisis response strategy ( $M = 3.41, SD = 1.20; t(62) = 2.85, p = .006$ ). These results support H1a and H1b.

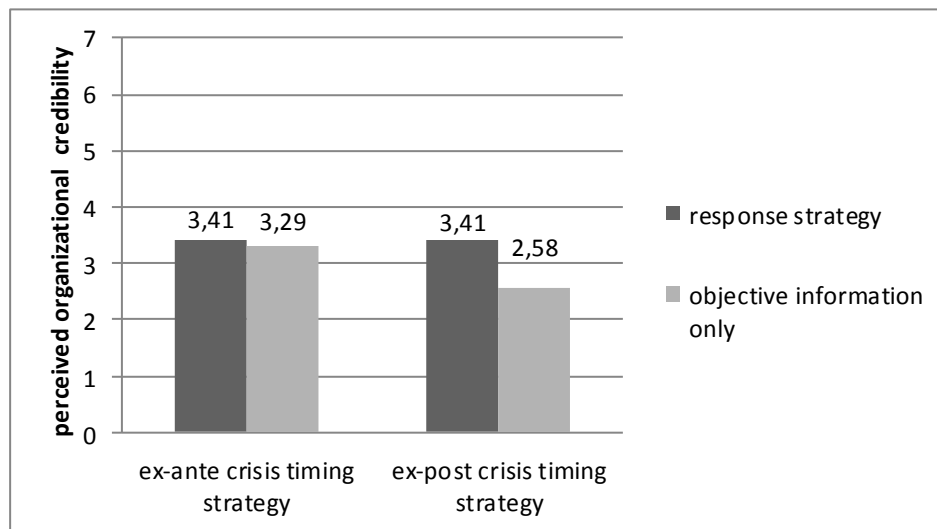


Fig. 1: Interaction between crisis timing strategy and crisis response strategy on perceived organizational post-crisis credibility

The second hypothesis is tested using a mediation analyses based on the Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure (cf. Table one). In the first step, the effects of the independent variables, crisis response and crisis timing strategy on post-crisis organizational reputation, are estimated. The results of the ANOVA show two significant main effects (crisis response ( $F(1, 133) = 4.52, p = .035$ ), crisis timing strategy ( $F(1, 133) = 4.18, p = .043$ )). The interaction effect of crisis response strategy and timing strategy on reputation is significant on the point one level ( $F(1, 133) = 3.01,$

$p = .085$ ). In the second step of the procedure, the effect of the independent variables on the mediating variable, organizational credibility, is investigated. The ANOVA shows a significant main effect of crisis response strategy ( $F(1, 133) = 6.44, p = .012$ ) and a significant main effect of crisis timing strategy ( $F(1, 133) = 3.61, p = .06$ ) on credibility. As mentioned in the previous analysis (see H1a and H1b), the interaction effect on credibility is significant ( $F(1, 133) = 3.70, p = .056$ ). In the third step of the procedure, the effects of the mediating and the independent variables on organizational reputation are estimated simultaneously. Hence, credibility was added as a covariate in the ANOVA analysis (cf. first step). Credibility has a strong positive effect on post-crisis organizational reputation ( $F(1, 132) = 129.20, p < .001$ ). The main effects of both crisis response strategy  $F(1, 132) = .22, p = .64$  and timing are no longer significant ( $F(1, 132) = .96, p = .33$ ). The interaction effect is also no longer significant ( $F(1, 132) = .28, p = .60$ ). Hence, organizational credibility fully mediates the effects of crisis response, crisis timing strategy and their interaction on organizational post-crisis reputation. These results support hypothesis 2.

Baron and Kenny steps	Relation	$F(1, 133)$	Partial Eta <sup>2</sup>	$P$
Step 1	Crisis response strategy	4.52	.033	.035
	Crisis timing strategy	4.18	.031	.043
	Crisis response strategy $\times$ crisis timing strategy $\rightarrow$ reputation	3.009	.022	.085
Step 2	Crisis response strategy	6.44	.046	.012
	Crisis timing strategy	3.61	.026	.060
	Crisis response strategy $\times$ crisis timing strategy $\rightarrow$ credibility	3.70	.027	.056
Step 3	Crisis response strategy	.22	.002	.64
	Crisis timing strategy	.96	.007	.33
	Crisis response strategy $\times$ crisis timing strategy	.28	.002	.60
	Credibility (covariate) $\rightarrow$ reputation	129.20	.49	<.001

Table 1: Mediating effect of credibility on the impact of crisis timing strategy and crisis response strategy on organizational post- crisis reputation.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The SCCT suggests that in case of a crisis that poses a severe reputational threat, it is necessary to use reputation restoring crisis response strategies in addition to offering stakeholders objective information about the crisis (Coombs, 2004). Preventable crises induce a high reputational threat, and often lead to a difficult choice among the different crisis response

strategies. The use of denial strategies would be a mismatch according to SCCT guidelines (Coombs, 2007), as the organization is highly responsible. Accepting responsibility, however, might lead to lawsuits to demand compensation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). A proper use of crisis timing strategies might make it suitable to give solely objective information in the case of preventable crises.

This study confirms earlier findings on the use of crisis response strategies in ex-post crisis timing strategy situations (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). If an organization reacts to thunder in a preventable crisis, it will be more credible if it uses a rebuild crisis response strategy in addition to offering objective information. Organizations in crisis can, however, communicate proactively by using an ex ante crisis timing strategy. This should have an equally positive effect as compared to the use of crisis response strategies (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). The results confirm that in the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition offering objective information about the crisis has the same impact on organizational credibility as the use of a crisis response strategy.

Former findings of the positive effects of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy were mainly found for organizational credibility, but not yet for organizational reputation. The positive effects of stealing thunder on perceptions of crisis severity and guilt were mediated by credibility (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Williams et al., 1993). The results of this study equally show that the interaction between crisis timing strategy and crisis response on post-crisis reputation is mediated by organizational credibility.

The limitations of the current study provide some possibilities for further research. A first limitation is that reputation was measured after only one exposure to only one fictitious company. Further research is needed with real organizations from different industrial sectors. Secondly, we based the selection of respondents on a convenience sample. Further research should use a more systematic procedure to select the respondents. In addition, it has been suggested that ex-ante crisis timing strategies work best if they are followed by an attack from a third party (Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995). This study did not offer respondents that subsequent attack.

The current findings stress the importance of timing in addition to the content of crisis communication. The difficult choice among several crisis response strategies (apology, denial, etc.) can be avoided by simply selecting the right crisis timing strategy. The managerial implications of these results are that public relations practitioners have several options when confronted with a preventable crisis. They can avoid the difficulty of convincing the management or the legal department to take explicit responsibility for a crisis. If the organization's management or its legal department fear that an apology leads to financial losses, the organization can simply steal thunder and be the first to give stakeholders the factual information about a crisis, hereby minimizing reputational damage.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

### **OLD NEWS IS NO NEWS**

#### **HOW COMMODITY THEORY EXPLAINS THE DESIRABILITY AND IMPACT OF NEGATIVE PUBLICITY DEPENDING ON ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS TIMING STRATEGIES**

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## **CHAPTER 5 OLD NEWS IS NO NEWS: HOW COMMODITY THEORY EXPLAINS THE DESIRABILITY AND IMPACT OF NEGATIVE PUBLICITY DEPENDING ON ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS TIMING STRATEGIES**

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Commodity theory is examined as an explanation for the impact of information scarcity on value in the context of crisis communication. Two experiments were conducted with an eye-tracking device to examine participants' desire to read negative publicity about a crisis and the impact of this publicity on their perceptions about the related organization. The results of study one indicate that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy results in less attention for negative publicity and in less impact of that negative publicity on stakeholders' perceptions of organizational post-crisis reputation. This implies that information scarcity can result in two distinct outcomes: the desire to obtain the information and an impact of that information on perceptions. An interaction analysis between crisis timing strategy and crisis involvement in study two shows that both outcomes can occur independently of one another. If organizations apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, both outcomes are low, irrespective of the crisis involvement. If organizations apply an ex-post crisis timing strategy, crisis involvement affects stakeholders' desire to read the information but not its impact.

**Keywords:** commodity theory, scarcity of information, crisis communication, crisis timing strategies

# 1 INTRODUCTION

People have a general tendency toward wanting information that is limited or difficult to obtain (Cialdini, 2009). When much effort is required to obtain information, we often want to receive that information to a greater extent and might even develop a more favorable attitude toward it (Worchel & Arnold, 1973; Worchel, 1992). When erotic materials are difficult to obtain for instance, these become more desirable than if they were easily accessible (Fromkin & Brock, 1973; Cialdini, 2009). When people have limited access to ideological viewpoints, they may support these viewpoints more than when that information was readily available to them (Worchel, 1992; Cialdini, 2009). The effect of limited availability upon the valuation of information is explained by commodity theory (Verhallen, 1982).

Commodity theory proposes that people assign more value to objects, experiences or messages when they are less available (Brock, 1968; Verhallen, 1982; Cialdini, 2009). Commodity theory describes the value of information resulting from its scarcity as either the desirability to obtain that information or as its impact on related perceptions (Brock, 1968). This study makes a clear distinction between the two. We attempt to thoroughly investigate the impact of information scarcity on both its desirability and impact. The results illustrate that information scarcity increases both types of value. In addition, we further explore both types of value by investigating the moderating impact of issue involvement. Just as information scarcity about a certain issue can affect that information's value, people's involvement with an issue can affect the value of issue-related information as well (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). This study shows that issue involvement has a moderating impact on the effect of information scarcity on peoples' desire to obtain information, but not on its impact on perceptions.

Prior studies mainly used commodity theory to explain the impact of censorship (e.g., age restrictions for movies, violent video games) (Worchel & Arnold, 1973; Worchel, 1992). This offered the possibility to make policy makers aware that limiting access to certain forms of information may backfire. However, the scarcity principle can also provide insight into the effectiveness of self-disclosing incriminating information. Research in social psychology has for instance shown that people who are responsible for a negative event that occurred in their lives

should self-disclose this information when they meet someone new (Jones & Gordon, 1972; Archer & Burleson, 1980). If not, they are likely to be considered less attractive. When a defendant in trial attempts to hold back incriminating information, jury members may consider the information more severe when they discover (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993; Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003).

The importance of self-disclosure of detrimental information is highly apparent for organizations confronted with a crisis. When organizations fear negative publicity, they have two options (Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995; Wigley, 2011): to use an ex-ante crisis timing strategy or to use an ex-post crisis timing strategy. The former crisis timing strategy is commonly referred to as *stealing thunder* and implies that an organization “*breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties*” (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425). In this case the organization self-discloses a crisis before external parties communicate about the issue (Williams et al., 1993; Dolnik et al., 2003). The latter crisis timing strategy is often called *thunder*, in which case the crisis is announced by an external party.

This chapter investigates if commodity theory can explain the positive impact of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy on organizational post-crisis reputation (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). When crisis information is disclosed by a third party in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, stakeholders’ access to crisis information is considered limited (Williams et al., 1993). This results in perceived information scarcity. In order to test the impact of information scarcity on value in terms of both desirability and impact, two experimental studies were conducted. These studies measure the effect of crisis timing strategies on the attention devoted to a newspaper article containing negative publicity provided by an external party by means of an eye-tracking device. In addition, the impact of this article on organizational post-crisis reputation is estimated. A second study additionally focuses on the moderating impact of stakeholders’ involvement with the crisis.

Our research offers three contributions to communication research. First, the studies contribute to research on commodity theory by differentiating between two types of value that

can be induced by information scarcity: the desire to obtain information and its impact on people's perceptions. No prior research has clearly established this dual effect of information scarcity. Moreover, the desirability of the information is measured in an objective way by means of an eye-tracking device. Second, the study assesses the moderating impact of involvement with the information. The findings illustrate that crisis involvement affects the desire to read negative publicity, but not its impact on post-crisis reputation. Consequently, this study illustrates that both types of information value as a result of information scarcity can be affected independently of one another. Finally, the results indicate that commodity theory can be applied to organizational crisis communication and, more specifically, to crisis timing strategies. Organizations in crisis can try to avoid the detrimental impact of information scarcity by applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy.

## **2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Commodity theory**

Commodity theory's basic premise is that "*any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is unavailable*" (Brock, 1968, p. 246). Some authors believe that unavailability operates as a heuristic cue (Lynn, 1991; Cialdini, 2009; Worchel, 1992). People may use the availability of a commodity as a shortcut to estimate its quality or importance (Cialdini, 2009). Another theoretical stream suspects that unavailability results in increased value because it causes people to scrutinize a message more (Brock & Brannon, 1992). Unavailability refers to scarcity and the amount of effort that is needed to obtain the commodity (e.g., limited editions of products) (Brock, 1968; Lynn, 1991). Commodity refers to anything (e.g., messages, experiences, objects) that is useful, transferable from one person to another and has the potential to be possessed.

Many studies on the impact of unavailability of commodities focused on information or messages. In this context, studies were conducted, amongst others, on censorship (Fromkin & Brock, 1973; Worchel, 1992). However, commodity theory also applies for instance to people's evaluations of the seriousness of health disorders (Jemmott, Ditto, & Croyle, 1986; Ditto &

Jemmott, 1989). More recently, researchers started to focus on commodity theory in the context of marketing as well. Marketers often use so called scarcity appeals as an advertising technique (Eisend, 2008). They refer to the impact of unavailability on value as a scarcity effect which is defined as “*the influence of perceived scarcity on the subjective desirability of an object*” (Jung & Kellaris, 2004, p. 740). Researchers distinguish between two types of scarcity appeals, limited-time and limited-quantity. The former is also referred to as the “deadline” tactic, in which consumers’ time to obtain a product is limited (Cialdini, 2009; Highhouse, Beadle, Gallo, & Miller, 1998; Aggerwal & Vaidyanathan, 2003; Aggerwal, Jun, & Huh, 2011). The latter means that consumers are told that a product is short in supply (Cialdini, 2009). However, all types of scarcity, irrespective of the context, serve one single goal or have one single effect according to commodity theory, which is to increase value.

## 2.2 Scarcity’s effect on the desire to obtain information and its impact

Scarcity effects are often investigated in terms of their impact on the subjective value of a commodity, its desirability (Jung & Kellaris, 2004; Eisend, 2008). This stress on desirability as an outcome of scarcity is also reflected in much of the definitions authors give for scarcity effects and commodity theory (Lynn, 1992; Jung & Kellaris, 2004). Commodity theory however, does not solely consider the commodity value resulting from scarcity to be equal to subjective desirability. Besides the desirability of a commodity, commodity value can also refer to the impact of the content of scarce information on people’s perception towards the position advocated in the message (Brock, 1968). Commodity theory suggests however that the type of value that is affected, desirability or impact, depends on the type of commodity. When a recipient values an experience for instance, this would imply that this person will seek the experience out and prefers it over other experiences (desirability). When a recipient values a message however, commodity theory claims that this implies that the message will be more effective in changing attitudes and behavior (impact). Several studies have however illustrated that scarcity can increase both the desirability of a commodity and its impact on people’s perceptions.

Research by Worchel and Arnold (1973) for instance showed that censorship of information not only leads to an increase in desire to hear that communication, it additionally causes a potential audience to change their attitudes toward the position advocated by the censored message. We could expect a same dual effect for objects. Caviar for example is not an abundant product on the food market. The scarcity of this product is expected to increase its desirability on the one hand, but might cause consumers to find it more tasteful once they have tried it on the other hand as well. This distinction reflects the argumentation that the intriguing finding about the impact of censored information is that people do not just consider that information more desirable (Cialdini, 2009). An important assumption is that people also come to believe that information more.

Both outcomes of the scarcity effect have been indirectly mentioned by Brock and Brannon (1992). They claim that if the scarce commodity is a persuasive message, people may scrutinize it more. In addition however, people will be more persuaded by strong arguments in the message when they scrutinize it (Brock & Brannon, 1992). Worchel and Arnold (1973) and Cialdini (2009) illustrate that these outcomes are two distinct types of commodity value resulting from message scarcity. The first type of commodity value reflects the desire to obtain information. When information is scarce people are likely to consider it more desirable and pay more attention to it. The second type of commodity value equals the impact of the information. A scarce message may impact people's perceptions to a greater extent.

The distinction between scarcity's impact on both the desire to obtain information and its impact on people's perceptions is highly applicable to research on crisis timing strategies. Organizations that fear the revelation of negative publicity can generally choose between two crisis timing strategies, an ex-ante crisis timing strategy or an ex-post crisis timing strategy. The former is often referred to as *stealing thunder* and is a self-disclosure strategy in which an organization is the first to offer stakeholders information on a crisis, before another party (e.g., government, media) does (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). The latter can be referred to as *thunder*, because in this case organizations wait to respond to inquiries from the media or other third parties.



When negative information is not self-disclosed by the organization, but is disclosed by an external party, stakeholders might believe that the organization tries to withhold information (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). In that case, the information provided by the external party is scarcer and consequently more valuable than when the organization had self-disclosed the information (Brock, 1968). If the organization had already self-disclosed the information earlier on, the negative publicity would become less influential (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Consequently, it is expected that in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, message scarcity results in an increased desire for the negative publicity. Stakeholders may feel more inclined to read it. In addition, the negative publicity is likely to have a greater negative impact on stakeholders' evaluation of the organization in crisis.

**H1.** In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy the desire to read negative publicity is lower than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy

**H2.** In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy the impact of negative publicity on the post-crisis organizational reputation is lower than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy

### 2.3 The moderating effect of crisis involvement

Brock (1968) remarks that the scarcity principle applies to commodities, which are described to be useful to the potential possessor. Usefulness is defined as having potential relevance to the needs and interests of that possessor (Brock, 1968; Lynn, 1991). Based on this definition, it is unclear if the theory is applicable when the usefulness of an object is low; in that situation one may doubt that the object is in fact a commodity (Brock, 1968). If for instance a message is presented as scarce, but the recipient is not interested in the topic, scarcity alone might not augment the value of that message. This study proposes that the assumption made by Brock (1968) may need to be modified. Imagine for instance that a person who has never tried caviar, which can be considered a scarce product, finds the idea of eating fish eggs disgusting. To that person, the desirability of caviar is low. When being invited for dinner at a friend's place however, the person might feel obligated to try some caviar when it was offered. It is not unlikely that that person might turn out to like the taste, which means that the commodity turns

out to have an impact on that person's opinion. We therefore propose that while the usefulness of a scarce commodity is likely to impact its desirability, it might not have an effect on its impact.

Usefulness can be affected by people's involvement with an issue or object. High involvement implies that a message has a high degree of personal relevance, whereas low involvement means that the personal relevance of the message is rather trivial (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). People's level of involvement influences the amount and direction of their attention (Celsi & Olson, 1988). High issue involvement increases a person's motivation to engage in a thorough consideration of issue-relevant information that an organization presents, in order to form an attitude about that issue (Petty et al., 1983). Under high involvement conditions, message content has a large impact on people's attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, 1981; Petty et al., 1983). Under low involvement conditions however, peripheral cues (e.g., product endorser) have a greater impact.

Similarly to information scarcity (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992), it is expected that crisis involvement can influence the value of crisis related information. Brock and Brannon (1992) suggest that scarcity and personal involvement can result in similar outcomes. Both high crisis involvement and information scarcity can lead to a greater desire to obtain information on the one hand. On the other hand, both elements can lead to a larger impact of the information on people's perceptions. An important question that results from the outcomes of scarcity and issue involvement is how people's involvement with a crisis can moderate the scarcity effect. Whenever an organization applies an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, a subsequent external attack is likely to be considered old news (Williams et al., 1993; Dolnik et al., 2003; Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Consequently, irrespective of crisis involvement, when organizations self-disclose crisis information a subsequent attack becomes less valuable. Neither high nor low crisis involvement is likely to increase stakeholders' desire to read negative publicity or its impact on the post-crisis reputation.

Whenever an organization applies an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, a different effect is expected due to the high level of perceived message scarcity. If, under scarce message conditions, (ex-post crisis timing strategy) the message topic is highly relevant to people, this is

likely to enhance individuals' interest in the message to an even greater extent than the scarcity by itself (Petty et al., 1983). Not only will message scarcity increase the desirability and the impact of the negative publicity on the organization's evaluation (Lynn, 1991), the high level of message involvement additionally causes people to be motivated to read the information and use this to form their attitude (Petty et al., 1983). Therefore, in the case of high message scarcity and high crisis involvement, stakeholders are likely to desire to read negative publicity and to be affected by it.

Finally, in the case of low crisis involvement, the outcomes of information scarcity and crisis involvement can differ. Research indicated that scarcity might have the ability to enhance people's motivation to process message content, even under conditions of peripheral processing (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). Therefore, one might expect that in the case of low crisis involvement, even though stakeholders are unlikely to pay high amounts of attention to negative publicity, that negative publicity may affect their evaluation of the company. Even if low crisis involvement causes stakeholders to have less desire to read negative publicity, it may still result in reputational damage. Petty and Cacioppo (1981) made a similar consideration when studying the impact of involvement. They suggest that if a person with low involvement tries a product, over time, product involvement might increase. Similarly, even though the topic of scarce crisis information might not be of interest to stakeholders with low crisis involvement, when they do read an article about it, it may affect their opinion about that company.

Therefore, it is expected that when an organization uses an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, crisis involvement will not impact its influence on the value of negative publicity. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, involvement is likely to affect stakeholders' desire to read negative publicity, but not the impact of that negative publicity on the organizational post-crisis reputation.

**H3a.** In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, crisis involvement does not impact the desire to read negative publicity

**H3b.** In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, the desire to read negative publicity is higher when stakeholders are highly involved with a crisis than when their involvement with a crisis is low

**H4.** In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, the impact of negative publicity on post-crisis reputation is lower than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, irrespective of stakeholders' level of crisis involvement

### **3 STUDY 1**

The first experiment examines the impact of information scarcity on two distinct types of commodity value: people's desire to obtain information and the impact of that information on their perceptions. In addition, this effect is studied in the context of organizational crisis timing strategies. Research on timing strategies in the context of organizational crisis communication has mainly focused on how the mere use of these strategies can affect stakeholders' evaluation of the organization in crisis (e.g., Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). These studies illustrate for instance that the use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can make an organization in crisis more credible than when it uses an ex-post crisis timing strategy. This study however, tests the hypotheses that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy minimizes crisis information's desirability, and thus stakeholders' attention for negative publicity on the one hand and the impact of that publicity on the post-crisis organizational reputation on the other hand. A first experiment therefore tests the first two hypotheses.

#### **3.1 Method**

##### *Design and stimuli*

The study used a single factor design, in which participants were confronted with either an ex- ante crisis timing strategy or an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Participants in both conditions were exposed to information about a crisis in the form of newspaper articles. The crisis involved a fictitious company which produces soap products for the Dutch consumer market. A fictitious organization was described in order to prevent any confounding effects of pre-crisis reputation

(Laufer & Jung, 2010). All articles were said to originate from a Dutch quality newspaper to avoid suspicion among the Belgian participants because they had not heard or read about these events before.

The crisis scenario involved the occurrence of serious burning injuries due to a wrong mixing of chemicals in the soap the organization sells, which was caused by a lack of safety controlling mechanisms issued by the organization. Safety control had been reduced by the company to cut costs. Some consumers were scarred for life due to the product failure. This crisis scenario refers to a preventable crisis, a crisis for which the organization is fully responsible (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This crisis type was selected because it poses the highest level of threat to organizations and their reputation (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Two articles were developed. One article described the organizational self-disclosure of the crisis. The other article involved an external attack related to the crisis against the organization. In the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition participants first received the article in which the organization in crisis self-disclosed this information. Afterwards, they additionally received the article in which that same information was offered in the form of an attack by a consumer organization. In the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition participants only received the article containing the external attack of the consumer organization. An actual newspaper article replaced the self-disclosure article.

### *Participants*

Participants were 66 third-year bachelor students in communication sciences who participated for course credit and who had not yet received any classes on corporate communication. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions and participated individually. All students were Dutch-speaking Belgian men and women with an average age of 22 years ( $SD = 1.65$ ; range = 21-31 years). Approximately 73% were females.

### *Procedure*

In order to be able to measure the desire to read the news article containing negative publicity provided by the external party, the amount of attention devoted to that article was measured with an eye-tracking device. Participants were instructed to read two sets of articles on

the screen of the eye-tracker (cf. Figure one). Each set consisted of two subsequent screens with each three articles. The first set of articles differed between both experimental conditions. Participants in the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition received two screens with each three actual Dutch newspaper articles. Participants in the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition received the same articles, but one of the three articles on the first screen was replaced with an article which contained the organizational self-disclosure. The second set of articles was the same for both conditions and contained two screens with each three articles. Five out of the six articles were taken from a Dutch quality newspaper. One article was fictitious and contained the external attack; this was the article for which the attention was measured. All articles were formatted in the same way and were about the same length.

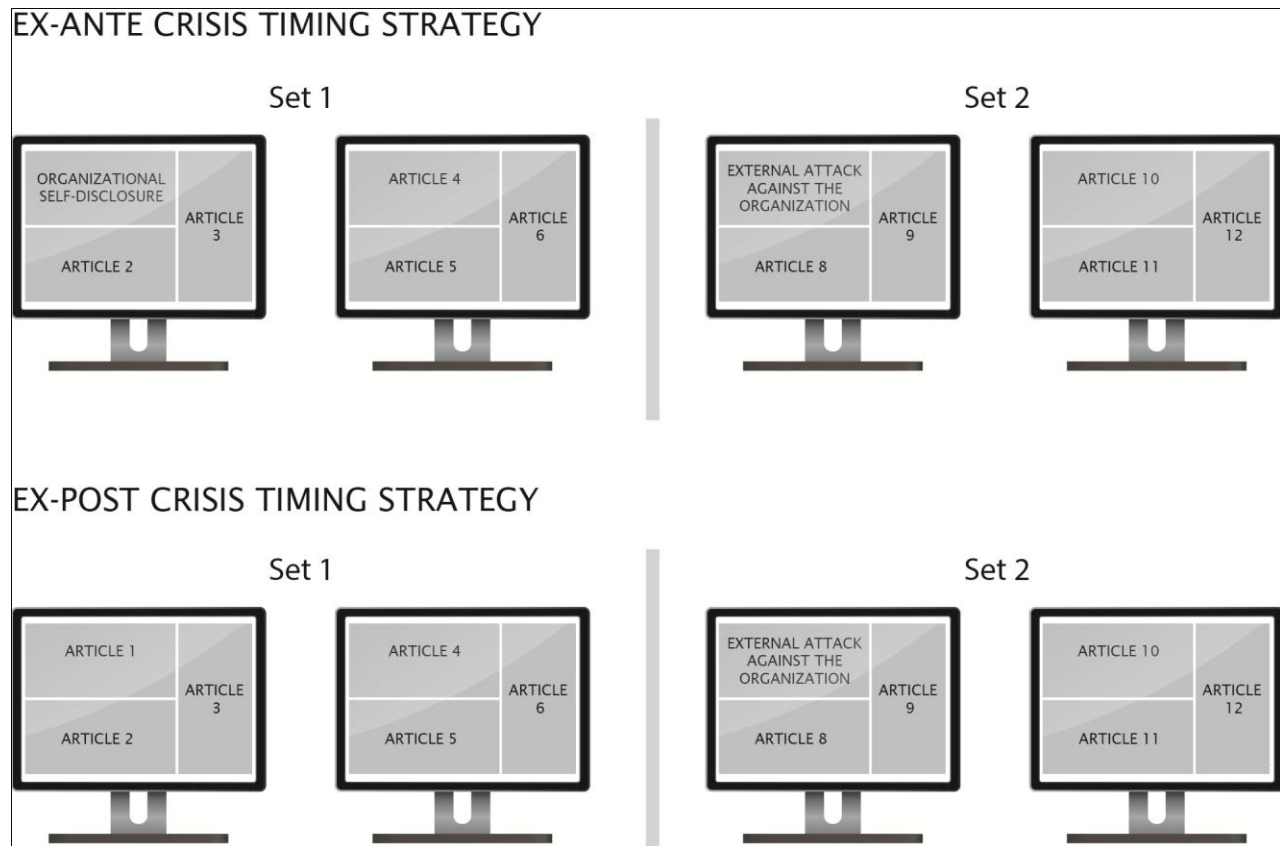


Fig. 1: Eye-tracking screens in the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition and the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition

Participants were told that the goal of the study was about the impact of reading newspapers online on reading behavior. To make sure that participants in the ex-ante crisis timing strategy

condition read the article with the self-disclosure, which was on the first screen, all participants were instructed to read all three articles on that first screen. They were told that this way they could get used to the procedure of reading the articles on the screen. For the subsequent screens, participants were instructed to scan all three articles on each screen briefly and then select one article to actually read. By letting participants scan all three articles before selecting one to read, they were able to estimate the topic of each article. That way, the respondents in the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition knew the moment they saw the negative publicity that they had read information on that topic before. Consequently, they knew that the information on that topic was not scarce. In between both sets of articles, all participants received a small questionnaire containing filler items on their use of e-readers. This allowed us to hide the actual purpose of the study.

### *Measures*

First, the study measured the desire to read negative publicity. Participants' observation length of the article containing that negative publicity communicated by an external party was determined by means of the eye-tracker. Since the participants were instructed to scan each article and then to select one of the three articles on the screen to read, the attention for the heading and the introduction was expected to be about the same for all participants. The analyses therefore compared the observation length for the actual content of the article only.

The impact of the negative publicity was established by analyzing the correlation between observation length and perceptions of organizational post-crisis reputation. These perceptions were measured using the reputation quotient of Fombrun, Gardberg and Sever (2000). According to these authors, reputation entails two factors, emotional and rational appeal. Since the crisis involved a fictitious organization it was difficult for respondents to rate some of the items in the rational factor (e.g., *"This organization looks like a low risk investment"*, *"This organization develops innovative products and services"*). Therefore, nine of the 20 items were dropped. The remaining items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., *"I have a good feeling about this company"*, *"This company offers high quality products and services"*, *"This company has excellent leadership"*, *"This company maintains high standards in the way it treats people"*) ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### 3.2 Results

The first hypothesis states that information scarcity in terms of crisis timing strategies impacts the attention stakeholders pay to that information. The results of the main effect of crisis timing strategy on participants' observation length for the attacking article show that in the case the organization used an ex-ante crisis timing strategy ( $M = 8.28$ ,  $SD = 11.72$ ), participants paid less attention to the attack than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy ( $M = 22.41$ ,  $SD = 19.36$ ;  $t(64) = 3.59$ ,  $p = .001$ ) (cf. Figure two). These findings support H1.

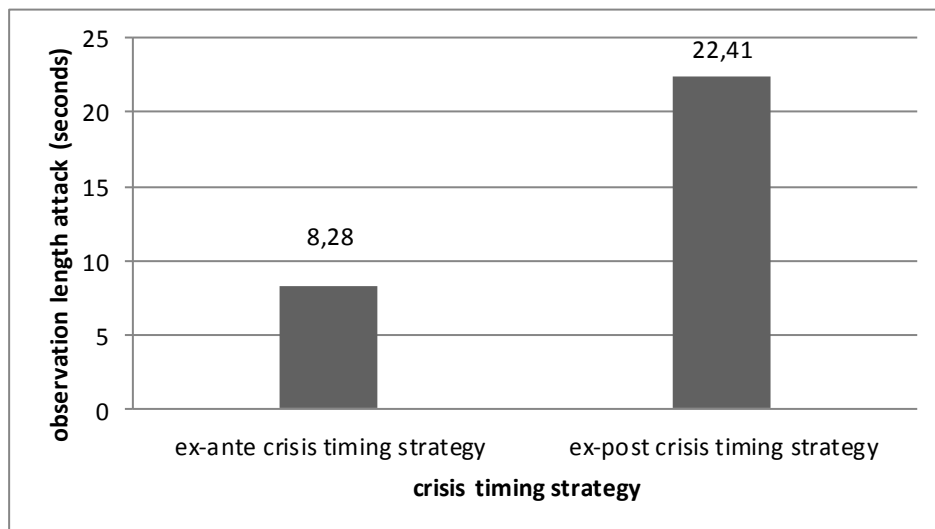


Fig. 2: The impact of crisis timing strategy on observation length of the attack

The second hypothesis states that the degree to which stakeholders pay attention to an external attack against an organization in crisis is negatively related to their perceptions of the organization's post-crisis reputation. However, it was expected that this would only be the case for an ex-post crisis timing strategy in which crisis information is scarce and not for an ex-ante crisis timing strategy in which the crisis information is regarded as highly available. The results confirm that in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy there is no relationship between the attention that is offered to the attack and participants' perceptions of organizational post-crisis reputation ( $r(32) = .021$ ,  $p = .91$ ). In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, there is a strong negative correlation between the attention participants paid to the attack and their



evaluation of the organization's post-crisis reputation ( $r(32) = -.62, p < .001$ ). These results confirm the second hypothesis.

### 3.3 Discussion

The results show that in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy participants observed an article which contained negative publicity longer than in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. This finding parallels the results from previous research on the impact of scarcity of commodities on subjective desirability. When a commodity is scarce, people are likely to desire it more (e.g., Worchel & Arnold, 1973; Jung & Kellaris, 2004; Eisend, 2008). In addition, the results suggest that the attention devoted to the article which contained negative publicity is negatively related to stakeholders' perceptions of an organization's post-crisis reputation only in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy. This result confirms earlier findings which showed that scarcity can increase the effectiveness of a message (e.g., Worchel & Arnold, 1973; Menon, Jewell, & Unnava, 1999). The findings from the first study therefore offer a clear indication that information scarcity results in two distinct outcomes. Scarcity consequently affects commodity's value in two ways: it makes them more desirable and it increases their potential impact. While the idea of a distinction between these two types of commodity value has been suggested by Brock and Brannon (1992) indirectly, they did not consider these as two distinct outcomes of perceived scarcity.

Moreover, study one illustrates that commodity theory offers a valuable explanation for the impact of crisis timing strategies on post-crisis organizational reputation. The findings illustrate why organizations in crisis should self-disclose negative information in order to decrease and even avoid reputational damage from subsequent negative publicity. An ex-ante crisis timing strategy can minimize perceptions of information scarcity and therefore minimize the value stakeholders attach to negative publicity.

## 4 STUDY 2

The purpose of study two is twofold. A first aim is to corroborate the results from study one. The second study manipulates crisis timing strategy in the same way as study one, however a different crisis situation and different organization are described. The second aim is to test for the moderating role of involvement. Study two therefore tests the third and fourth hypothesis. More specifically, we expect that crisis involvement does not affect either stakeholders' desire to read negative publicity or its impact on the post-crisis reputation in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, we do expect that crisis involvement affects the desire to read negative publicity. However, crisis involvement is not expected to affect the impact of negative publicity on the post-crisis organizational reputation when an ex-post crisis timing strategy is applied. While the first study included the description of a crisis which was high in terms of involvement ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ). This study manipulates the crisis to be either high or low involving in order to test the moderating impact of crisis involvement.

### 4.1 Method

#### *Design and stimuli*

In order to test the moderating impact of stakeholders' crisis involvement on the effect of crisis timing strategy on both the desire to read negative publicity and its impact, the second study used a 2 (crisis timing strategy: ex-ante crisis timing strategy vs. ex-post crisis timing strategy)  $\times$  2 (crisis involvement: low vs. high) between-subjects factorial design. Using four fictitious scenarios, we manipulated both crisis timing strategy and crisis involvement by using different newspaper articles.

Crisis timing strategy was manipulated in the same manner as in study one. In the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition participants received an article in which an organization self-disclosed crisis information. They subsequently received an article in which that same information was offered under the form of an attack by a third party. In the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition participants only received the article containing the external attack. The articles again described a fictitious crisis about a fictitious organization in order to prevent

confounding effects of pre-crisis reputation (Laufer & Jung, 2010). Participants were told the articles originated from a Dutch quality newspaper.

Crisis involvement was manipulated based on the approach of Petty et al. (1983). They propose to make high involvement subjects believe that a certain issue affects them personally, whereas for low involvement subjects the issue has no personal impact. All participants were Belgian students. The high involvement group read about a bacterium on vegetables, which were mainly delivered to student restaurants and sandwich shops in the university cities in Belgium. They were told that at least eleven students from the same city in which the participant sample studied had been recently infected with the bacterium. This bacterium can sometimes be fatal and is especially dangerous for young adults. The low involvement group received an article about that same bacterium on vegetables but was told that the company mainly delivered the vegetables to elderly homes in the Netherlands where eleven elderly residents had been infected. The bacterium was said to be especially dangerous to elderly people with weak immune systems.

### *Participants*

Participants were 86 third year bachelor students in communication sciences who participated for course credit. The students had not yet received any classes on corporate communication. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and participated individually. All students were Dutch-speaking Belgian men and women with an average age of 22 years ( $SD = 1.85$ ; range = 20-36 years). Approximately 59% were females.

### *Procedure*

The procedure and the participants' processing goal was the same as in study one. They also read two sets of six articles on an eye-tracking device in order to measure the observation length of the article containing an external attack against the company in crisis. Each participant received information about the low involving crisis or about the high involving crisis.

### *Measures*

The eye-tracking measurement allowed establishing participants' desire to read negative publicity by measuring the observation length. After reading the articles on the eye-tracker the

participants filled in a questionnaire which contained the measurement of organizational post-crisis reputation, a manipulation check for perceived crisis involvement and socio-demographical variables. Post-crisis reputation was again measured by means of eleven items from the reputation quotient of Fombrun et al. (2000) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from one (completely disagree) to seven (completely agree) ( $\alpha = .93$ ). The manipulation check contained a three-item measure of crisis involvement on a seven-point Likert scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ) (e.g., “*These events are very important to me*”) (Kopalle & Lehmann, 2001).

## 4.2 Results

### *Manipulation check*

The manipulation of crisis involvement indicates a successful manipulation; crisis involvement is higher for respondents in the high crisis involvement condition than for those in the low crisis involvement condition ( $M_{\text{low involvement}} = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.19$  vs.  $M_{\text{high involvement}} = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ;  $t(84) = 3.61$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

### *Tests of hypotheses*

The third hypothesis proposed that the impact of crisis timing strategy on stakeholders’ desire to read negative publicity would be moderated by their level of crisis involvement. A univariate two-way ANOVA (general linear model) analyzed the interaction between crisis timing strategy and crisis involvement on participants’ observation length for the article that contained the attack ( $F(1, 82) = 3.92$ ,  $p = .051$ ) (cf. Figure three). Two independent-samples  $t$ -tests allow looking at this moderating effect of crisis involvement in detail. The results show that in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy the observation length is not affected by the level of crisis involvement ( $M_{\text{low involvement}} = 17.06$ ,  $SD = 15.10$  vs.  $M_{\text{high involvement}} = 13.41$ ,  $SD = 21.26$ ;  $t(38) = -.61$ ,  $p = .54$ ). These results support H3a. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, the observation length is significantly higher when crisis involvement is high ( $M = 25.27$ ,  $SD = 19.25$ ) than when crisis involvement is low ( $M = 13.38$ ,  $SD = 15.03$ ;  $t(44) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .023$ ), supporting H3b.

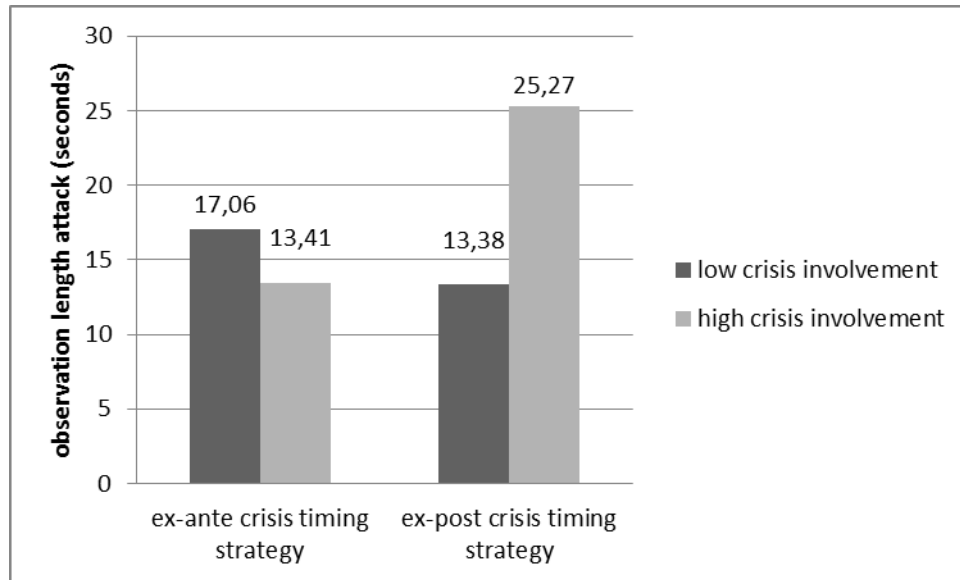


Fig. 3: The moderating impact of crisis involvement on the effect of crisis timing strategy on observation length of the attack

The fourth hypothesis assumed however that the impact of crisis timing strategy on the impact of negative publicity does not differ depending on the level of stakeholders' crisis involvement. In the case of high crisis involvement, participants' observation length for the external attack was significantly negatively correlated to their perceptions of organizational post-crisis reputation if that organization used an ex-post crisis timing strategy ( $r(25) = -.53, p = .006$ ), but not if the organization used an ex-ante crisis timing strategy ( $r(22) = -.14, p = .53$ ). We found a similar pattern for low crisis involvement. In the case of low crisis involvement participants' observation length for the external attack was significantly negatively correlated to their perceptions of organizational post-crisis reputation if that organization used an ex-post crisis timing strategy ( $r(21) = -.42, p = .058$ ), but not if the organization used an ex-ante crisis timing strategy ( $r(18) = -.22, p = .38$ ). Hypothesis four is supported.

### 4.3 Discussion

People's level of involvement with an issue moderates the impact that information scarcity has on their desire to obtain the issue-relevant information, but not on the impact of that information on their perceptions. The results show that when an organization applies an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, both the desire to read negative publicity and its impact on post-crisis

reputation are low, irrespective of the level of crisis involvement. So if an organization self-discloses a crisis, stakeholders will not be interested in reading a subsequent external attack, nor will they let such an attack influence their opinion about the company, even when they are highly involved.

However, if information is scarce because an organization applies an ex-post crisis timing strategy, involvement with the content of the information matters. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, stakeholders spend more time observing an article about an external attack against the organization in crisis when their involvement with that crisis is high than when it is low. When information about a crisis is scarce, low crisis involvement can cause for stakeholders to lose interest in the crisis message, despite its scarcity. This result confirms research according to which involvement can impact people's interest for message content (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty et al., 1983; Celsi & Olson, 1988). More importantly, however, this finding partly confirms the consideration made by Brock (1968) concerning the importance of the usefulness of commodities. However, it also indicates that the importance that has been attached to the usefulness of commodities should be nuanced. Commodity theory originally stated that the scarcity principle only applies to messages that are considered relevant by people, since only then one can strictly say that the message is a commodity (Brock, 1968; Lynn, 1991). Even if a message is scarce, if people are not interested in its topic they will not consider it valuable.

The results concerning the impact of the negative publicity on post-crisis organizational reputation put Brock's (1968) assumption into perspective. The findings show that if people are not interested in the topic of a scarce message and they have little desire to read information about it, their opinion might still be affected by that information. While this was expected under the condition of high crisis involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty et al., 1983; Celsi & Olson, 1988; Choi & Lin, 2009), this is contrary to what Brock (1968) suspected when a message is considered irrelevant or useless. However, it is compatible with the idea that scarcity has the ability to increase value even under conditions of peripheral processing (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992), which is considered to be the case when people's involvement is low (Petty et al., 1983). Based on this presumption (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992), it was expected that even when stakeholders' crisis involvement is low, scarcity can have the ability to affect perceptions.

Therefore the results imply that while low crisis involvement causes stakeholders to pay less attention to an external attack, the attention they do pay can result in attitude change.

## **5 GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Our research offers general support for commodity theory as an explanation for the impact of information scarcity on the value of information. In addition, the results further explore this theory by investigating the concept of value on the one hand and the importance of the usefulness of commodities in creating value on the other hand. Finally, this chapter illustrates that commodity theory can account for the impact of organizational crisis timing strategies.

First, both studies show that when information is scarce, it is considered more valuable. This finding supports the basic premise of commodity theory (cf. Brock, 1986). Furthermore, both studies expand the knowledge on some of the basic propositions made by the theory. Commodity theory describes the value created by scarcity as either the desirability or the impact of the commodity. However, this study illustrates that scarcity can result in both an increased desire to obtain a commodity and an increased effectiveness of that commodity. This finding confirms earlier research on censorship (e.g., Worchel & Arnold, 1973). The second study offers a further exploration of these two types of value by investigating the moderating impact of involvement. The results show that while involvement can affect the impact of scarcity on the desirability to obtain a commodity, it cannot affect scarcity's effect on the commodity's impact. This finding first illustrates the strength of the scarcity effect. Irrespective of people's involvement, scarcity affects the impact of a commodity. More importantly however, these results show that scarcity does not always affect both types of value in the same direction; they can emerge independent of one another. Hence, a commodity's desirability and impact are two distinctive outcomes of scarcity.

Besides specifying the concept of value as described by commodity theory, this research also offers a deeper insight in the concept of usefulness. While commodity theory explains that the scarcity effect only applies to anything that is considered useful to its potential possessor

(Brock, 1968; Lynn, 1991), the second study suggests that this finding should be nuanced. The results of the interaction analysis first confirm the assumption made by Brock (1968) by illustrating that the usefulness of a commodity, operationalized in terms of involvement in the second study, affects people's desire to obtain it. However, the findings additionally show that scarcity affects the impact of a commodity whether it can be considered useful or not. Hence, even when a commodity is not useful, the scarcity principle can still apply to the impact of information on people's perceptions. More specifically, this study illustrates that stakeholders may not read an article which describes a certain crisis if this topic is irrelevant to them. However, when they do read it, they may come to realize that it is of some interest and it can form their opinion.

Finally, this chapter shows that commodity theory can be applied to crisis communication and, more specifically, to the impact of crisis timing strategies on crisis damage. The findings confirm that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy results in less crisis damage than an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, which induces perceptions of information scarcity, stakeholders' desire to read negative publicity about the organization increases. In addition, the negative publicity is more likely to affect the organizational post-crisis reputation. Therefore, if information about a crisis is scarce due to the crisis timing strategy applied by the organization, the value of negative publicity increases. Organizations that are aware of a crisis should thus self-disclose the information in order to reduce perceptions of message scarcity and reduce the crisis damage.

## **6 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This chapter entails some limitations that provide guidelines for further research. First, while the level of involvement significantly differed between participants in the low involvement and the high involvement group, the average involvement for the high involvement group was still only moderately high. However, the relevance of the crisis was very clearly outlined in the high involvement condition. The low average might be due to the forced participation, which may



have lowered the subjective interest of the student respondents for any of the articles. Second, the study took place in an artificial setting and the impact in more natural conditions is therefore yet to be studied. However, the setting was necessary in order to be able to obtain eye-tracking data. The reading process was as natural as possible. Participants took place in a comfortable seat and were instructed to scan all articles before selecting the one they would read entirely as they would do when reading the newspaper. Third, two fictitious organizations were described in the studies in order to rule out any confounding effects of pre-crisis organizational reputation (Laufer & Jung, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Further research might however investigate if and how stakeholders' pre-crisis evaluation of an organization in crisis impacts the commodity value.

Future research should explore the findings from both studies further. This research shows that the scarcity of information can result in a higher desire to read that information and in a larger impact of that information on people's perceptions. However, commodity refers to more than just information. It can also refer to objects or experiences (Brock, 1968; Lynn, 1991). Research should therefore examine if the dual outcome of the scarcity effect, desirability and impact, is also found for other commodities than information. One could for instance explore the scarcity effect for a ring that consists of a rare diamond. Do consumers just want to obtain that piece of jewelry more than if it was as not rare, or does owning the ring increase their self-esteem as well? Do consumers just want to eat caviar because it is not common, or do they like the taste better than any similar but more available variant as well?

In addition, research could explore the other theoretical explanations for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. While this study focused on commodity theory, past studies investigated the explanatory value of other theories (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). More research is needed on some of those theoretical backgrounds in order to get a full understanding of the mechanisms behind these crisis timing strategies. More research is for instance needed on the framing hypothesis, based on which it is proposed that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy offers the advantage that organizations can frame a crisis in the most beneficial manner (Williams et al., 1993; Dolnik et al., 2003). While in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, a third part already had the opportunity to do so.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

This research offers support for commodity theory as a theoretical explanation for the scarcity effect. In addition, it expands our knowledge of the theory by investigating the concept of value and the importance of the usefulness of a commodity. Commodity theory explains that scarcity increases value, and value can be defined as either the desire to possess the commodity *or* its impact on perceptions and attitudes (Brock, 1968; Lynn, 1991; Brock & Brannon, 1992). However, this distinction between these two outcomes of scarcity has not been studied yet. This study clearly indicates that scarcity increases both the desire to obtain *and* the impact of information. In addition, the second study illustrates that both types of value that are increased by scarcity are not always affected in the same direction. Even when people do not desire to obtain a commodity, it may still have an impact on them. More specifically, this research shows that even when people are not inclined to read a message, it may have an impact on their opinion if they do so. In addition, the results broaden knowledge in terms of the importance of the usefulness of a commodity. Commodity theory posits that a scarce object, experience or message can only increase value when it is considered useful (Brock, 1968; Lynn, 1991). The findings show however that even when a message is considered irrelevant to people, they might be affected by its content anyway.

This research therefore not only confirms the basic premises of commodity theory, it expands them. The range of the value that is created by scarcity is broader than initially stated (Brock, 1968). Moreover, the domain of commodity theory can be expanded since the findings indicate that commodities do not need to be useful to affect value by means of scarcity. Brock and Brannon (1992) have suggested that commodity theory should expand its scope in terms of the definition of a commodity. They explicated that the original notion of usefulness could be discarded because the theory applies to negative elements as well. When a serious disease is for instance very rare, people's original negative attitude towards them will develop even more negatively. We argue however that commodity theory may even apply, up to a certain degree, to commodities that originally were neither highly desirable nor highly undesirable.

Finally, this chapter shows that commodity theory offers a theoretical explanation for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy by organizations in crisis compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Prior research has shown that the mere use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can have a positive impact on organizational evaluations because it can increase the credibility of an organization (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). This study indicates however that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy may also minimize the harms of negative publicity in light of the crisis. Stakeholders are likely to pay less attention to external attacks against the organization and even if they do, these attacks do not influence the post-crisis reputation negatively.

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**CHAPTER 6**

**THE ADVANTAGE OF STEALING THUNDER**

**FRAMING CRISES IN THE MOST BENEFICIAL**

**WAY**

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## CHAPTER 6 THE ADVANTAGE OF STEALING THUNDER: FRAMING CRISES IN THE MOST BENEFICIAL WAY<sup>4</sup>

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This study investigates the impact of crisis timing strategies on the post-crisis reputation of organizations confronted with a preventable crisis. In addition, the moderating impact of emotional versus rational message framing on the effectiveness of crisis timing strategies is studied by means of a 2 (crisis timing strategy: ex-ante crisis timing strategy vs. ex-post crisis timing strategy) × 2 (message framing: rational vs. emotional) between-subjects factorial experimental design with 168 participants. The results show that organizations can minimize reputational damage better by means of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy than by means of an ex-post crisis timing strategy. In addition, the study illustrates that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy leads to more effective use of organizational message framing. In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy emotional message framing results in a better post-crisis reputation than rational message framing, whereas no impact of message framing is found for an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Finally, the results indicate that organizations can benefit from framing their crisis communication emotionally because it makes them appear more sincere.

**Keywords:** crisis timing strategies, emotional versus rational message framing, post-crisis reputation, sincerity

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter six has been submitted as “Claeys, A.S., Cauberghe, V., & Leysen, J. (submitted). The advantage of stealing thunder: Framing crises in the most beneficial way. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*”  
This paper was presented at the European Marketing Academy (EMAC) Conference in Lisbon (22-25<sup>th</sup> May 2012)



# 1 INTRODUCTION

The past few decades a lot of research attention has been devoted to crisis communication because of its ability to minimize organizational reputation damage (Coombs, 2004; Reynolds, 2006). Most studies focused on the importance of the content of organizational crisis communication as a reaction to the crisis, namely the crisis response strategies (e.g., apology, denial) (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Many researchers emphasized the role of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), which distinguishes different crisis response strategies based on the amount of responsibility that the organization takes for the crisis and advises organizations in crisis to take as much responsibility for a crisis as stakeholders attribute to them.

Even though the content of crisis communication is a highly important factor to consider for crisis communication managers, academics have more recently stressed the importance of the timing of information release during crises (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Organizations faced with the prospect of negative publicity can choose to wait for the crisis information to be dispersed by third parties (i.e. ex-post crisis timing strategy) and respond by means of crisis response strategies, or consider self-disclosing the negative information that would be brought out in a potential attack (i.e. ex-ante crisis timing strategy) (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Prior research does not only suggest that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can be highly useful to people or organizations in crisis compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy in minimizing crisis damage (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, Wigley, 2011), it also argues that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy allows organizations to minimize crisis damage further by means of beneficial message framing.

Research in the field of law studies suggests that message framing will be more or less important depending on the crisis timing strategy a defendant employs during trial (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993). Whoever discloses the crisis information first gets the chance to frame the information in its own manner. The current study elaborates on this potential moderating effect of organizational message framing on the impact of crisis timing strategies on post-crisis reputation. More specifically, the research focus lies on the impact of emotionally

versus rationally framed crisis communication messages. The impact of emotional versus rational messages has received a lot of research attention in marketing and advertising research (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Geuens, De Pelsmacker, & Fasseur, 2011, Cotte & Ritchie, 2005). Although Coombs and Holladay (2005) pointed out the need to investigate affect in crisis situations as well, research up till now has mainly focused on studying which emotions stakeholders experience when confronted with a crisis (e.g., Choi & Lin, 2009; McDonald, Sparks, & Glendon, 2010; Jin, Park, & Len-Rios, 2010). This study however, answers the need to investigate the impact of the tone of crisis communication given by the organization in crisis on organizational reputation (Liu, 2007). In addition, we study why message framing is likely to result in decreased reputational damage, by investigating the mediating role of stakeholders' perceptions of organizational sincerity (Benoit & Brinson, 1999).

To sum up, this study contributes to the research field of crisis communication in four respects. First, it investigates the impact of crisis timing strategies on organizational post-crisis reputation, which has only received little research attention so far (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Second, this chapter offers insights into the proposed advantage of applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy in terms of the increased effectiveness of message framing. While prior studies have shown that the mere application of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can result in minimized crisis damage compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), this study shows that it additionally offers organizations the possibility to minimize reputational damage further by means of beneficial message framing. Third, this chapter indicates that besides content (i.e., crisis response strategies) and timing (i.e., crisis timing strategies), message framing can also be applied strategically in crisis communication. Fourth, this study examines the importance of perceived organizational sincerity as an explanatory mechanism for the effectiveness of emotional message framing.

## 2 CRISIS TIMING STRATEGIES

Researchers generally stress the importance of open and proactive crisis communication (Huang & Su, 2009). More specifically, organizations in crisis are advised to take the initiative to communicate about a crisis since this would illustrate that the organization is honest. While communication professionals often have conflicting views regarding the appropriateness of this kind of openness in times of crisis (Kline, Simunich, & Weber, 2009), experimental studies on crisis timing strategies have indicated its effectiveness in minimizing reputational damage (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Organizations can generally choose between two crisis timing strategies, an ex-ante crisis timing strategy or an ex-post crisis timing strategy. The former is often referred to as *stealing thunder* and is a self-disclosure strategy in which an organization is the first to offer stakeholders information on a crisis, before another party (e.g., government, media) does (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). The latter can be referred to as *thunder*, because in this case organizations wait to respond to inquiries from the media or other third parties. The use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is strongly recommended when organizations are aware that the spread of negative information is unavoidable (Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995).

Research on crisis timing strategies originated in the context of law studies. When a defendant is aware of negative information that might be revealed in trial by the opposing party, the general advice is to self-disclose this information (Mauet, 2007). When a defendant admits something compromising before the prosecutor reveals it, a mock jury considers the defendant less guilty than in an ex-post crisis timing strategy condition (Williams et al., 1993). More specifically, an ex-ante crisis timing strategy affects judgments of guilt by increasing the credibility of the defendant. Dolnik, Case and Williams (2003) additionally found that mock jurors in an ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition interpret incriminating evidence less serious and less harmful to the defendant than jurors in the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition.

Research on organizational crises confirms that the longer organizations wait to communicate about a crisis, the less effective the crisis communication will be (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). An ex-ante crisis timing strategy leads to more positive evaluations of public

relations practitioners than an ex-post crisis timing strategy. These results are confirmed by additional research, which also shows that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy causes stakeholders to consider the crisis as less severe (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). More recently, actual news coverage following crises that involved four well-known individuals was examined (Wigley, 2011). Two cases involved individuals that applied an ex-ante crisis timing strategy and two other cases involved individuals that applied an ex-post crisis timing strategy. The results indicate that individuals in the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition received less news coverage and their stories were framed more positively than in the case of individuals who applied an ex-post crisis timing strategy.

Finally, chapter four shows that while in an ex-post crisis timing strategy condition it is crucial for the minimization of reputational damage to add a crisis response strategy (e.g., apology) to objective information about the crisis, this is not the case when applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). When self-disclosing a crisis, the organizational reputation will be equally restored irrespective of whether objective information only was offered or a crisis response strategy was added. These studies on crisis timing strategies in both the context of trial cases and crisis communication suggest the following:

**H1.** An ex-ante crisis timing strategy results in a better post-crisis reputation compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy

### **3 THE MODERATING IMPACT OF FRAMING ON CRISIS TIMING STRATEGIES**

The effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy for organizations that want to maintain or restore their reputation can be explained by several theories (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). A first theory that might explain the benefits of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is commodity theory, according to which the scarcity of commodities enhances their value to people (Brock, 1968). Messages are like commodities in the sense that the more scarce information about a certain issue is the more valuable it will be to a public (Williams et al., 1993). If an organization uses an

ex-ante crisis timing strategy, a subsequent attack will be considered “old” news and therefore has less impact on reputational outcomes (Dolnik et al., 2003; Arpan & Pompper, 2003). If however an organization tries to conceal a message, a subsequent attack containing this new information will be considered more valuable to stakeholders and therefore have a more detrimental impact (Williams et al., 1993; Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

A second possible explanation is provided by the disconfirmation of expectations theory. According to this theory, organizational spokespeople are expected to exhibit both knowledge and reporting bias during a crisis (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). The knowledge bias represents the belief of recipients that communicators’ knowledge about a crisis is biased by their limited information (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978, Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Reporting bias means that stakeholders believe that spokespersons’ willingness to offer an accurate version of a crisis is compromised. Stakeholders’ beliefs about these communicator biases impact the persuasiveness of organizational messages because they imply that stakeholders hold expectancies about the position that a spokesperson will hold on a crisis (Eagly et al., 1978). An ex-ante crisis timing strategy however can disconfirm these expectancies and lead to increased credibility for both spokesperson and organization. This proposition is supported by prior research that found organizations to be considered more credible in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

A related explanation for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is the change of meaning hypothesis. When people or organizations reveal negative information about themselves before a third party does, the audience tries to make sense of this inconsistency by changing the meaning of the disclosure, in order to make it more consistent to their prior expectations (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Williams et al., 1993). Arpan and Pompper (2003) did not find proof for the change of meaning hypothesis. They compared an ex-ante crisis timing strategy to an ex-post crisis timing strategy in terms of the impact on perceptions of crisis severity by news reporters. The findings showed that journalists did not minimize the crisis severity when the organization had self-disclosed the crisis.

A fourth possible explanation which has not yet been studied in the context of crisis communication is the framing hypothesis. According to this hypothesis an important asset of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is that it allows people or organizations to frame the crisis in their own terms and downplay its significance, because the organization is the first to communicate about the crisis (Williams et al., 1993). In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, a third party already took the opportunity to frame the crisis. Therefore, this study investigates if message framing is more effective in minimizing reputational damage in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy.

#### **4 RATIONAL VERSUS EMOTIONAL MESSAGE FRAMING**

Messages can be framed either emotionally or rationally. Messages with emotional framing appeal to individuals' emotions by using drama and including subjective, evaluative properties (Stafford & Day, 1995; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Messages with rational framing appeal to the rationality of the receiver by presenting information in an objective and straightforward manner. Advertisers often use emotional framing in their persuasive communication in order to convince consumers (Cotte & Ritchie, 2005). In addition, politicians commonly use emotional framing in their messages to gain votes (Ridout & Searles, 2011). Although no experimental research has been conducted on the effectiveness of emotional versus rational framing within the field of crisis communication, many case studies indicate that emotions can be used strategically in order to minimize reputational damage.

The public relations crisis that resulted from the cold reaction of the British Royal Family to the death of Princess Diana is a clear example of how emotional message framing might be more effective in crisis communication than rational message framing (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). In response to the criticism on her perceived lack of sympathy, the British Queen expressed her care and feelings in a speech, which was positively evaluated by the British people because it made the Queen sound genuinely concerned and sincere. The Archbishop Cardinal of Boston offered an emotional crisis response to criticism for a lack of handling revelations of sexual abuse by priests in the American Catholic Church (Kauffman, 2008) which resulted in positive media



coverage. These case studies give an indication that one can benefit from communicating emotionally during crises compared to communicating rationally.

Even when the content remains stable, a message can result in a completely different post-crisis reaction depending on the framing (Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010). Prior research on advertising illustrates that *“when two messages contain the exact same substantive content, framing that content in terms of its source’s thoughts or feelings can dictate its impact”* (Mayer & Tormala, 2010, p. 444). Given the fact that research on crisis timing strategies proposes that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy offers the advantage of giving a person or an organization the chance to frame the crisis, compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Williams et al., 1993), it is expected that emotional message framing impacts organizational post-crisis reputation in a more positive way than rational message framing in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy framing may not be as effective since then an external party already got the opportunity to frame the crisis. Consequently, the organization might not have any other option than to reply to these accusations by means of a suitable crisis response strategy.

**H2a.** In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, emotional message framing can be better than rational message framing at restoring organizational post-crisis reputations.

**H2b.** In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, no difference in organizational post-crisis reputations will result from message framing.

## **5 THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SINCERITY ON THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL MESSAGE FRAMING ON POST-CRISIS REPUTATION**

This positive effect of emotional message framing compared to rational message framing in a crisis communication context can be explained by an increase in stakeholders’ perceptions of organizational sincerity. Benoit and Brinson (1999) suggested that the British Queen’s emotional message was effective due to the fact that it made her seem highly sincere. Other case studies on

crisis communication which also involved an emotional response equally suggest that the positive effects of emotional crisis communication could be explained by increased perceptions of sincerity (Kauffman, 2008; Legg, 2009).

Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal (2002) already stressed the importance of sincerity of crisis communication. The level of sincerity attributed to corporate communication can positively influence stakeholders' evaluations of the organization (Kim, 2011). Social psychology adds that when an attempt to be forgiven for wrongdoing is considered to be sincere, it will increase empathy and subsequently motivate forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Davis & Gold, 2011). These assumptions result in the expectation that the positive impact of emotional message framing compared to rational message framing on organizations' post-crisis reputation in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy may be due to a mediating effect on perceived organizational sincerity.

**H3.** In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, the impact of message framing on post-crisis organizational reputation is mediated by perceptions of organizational sincerity.

## 6 METHOD

### 6.1 Design and stimuli

This study used a 2 (crisis timing strategy: ex-ante crisis timing strategy vs. ex-post crisis timing strategy)  $\times$  2 (message framing: rational vs. emotional) between-subjects factorial experimental design to investigate the hypotheses. Four fictitious scenarios manipulated crisis timing strategy and message framing.

The crisis situation involved a fictitious fire in a dance club in Madrid (Spain). The crisis was located in Spain instead of Belgium (the country of origin of the participants) because this way, participants would not be suspicious due to the fact that they did not hear of the crisis yet in the Belgian media. Locating the crisis in a European country makes the crisis remain somewhat

involving to the participants. Participants read the content of a press conference which disclosed that one of the emergency exits in the dance club was shut. As a consequence, several visitors died in the fire. In the ex-ante crisis timing strategy condition, the manager of the dance club self-disclosed that the emergency exit was closed. In the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition, the fire department of Madrid disclosed the same information in a press conference and the manager confirmed this information in a response.

In order to make a realistic comparison between the ex-ante crisis timing strategy and the ex-post crisis timing strategy, the managerial response in the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition additionally contained a crisis response strategy. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory posits that whenever a crisis is highly severe, it is necessary for organizations to offer a crisis response strategy (e.g., apology, denial) in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Coombs, 2004; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). To enlarge the generalizability of the study, two different response strategies (rebuild crisis response strategy and deny crisis response strategy) were used. Half of the respondents in the ex-post crisis timing strategy condition read that the manager apologized (i.e., rebuild crisis response strategy), the other half read that the manager denied (i.e., deny crisis response strategy) that the exit door was closed. Crisis response strategy was not used as an independent variable in the study since the focus is on crisis timing strategies. Therefore both types of crisis response strategy were taken together in the analyses.

Independently of the crisis response strategy, the manager of the dancing communicated in either an emotionally or rationally framed manner. In line with Stafford and Day (1995), the emotionally framed message includes subjective, evaluative properties and emotional loaded adjectives (e.g., "*horrifying drama*", describing the damage approximately). The emotion that was expressed in this study was sadness for what happened. The rationally framed message on the other hand is more direct and presents the same information in a more straightforward and objective manner (e.g., "*incident*", describing the damage through exact numbers). Message framing was therefore manipulated in a manner that allowed for the message content to remain stable (Mayer & Tormala, 2010).

## 6.2 Participants and procedure

Data were collected from 168 respondents using a convenience sample from Dutch-speaking Belgian men and women. Respondents received an email inviting them to fill in an online questionnaire. They were randomly divided across the four experimental conditions. After reading the scenario online containing the self-disclosure or the external attack and the crisis response, respondents filled in the online questionnaire containing the manipulation checks, measures of the dependent variables and socio-demographical variables. Participants had an average age of 39 years ( $SD = 14.48$ ; range = 16-80 years). Approximately 46 % were male and 54 % were female.

## 6.3 Measures

A four-item seven-point semantic differential scale measures the emotional versus rational message framing based on the work of Liu and Stout (1987) ( $\alpha = .73$ ). Participants rated the reaction of the organization on each of the items (e.g., *rational vs. emotional*).

Organizational post-crisis reputation was measured using one factor of the reputation quotient of Fombrun, Gardberg and Sever (2000). According to these authors, reputation entails two factors, an emotional and rational factor. Since the crisis involved a fictitious organization and the organization was a dance club, it was difficult for respondents to rate many of the items in the rational factor (e.g., *"This organization looks like a low risk investment"*, *"This organization develops innovative products and services"*). Therefore, only the emotional factor was used which essentially measures a general attitude towards the organization by measuring three items on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., *"I have a good feeling about the company"*, *"I admire and respect the company"*, *"I trust this company"*) ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

Perceptions of organizational sincerity were measured by means of a three-item 7-point Likert scale (e.g., *insincere vs. sincere*) based on the work of Aaker (1997) ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

## 6.4 Pre-test

A pre-test using a between-subjects design was conducted to check the manipulation of message framing ( $N = 94$ ). The results of an independent-samples t-test show that in case the

message was framed in an emotional manner, participants considered the communication to be significantly more emotional ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) than in case the message was framed rationally ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ;  $t(92) = 2.13$ ,  $p = .036$ ).

## 7 RESULTS

### 7.1 Manipulation check

The analysis from the pre-test was replicated in order to conduct a manipulation check of message framing. In case the message was framed emotionally, participants considered it to be significantly more emotional ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than in case the message was framed in a rational way ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ;  $t(161) = 6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No manipulation check was conducted for crisis timing strategy because this was a structural manipulation, which does not involve any perceptions.

### 7.2 Tests of hypotheses

The first two hypotheses were tested by means of a univariate two-way ANOVA (general linear model). The results first indicate a main effect of crisis timing strategy on organizational post-crisis reputation. When organizations use an ex-ante crisis timing strategy ( $M = 3.08$ ), their reputation will be significantly better restored than when they use an ex-post crisis timing strategy ( $M = 2.09$ ;  $F(1, 164) = 28.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings support H1 and illustrate the benefits of self-disclosure for minimizing reputational damage during crises.

Figure one shows an interaction effect between message framing and crisis timing strategy on post-crisis reputation ( $F(1, 164) = 3.13$ ,  $p = .079$ ). The results of the simple tests show that for an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, the post-crisis reputation toward the organization is higher in the case of an emotionally framed crisis response ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) as compared to a rationally framed crisis response ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = .99$ ;  $t(62) = 2.40$ ,  $p = .020$ ). These results support H2a. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, no difference in post-crisis reputation occurs depending on the use of either an emotional ( $M = 2.16$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) or a rational

message frame ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ;  $t(102) = .65$ ,  $p = .52$ ). These findings support H2b. These results show that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, contrary to an ex-post crisis timing strategy, offers the advantage that it allows organizations to frame a crisis in the best manner with respect to the organizational reputation.

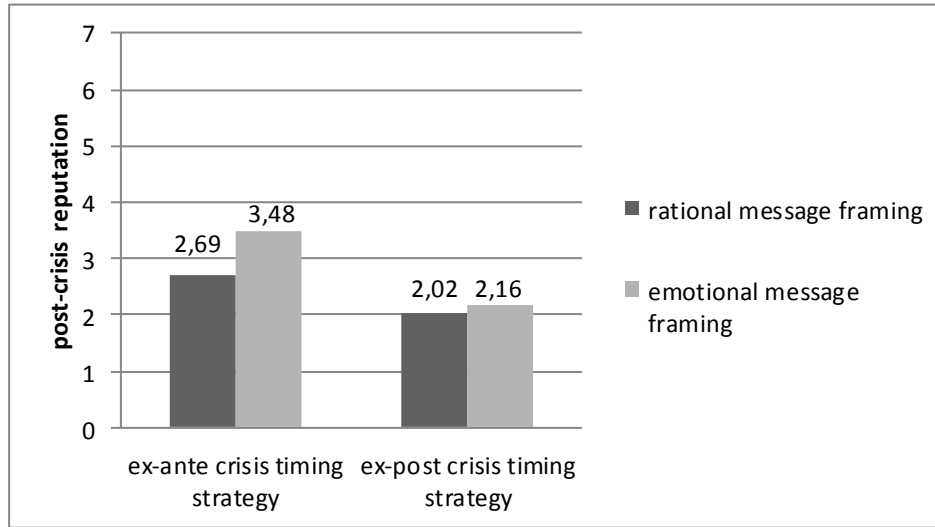


Fig. 1: Interaction effect of crisis timing strategy and organizational message framing on organizational post-crisis reputation

In order to test the last hypothesis, a mediation analysis, which is illustrated by figure two, was performed based on the Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure. The first step shows that message framing (rational vs. emotional) significantly predicts organizations' post-crisis reputation ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $t [62] = 2.43$ ,  $p = .018$ ). Message framing also predicts perceptions of the mediator, organizational sincerity ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $t [62] = 3.28$ ,  $p = .002$ ). The third step shows that organizational sincerity predicts the outcome variable, reputation ( $\beta = .60$ ,  $t [62] = 5.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, the independent variable and the mediator are regressed on the dependent variable. The impact of sincerity on reputation is still significant ( $\beta = .57$ ,  $t [61] = 5.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The effect of message framing on reputation however, diminishes and even becomes insignificant when sincerity is added as mediator, compared to the first step ( $\beta = .077$ ,  $t [61] = .69$ ,  $p = .49$ ). A Sobel test further supports the existence of a significant mediation of organizational sincerity ( $z = 2.86$ ,  $p = .004$ ). These results support the third hypothesis; the impact of message framing on post-crisis reputation is fully mediated by sincerity.

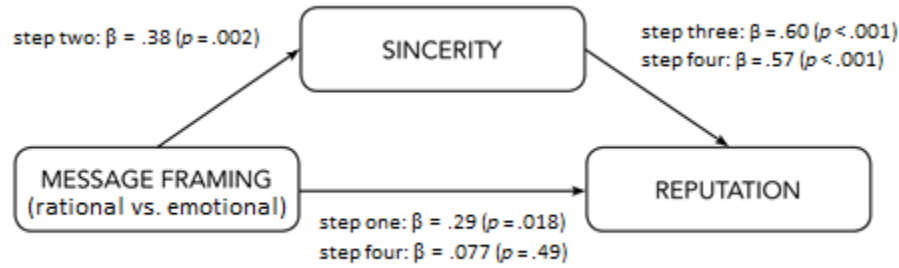


Fig. 2: Analysis of the mediating effect of perceived organizational sincerity on the impact of organizational message framing on post-crisis reputation in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy

## 8 DISCUSSION

In line with prior research on crisis timing strategies (Arpan, & Pompper, 2003; Arpan, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011), this study shows that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can minimize crisis damage compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy. The results show that self-disclosing a crisis results in a better post-crisis reputation than responding to accusations of a third party.

In addition to minimizing reputational damage, the use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy offers organizations the possibility to frame the crisis in the most advantageous way (Williams et al., 1993). In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy emotional message framing can result in less reputational damage from a crisis than rational message framing. This can be explained by the fact that when applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, the organization in crisis is the first to communicate about potentially incriminating information, which means the organization still has the chance to frame the crisis in the most beneficial way (Williams et al., 1993). In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy however, an external party already got the opportunity to frame the crisis in a certain manner and the organization has no other option than to respond to these messages (Williams et al., 1993; Coombs, 2007; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Consequently, this study offers support for the framing hypothesis (Williams et al., 1993). While

an ex-ante crisis timing strategy generally results in a better post-crisis reputation than an ex-post crisis timing strategy, an ex-ante crisis timing strategy also offers the advantage that the beneficial type of message framing can increase its positive impact to an even greater extent.

These results also comply with the findings from chapter four on the relative impact of crisis response and crisis timing strategies (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). While chapter four shows that in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy the content of the message matters less than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, this study suggests that message framing might be all the more important. Also, while chapter four found that it is important to offer a crisis response strategy in addition to objective information on a crisis in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012), this study suggests that under that condition the importance of message framing may be subordinate to the importance of the content.

To conclude, a mediation analysis further explored the underlying mechanism of the impact of organizational message framing on post-crisis reputation in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. More specifically, the study established that this effect is mediated by changes in stakeholders' perceptions of organizational sincerity. In the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, the positive impact of emotional message framing on post-crisis reputation is entirely explained by an increase in perceived organizational sincerity. These results offer experimental support for those case studies which have suggested that emotional message framing can be beneficial during crises due to the mediating effect of perceived organizational sincerity (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Kauffman, 2008; Legg, 2009). These results are also in line with psychological research that finds sincerity to be an important factor for forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997; Davis & Gold, 2011). When an organization offers a response that is considered sincere by stakeholders, these may be more likely to forgive the organization for its wrongdoing and evaluate it less negatively. In addition, the study confirms that sincerity is an important factor in determining the impact of organizational communication (Kim, 2011).



## 9 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A number of limitations to this study offer suggestions for further research. This study used a scenario about a fictitious crisis on a fire in which young people got killed. This type of crisis might have triggered emotional reactions of the participants, influencing the effect of emotional framing. Further research should replicate the current study using a less emotional involving and less severe crisis. In addition, it would also be useful to replicate these results by using existing organizations; making it possible to take the multidimensionality of the reputation construct into account (Fombrun et al., 2000). The study also based the selection of participants on a convenience sample. Further research should use a more systematic procedure to select the respondents.

Moreover, future research should focus on the strategic use of various specific emotions in crises. For instance, case studies on organizational crisis communication show that organizations can communicate a variety of emotions, such as hope and anger (Jin et al., 2010). The current study manipulated emotional framing by means of sadness (e.g., Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Kauffman, 2008), but further research should study the impact of different types of emotions. Future research should also elaborate on the impact of organizational sincerity in crisis communication. The results of this study show that emotional message framing is beneficial because it is considered sincere. However, further research might study if emotional message framing backfires when it is considered insincere. For instance, when organizations' have an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation, they are likely to be evaluated rather negatively throughout a crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). In this case it might be possible that emotional message framing is considered insincere and backfires. Communication managers should therefore be ware if they communicate emotionally for strategic reasons only.

Finally, this study shows that emotional framing can be beneficial in the post-crisis phase, when the negative event has already passed. This does not automatically imply however, that practitioners should communicate emotionally in the midst of a crisis, when lives are at stake and stakeholders are in need of information on how to handle the crisis (cf. Coombs, 2007). Further

research should rule out if in this case, stakeholders might need a spokesperson to be decisive rather than sincere.

## **10 CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter offers a number of contributions to the field of crisis communication. First, the results show that organizations confronted with a preventable crisis may be best of applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. By self-disclosing a crisis before an external party has the opportunity to do this, organizations minimize the reputational damage compared to when they use an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Second, the findings suggest that the use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy additionally offers organizations the opportunity to further minimize crisis damage by framing the crisis in an emotional manner. Third, this chapter introduces a new type of crisis communication strategy besides content (i.e., crisis response strategies) and timing (i.e., crisis timing strategies): message framing. The results illustrate the effectiveness of emotional message framing compared to rational message framing. Organizations in crisis should therefore not only consider the potential impact of the content and timing of their crisis communication, but of the framing as well. The impact of framing should especially be taken into regard when organizations self-disclose a crisis. Fourth, the results illustrate the importance of perceived organizational sincerity in crisis communication. Emotional crisis communication can have a positive impact on an organization's post-crisis reputation because it is likely to increase the perceived organizational sincerity.

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## **CHAPTER 7**

# **THE IMPACT OF THE HALO EFFECT IN ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

## **THE BENEFITS OF A GOOD REPUTATION**

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## **CHAPTER 7 THE IMPACT OF THE HALO EFFECT IN ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION: THE BENEFITS OF A GOOD REPUTATION**

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This study investigates the influence of pre-crisis organizational reputation on stakeholders' crisis evaluations and its underlying mechanism. In addition, the study examines if a favorable pre-crisis reputation can protect organizations against attacks from external parties. The results indicate that organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation suffer less reputational loss than organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. This impact of pre-crisis reputation on reputation loss is fully mediated by the perceptions of organizational responsibility for the crisis. In addition, the findings suggest that a favorable pre-crisis reputation can protect organizations' reputation against the detrimental impact of an attack from an external party.

**Keywords:** pre-crisis reputation, attributions of responsibility, reputation loss, halo effect, stealing thunder

# 1 INTRODUCTION

When organizations are confronted with a crisis, they are likely to suffer reputational damage from it (Coombs, 2007). The degree to which organizations suffer reputation loss from a crisis however, depends on their pre-crisis reputation. Stakeholders' evaluations of an organization in crisis are strongly affected by their overall evaluation of that company (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Ulmer, 2001). Stakeholders use their prior evaluations to estimate the organizational responsibility for the crisis (Dick, Chakravarti, & Biehal, 1990) and to form an overall post-crisis evaluation of the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

Psychological research explains that, generally, the global evaluations people make about another person impact their evaluations of that person's specific attributes (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Otherwise stated, people evaluate all aspects of performance and all personal attributes in a manner that is consistent with their general evaluation or impression of someone (Balzer & Sulsky, 1992). This phenomenon is termed the *halo effect*, because people suffuse their ratings of personal features of others with a halo belonging to those individuals as a whole (Thorndike, 1920). This has been shown to be a very strong effect, which might hold even when there is sufficient information to assess these personal attributes independently (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; McNatt, 2010). In addition, people often are not aware that one evaluation influences another (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

The halo effect does not only apply for people but for objects as well. Consumers infer the performance of new products based on their general evaluation of the brand (Keller, 1993). The halo effect in crisis communication implies that the global evaluation of an organization prior to a crisis affects stakeholders' evaluations of that company during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). The impact of the pre-crisis reputation of an organization works in two ways. It is positive in case of a favorable pre-crisis reputation, but negative in case of an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation (Griffin, Babin, & Attaway, 1991).

There are two mechanisms that might explain the occurrence of a halo effect in a crisis communication setting. First of all, a favorable pre-crisis reputation can cause stakeholders to

offer the organization *the benefit of the doubt* with respect to the amount of responsibility they attribute to the organization (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Secondly, a favorable pre-crisis reputation might work *as a shield* that protects the organization from potential reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

The benefit of the doubt explanation for the halo effect has been supported in a number of studies (Griffin et al., 1991; Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Klein & Dawar, 2004). The shield explanation however (Coombs & Holladay, 2006), has not been sufficiently tested so far. Previous findings concerning the impact of pre-crisis reputation on post-crisis reputation (e.g., Griffin et al., 1991; Coombs & Holladay, 2001) merely show that organizations that have a favorable reputation prior to a crisis retain a better reputation after a crisis compared to organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. This does not imply, however, that an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation suffers less reputational damage than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. It could just as well mean that organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation only have a better reputation after the crisis because they had a lot more reputational capital to lose to begin with (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

This study contributes to the field of crisis communication in three respects. First, our study examines more adequately than prior studies whether the halo effect results from a shield offered by a favorable pre-crisis reputation as we specifically focus on reputation loss rather than post-crisis reputation. Second, although prior research viewed the two halo mechanisms as independent (Coombs & Holladay, 2006), our study shows that the shield mechanism is a consequence of the benefit of the doubt mechanism. Third, to investigate the halo effect in crisis communication further, the impact of the halo on the effect of external attacks directed to organizations in crisis is studied.

## 2 HALO AS THE RESULT OF BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

The attribution theory explains that people generally have the tendency to search for underlying causes for events they observe (Kelley, 1973). Crises are considered negative events, which lead stakeholders to determine who is to blame for them (Dean, 2004; Coombs, 2007), and stakeholders mainly assess how much responsibility is to be attributed to the organization that is confronted with the crisis (Kelley, 1973; Coombs, 2007). They consider three factors when they evaluate the crisis situation and the degree of organizational responsibility for it. Firstly, they consider the initial crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). This initial responsibility is based on an assessment of the crisis type and how this is interpreted by for instance the media (e.g., victim crisis, preventable crisis). Secondly, stakeholders take into account the crisis history. Has the organization been confronted with this type of crisis before? A third and highly important factor that is considered by stakeholders when attributing responsibility however, is the pre-crisis organizational reputation (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Coombs, 2007).

Stakeholders make causal inferences based on their general evaluation of the organization before the crisis (Folkes, 1988; Dick et al., 1990; Coombs, 2007). A favorable pre-crisis reputation can make stakeholders give an organization the benefit of the doubt in crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). This implies that stakeholders may attribute less crisis responsibility to organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation (Dean, 2004). Organizations with an unfavorable reputation prior to the crisis, however, may be more likely perceived as the cause of that crisis (Griffin et al., 1991). The crisis may be regarded as just another example of misconduct for the organization in the eyes of stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Therefore, the following is expected:

**H1.** An organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation will be attributed less responsibility for a crisis compared to an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation

### **3 HALO AS THE RESULT OF A SHIELD**

A favorable pre-crisis reputation is not only beneficial for responsibility attributions but also for the evaluation of post-crisis reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Griffin et al. (1991) found that companies with a favorable pre-crisis reputation receive more favorable attitude ratings when confronted with a crisis. Similarly, stakeholders perceive an organization's post-crisis reputation more negatively when an unfavorable relationship precedes the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Organizations that have a history of corporate social responsibility are also found to have a better reputation after a crisis than those who do not (Wigley & Pfau, 2010). In addition, stakeholders are more likely to purchase from organizations in crisis with a favorable pre-crisis reputation (Lyon & Cameron, 2004).

Coombs and Holladay (2006) believe, however, that a favorable pre-crisis reputation might offer more than just a larger amount of reputation capital to spend during crises, compared to organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. A favorable pre-crisis reputation should be able to protect the organization from reputation loss. Drawing on the expectancy confirmation theory in the context of individuals' beliefs about social issues (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2006), it is suggested that a favorable pre-crisis reputation can offer a shield against reputational loss. According to this theory, when people receive information that disconfirms their expectations, they tend to interpret this information in a way that is consistent to their prior expectations (Darley & Gross, 1983; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Lord et al., 1979; Traut-Mattausch, Schulz-Hardt, Greitemeyer, & Frey, 2004).

The halo as result of a shield explanation is based on the assumption that stakeholders holding a favorable attitude towards an organization in crisis may focus on the positive aspects of the organization and ignore the negative information created by the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Stakeholders experience a dissonance between their favorable evaluation of a company, and the negative perception that is raised due to the crisis (Perloff, 2010). They attempt to resolve this apparent inconsistency (Festinger, 1957), a goal which can be achieved by

disregarding the elements of the crisis that shed a negative light on the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

This style of information processing not only has the potential to prevent reputational damage caused by crises, but may even lead stakeholders to dismiss the crisis up to a certain degree and retain their initial positive evaluation of that organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). If the halo effect can genuinely offer a protective shield to an organization in crisis, this implies that an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation would suffer less reputational loss than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. The following is expected:

**H2.** An organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation will suffer less reputational loss than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation

#### **4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EXPLANATORY MECHANISMS FOR THE HALO EFFECT**

Even though Coombs and Holladay (2006) describe both explanations for the halo effect, they do not describe nor test how they are related. If the halo effect results from both attributions of responsibility and reputation loss, it begs the question if these processes indeed occur independent of each other. Research in both crisis communication and marketing suggests that attributions of organizational responsibility affect stakeholders' evaluations of a company's post-crisis reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Coombs, 2007). In addition, according to Coombs and Holladay (2001), pre-crisis reputation can impact post-crisis reputation indirectly through changes in attributed responsibility. Consequently, if organizations in crisis suffer less reputational damage, this is likely due to the mediating effect of organizational responsibility.

This is in line with the expectancy confirmation theory (Lord et al., 1979; Edwards & Smith, 1996). This theory implies that peoples' prior expectations about an organization can protect it

from reputation loss during crises, due to the fact that these prior expectations color their evaluation of new information (Darley & Gross 1983; Traut-Mattausch et al., 2004). This might imply, however, that, in fact, positive expectations about an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation directly impact attributions of responsibility. Because based on the attribution theory (Kelley, 1973; Folkes, 1988; Coombs, 2007), stakeholders are expected to evaluate crisis information mainly in order to determine the degree to which the organization is responsible for the crisis. This evaluation might then be used to finally form an opinion on the organization's post-crisis reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs, 2007).

Therefore, when an organization with a favorable reputation is confronted with a crisis, stakeholders may be reluctant to disconfirm their initial positive evaluation of that company (Lord et al., 1979; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Consequently, they may attribute less responsibility to that organization for the crisis (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Brown & White, 2011) and the organization may suffer only minor reputational loss (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). A mediation analysis will establish if a favorable pre-crisis reputation functions as a shield against crisis damage because of an intermediate effect on responsibility attribution and, consequently, because it offers companies the benefit of the doubt:

**H3.** The effect of pre-crisis reputation on reputation loss is mediated by attributed responsibility

## **5 A FAVORABLE PRE-CRISIS REPUTATION AS PROTECTION AGAINST EXTERNAL ATTACKS**

When organizations disclose information on a crisis, the halo effect of a favorable pre-crisis reputation can prevent this 'negative' information from causing much damage to the organization's reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). However, external parties (e.g., competitors, government, and media) might still attack the organization publicly in light of the crisis (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Even though organizations can avoid a lot of damage by disclosing the crisis information before an attack (i.e., an ex-ante crisis timing strategy) (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993; Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003;

Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011), it is still expected that a subsequent attack can cause some additional reputational damage.

If the damaging crisis information that has been disclosed by an organization is repeated in a subsequent attack, it becomes more salient to stakeholders when they evaluate the organization (Williams et al., 1993). In addition, because they are exposed to the same negative content twice, they are expected to remember it better and might be influenced more negatively (Dolnik et al., 2003). Finally, attacks from external parties might have a detrimental impact on organizations' reputation because the information they offer can be considered less biased and more credible than the organizational communication (Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). Hence, an external attack on an organization in crisis can cause additional reputational damage:

**H4.** Organizations suffer more reputational loss when they are attacked by a third party than when they are not

A favorable pre-crisis reputation however, might diminish the potential harms of a third party attack. A halo effect can result from the formation of a protective shield against reputational damage due to a favorable pre-crisis reputation (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2006), and consequently safeguard the organization from any attacks that might succeed the crisis. It is therefore expected that when an organization had a favorable reputation prior to the crisis, it may not experience additional reputational loss due to an attack that is launched after an organization had disclosed a crisis. Conversely, organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation must be aware that external attacks can cause additional reputational damage:

**H5a.** The reputation of organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation will suffer less from the presence of an external attack

**H5b.** The reputation of organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation will suffer more when they are attacked by a third party than when they are not



## 6 METHOD

### 6.1 Design and stimuli

A 2 (pre-crisis reputation: unfavorable vs. favorable)  $\times$  2 (external attack: present vs. absent) between-subjects factorial experimental design was used to test the hypotheses. Based on a pre-test, two well-known and comparable Belgian supermarkets were selected that have either a favorable or an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. The crisis was the same for all four scenarios and involved a fictitious fraud case. The information that a number of top managers from the company were under suspicion of committing fraud was self-disclosed by the organization. In half of the conditions, this self-disclosure of the organization was followed by an attack from the Public Prosecutor who offered the same crisis information and stressed the severity of it. The other half of the respondents did not receive an additional attack.

### 6.2 Participants and procedure

A sample of 256 respondents participated in the study ( $M$  age = 29,  $SD$  = 11.44, range = 16-71 years; 62% were female) through a convenience sample. Respondents received an email containing a link, which led them to an online questionnaire. They were randomly exposed to one of the four experimental conditions. The respondents were first asked to evaluate either the organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation or the one with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation on the reputation measure. Then, they were instructed to read the scenario with the description of a fraud crisis that occurred in that organization. In all conditions the crisis information was self-disclosed by the organization. Half of the respondents subsequently read the same crisis information in an attack from a third party, the Public Prosecutor. The Public Prosecutor additionally stressed that it was incomprehensible that the organization got away with fraud for such a long time, and that it considered the events to be highly severe. Then, respondents rated the organization's reputation for the second time. In addition, their attributions of responsibility and socio-demographical variables were measured.

### 6.3 Measures

Both pre-crisis ( $\alpha = .97$ ) and post-crisis reputation ( $\alpha = .97$ ) were measured by the Reputation Quotient (RQ) scale, which measures reputation based on six dimensions (emotional appeal, products and services, vision and leadership, workplace environment, social and environmental responsibility, financial performance) (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). All 20 items of the RQ were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (e.g., “*I have a good feeling about the company*”) and averaged. Pre-crisis reputation was measured at the beginning of the questionnaire while post-crisis reputation was measured after respondents had read the crisis scenario and subsequent attack. The amount of reputation loss due to the crisis was measured by subtracting the second measure of reputation from the first measure of reputation. Reputation loss thus equals the difference between the organizational reputation before and after the crisis.

To measure the attributions of organizational responsibility, a two-item scale based on the work of Griffin, Babin and Darden (1992) was used ( $\alpha = .87$ ) (e.g., “*How responsible was the organization?*”).

## 7 PRE-TEST

A pre-test (N=57) was conducted to check the manipulation of pre-crisis organizational reputation by means of a within-subjects design. A total of ten organizations that are active in Belgium were selected. Each respondent received a questionnaire that contained the names of three of these companies. Each individual company was evaluated by at least 17 respondents. They had to fill in the reputation measure for each company separately. The companies were all involved in the food industry and consisted of supermarkets, food producers and fast food companies. The estimated reputation of all ten companies that had been evaluated throughout the pre-test was compared, in order to select two of them (both supermarkets), which differed significantly in reputation ( $M_{\text{unfavorable}} = 3.96$ ,  $SD = .78$  vs.  $M_{\text{favorable}} = 5.45$ ,  $SD = .75$ ;  $t(32) = 5.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

This selection complies with previous research in which an organization was considered to have a favorable reputation when respondents rated it to be five or higher on a seven-point scale (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). In addition, the results from the pre-test illustrate that the organization with the unfavorable pre-crisis reputation scores significantly lower than five concerning its post-crisis reputation ( $p < .001$ ). To substantiate our selection, we also looked up the standings of the selected organizations in the latest annual ratings from the Reputation Institute (Akkanto & Reputation Institute, 2011). Compared to the other Belgian organizations in the list, the favorable organization was ranked first of all 30 organizations. The unfavorable organization was ranked at number 21, the lowest of all supermarkets in the list, at the time the study was carried out.

## 8 RESULTS

### 8.1 Manipulation check

A manipulation check indicated that the organization that was selected as having a favorable pre-crisis reputation based on the pre-test indeed had a more favorable reputation than the organization with the unfavorable pre-crisis reputation ( $M_{\text{favorable}} = 5.13$ ,  $SD = .83$  vs.  $M_{\text{unfavorable}} = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ;  $t(238) = 9.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### 8.2 Tests of hypotheses

The main effect of pre-crisis reputation on attributions of responsibility was tested by means of an independent-samples t-test. The results show that organizations with a favorable pre-crisis reputation are attributed significantly less responsibility ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) for the crisis as compared to organizations with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ;  $t(254) = 2.59$ ,  $p = .01$ ). These findings support H1: an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation is attributed less crisis responsibility compared to an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation.

The second hypothesis stated that an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation may suffer less reputational damage during a crisis than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. An independent-samples t-test compared the mean reputation loss between both conditions. Supporting H2, the results show that an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation ( $M = .35$ ,  $SD = .62$ ), loses significantly less reputational capital than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation ( $M = .56$ ,  $SD = .80$ ;  $t(218) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .031$ ).

In order to test the third hypothesis a mediation analyses was performed based on the Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure (cf. Figure one). Step one shows, as already established, that pre-crisis reputation (unfavorable vs. favorable) significantly predicts organizations' reputation loss ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $t[218] = -2.17$ ,  $p = .031$ ). The second step, also as shown before, illustrates that pre-crisis reputation predicts perceptions of the mediator, organizational responsibility ( $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t[254] = -2.59$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Step three implies that organizational responsibility predicts the outcome variable, reputation loss ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $t[218] = 4.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, in step four, the dependent variable and the mediator are both regressed on the independent variable, reputation loss. Consistent with full mediation, the impact of organizational responsibility on reputation loss is still significant ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $t[217] = 4.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the effect of pre-crisis reputation on post-crisis reputation loss is not ( $\beta = -.091$ ,  $t[217] = -1.38$ ,  $p = .17$ ). A Sobel test further supports the existence of significant mediation ( $z = -2.25$ ,  $p = .024$ ). These results support the third hypothesis; the effect of pre-crisis reputation on reputation loss due to a crisis is fully mediated by perceptions of organizational responsibility. Consequently, pre-crisis reputation only affects reputation loss indirectly through perceptions of organizational responsibility.

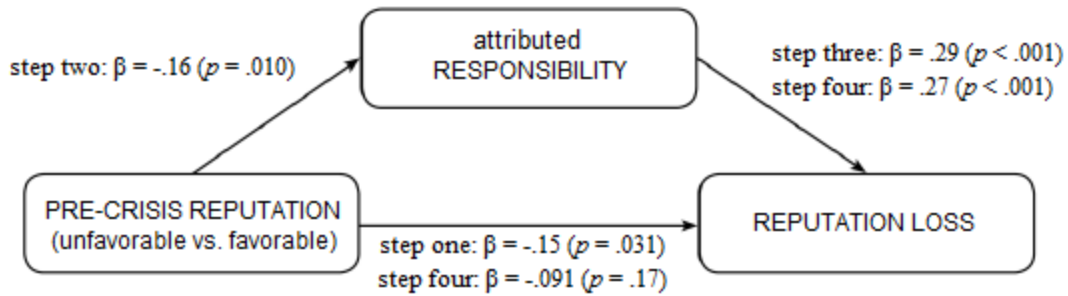


Fig. 1: Analysis of the mediating effect of attributed responsibility on the impact of pre-crisis reputation on reputation loss

H4 implies that when an organization self-discloses a crisis and this is followed by an external attack; the organization may suffer more reputation loss than when it is not followed by an attack. The main effect of the presence of an external attack (present vs. absent) was tested by means of an independent-samples t-test. Supporting H4, the results show that when an organizational self-disclosure is followed by an external attack ( $M = .55, SD = .71$ ), it suffers more reputational loss than when there is no external attack ( $M = .36, SD = .72; t(218) = 1.99, p = .048$ ).

Finally, an independent samples t-test shows that when an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation discloses a crisis, its amount of reputation loss is not influenced by an external attack ( $M_{attack\ present} = .39, SD = .60$  vs.  $M_{attack\ absent} = .32, SD = .63; t(110) = .53, p = .60$ ). These results offer support for H5a. When an organization has an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation, however, its post-crisis reputation suffers more in case the organization is attacked by an external party subsequent to the disclosure of the crisis ( $M = .72, SD = .77$ ) than when no attack follows ( $M = .40, SD = .80; t(106) = 2.12, p = .036$ ). These results offer support for H5b.

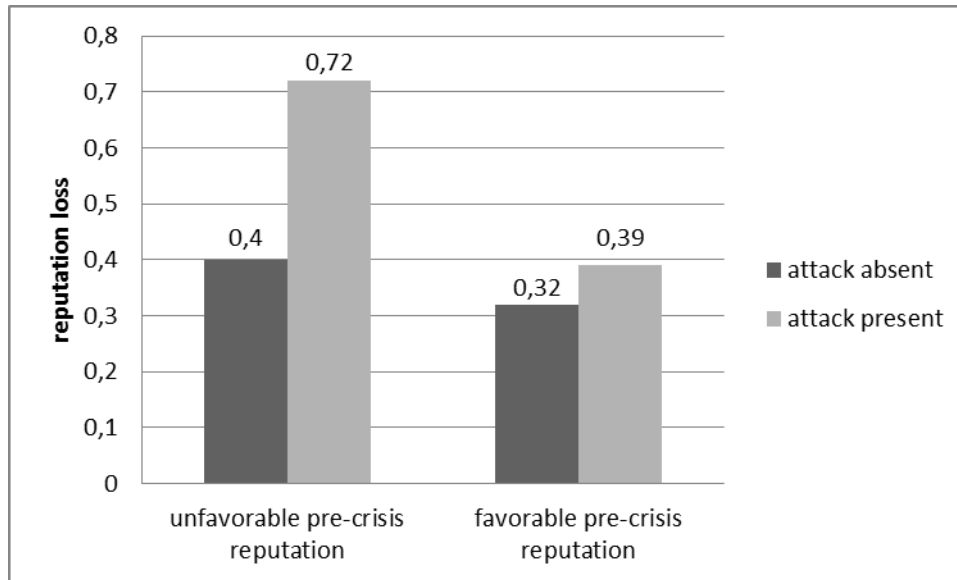


Fig. 2: Reputation loss as a function of pre-crisis reputation and presence (versus absence) of an external attack

## 9 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this final empirical chapter was threefold. First, it wanted to examine whether pre-crisis reputation affects post-crisis reputation *loss* as suggested in prior research on the halo effect. The second aim was to investigate how the two extant explanations for the halo effect relate to each other. To conclude, the study wanted to establish if the halo effect can serve to protect an organization in crisis against external attacks.

### 9.1 The explanatory mechanisms for a halo effect in crisis communication

The results confirm the existence of a halo effect. Firstly, the study shows that an organization with a favorable reputation prior to a crisis is considered less responsible for that crisis than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. This effect confirms that the halo effect can result from the fact that a favorable pre-crisis reputation causes stakeholders to offer the organization the benefit of the doubt when they attribute crisis responsibility (Griffin et al., 1991; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Dean, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Secondly, pre-crisis reputation affects the amount of reputation an organization loses due to a crisis. Organizations

with a favorable pre-crisis reputation may suffer less reputational loss than those with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation.

Prior studies have indeed argued that a favorable pre-crisis reputation acts as a shield against reputational damage (Griffin et al., 1991; Coombs & Holladay, 2001) but have merely shown that organizations with a favorable reputation prior to the crisis have a larger amount of reputation capital which can be spent in times of crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). By measuring reputation loss, this study offers a better test of the assumption that the halo effect can be explained by a shield against reputational damage. This study additionally investigated how this shield is formed.

## 9.2 The relative impact of the halo as a result of benefit of the doubt and shield

Even though it has been suggested that the halo effect can result both from the fact that a favorable pre-crisis reputation leads to benefit of the doubt and to a protective shield (Coombs & Holladay, 2006), no research has established how both explanations are related to each other. Prior research (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Coombs, 2007) suggested that the fact that a favorable pre-crisis reputation protects organizations against reputational damage might be due to its intermediate effect on responsibility attributions, but did not test this hypothesis. Our mediation analysis confirmed that the impact of pre-crisis reputation on reputation loss is entirely due to its effect on stakeholders' attributions of responsibility. An organization that has a favorable pre-crisis reputation is considered less responsible for a crisis and subsequently suffers less reputational loss than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation. Consequently, the halo is the result of a shield offered by a favorable pre-crisis reputation, but this shield is due to the effect on attributions of responsibility. This does not exclude, however, that in some settings the shield against reputational damage may be dependent of additional factors (e.g., crisis history, crisis severity).

Previous studies that found support for a halo effect in crisis communication always involved a scenario in which an organization responded to crisis information that was brought out by a third party (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Jeong, 2009). When organizations' first communication

about a crisis is in response to external allegations, this implies an additional threat to their reputation (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), allowing for a large impact of pre-crisis reputation. This study tested the halo effect by means of a scenario in which an organization self-discloses a crisis. By doing this, organizations already prevent a great deal of reputational damage (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). This allowed us to test the halo effect in the most conservative way. Consequently, the results show that even when organizations use the most advised communication strategies during crises, a favorable pre-crisis reputation still matters a great deal in preventing reputational damage.

### 9.3 The halo effect as protection against external attacks

In addition, this study contributes to the knowledge on the halo effect in crisis communication by showing that the halo effect does not only protect organizations from reputational damage resulting from the crisis, it also offers protection against factors that can cause additional damage. Even if an organization self-discloses a crisis, it will most likely still get attacked by external parties afterwards (Yoon et al., 2006). The results of this study illustrate that these attacks have a detrimental impact on an organization's reputation. This can be explained by an increased availability of negative information when a self-disclosure is followed by an attack. The same negative information is communicated twice, causing it to be more salient and better remembered by stakeholders (Williams et al., 1993; Dolnik et al., 2003). The results in this study illustrate however, that because a favorable pre-crisis reputation offers a shield against reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2006); it also diminishes the impact of an external attack. When an organization has an unfavorable reputation prior to a crisis though, it may suffer more reputational loss when it receives an external attack than when it does not.

## **10 LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH**

A number of limitations to this study offer suggestions for further research. First, the halo effect was tested by means of a fictitious crisis that occurred in two existing, well-known, Belgian warehouses. Existing organizations were used in this study because a fair test of the halo



effect should not rely on a simple positive or negative text to manipulate pre-crisis reputation (Dean, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Future research should however test the halo effect by means of different organizations and different types of organizations for different types of crisis. In addition, the selection of respondents was based on a convenience sample. Further research should use a more systematic procedure to select the respondents.

To test the halo effect in the most conservative way, this study investigated the impact of pre-crisis reputation when an organization self-discloses information on a crisis. It might be argued that when organizations that have an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation self-disclose a crisis, stakeholders may be suspicious and consider this communication effort to be insincere (Yoon et al., 2006). However, we expect that the halo effect is a general and strong effect which overcomes these matters, given the fact that the results of this study for the halo effect in the case of self-disclosure are consistent to the results found for the halo effect in the case of an organizational response to third party allegations (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Jeong, 2009).

This study clearly illustrates the consequences of a halo effect during crises. Further research should investigate the implications of this effect. For instance, prior studies suggest that organizations' pre-crisis reputation can impact the efficacy of certain crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Lyon & Cameron, 2004). Further research might however look into the impact of the halo effect on the efficacy of certain types of framing. Research in crisis communication indicates that emotional framing can be beneficial to people or organizations in crisis, due to the fact that it makes the organization appear more genuine (Benoit & Brinson, 1999, Kauffman, 2008; Legg, 2009). This might backfire however when that person or organization has an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation.

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**CHAPTER 8**  
**CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE**  
**RESEARCH**

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## **CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

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### **1 INTRODUCTION**

In 1984, a pesticide plant in Bhopal (India) under the control of Union Carbide was confronted with a gas leak, which resulted in one of the worst industrial catastrophes in the world. Hundreds of thousands of people were exposed to the toxic substance that was released. Thousands of people died shortly after exposure to the toxics and others died in the aftermath of the crisis due to gas-related diseases. The dominant cause of this crisis was the lack of safety procedures in the company (Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). Yet, Union Carbide, which is owned by Dow Chemical Company, has always denied responsibility for the disaster in an attempt to avoid litigations and the financial consequences related to it. The company claimed that the leak was the result of sabotage and that it was a victim of the crisis.

This example illustrates that an organization in crisis worries about financial and legal matters, not just reputational matters (Coombs, 2007b; Huang & Su, 2009). Due to the worries about the financial consequences of a crisis, communicating in a correct manner is not always companies' primary concern. They often attempt to avoid potential demands for compensation by refuting responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Huang & Su, 2009). However, an analysis of the Bhopal crisis concluded that the refusal of Dow Chemical to accept blame did not absolve the firm from legal liabilities (Sen, Egelhoff, 1991). The company was held responsible for the crisis and was forced to offer financial compensations to the victims.

In addition, today the company still suffers from the crisis and the way that it handled the events in terms of reputational damage. In 2004, an activist was able to appear on BBC world, pretending to be a spokesperson of Dow Chemical (cf. Figure one). The fake spokesperson announced that the organization would offer huge compensations to all victims and offered its apologies as protest against the company's denial. This is only one illustration of people's expressions of displeasure in the aftermath of that crisis. Dow Chemical would have been better

off taking responsibility immediately after the crisis had hit (Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). Then the company would probably have had to pay similar compensations as it has been forced to do now, but it might have been able to restore its reputation. Since reputation has a large impact on organizations' competitive advantage (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2002; Groenland, 2002, Watson, 2007) taking responsibility would have resulted in lower long-term costs (Sen & Egelhoff, 1991).



Fig. 1: Fake apology Dow Chemical

(<http://52faces.blogspot.be/2008/11/fake-new-york-times-war-is-over.html>)

The main aim of this dissertation was to test the impact of crisis communication strategies on an organization's post-crisis reputation. Given the positive results of the impact of crisis communication on the decrease in reputational damage for organizations in crisis, awareness can be raised of the importance of crisis communication for organizations. In addition, the findings from this dissertation offer guidelines to practitioners for the application of crisis communication strategies (cf. Figure two).

Besides these managerial implications, this dissertation makes a number of theoretical contributions. First, it elaborates on the research that has been conducted on the content of crisis communication, the crisis response strategies. While much research has investigated how crisis response strategies should be matched to the crisis type (cf. Coombs, 2007a), this dissertation illustrates in which situations this matching principle should be applied. Second, it expands the scope of crisis communication strategies beyond the content. Theoretical explanations for the

impact of crisis timing strategies were examined in order to gain insight in the importance of the timing of communication during crises. While crisis timing strategies have been introduced in the field of crisis communication (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011), this dimension of crisis communication is under researched. Third, even though the initial focus of the dissertation was on the content and timing, the findings additionally illustrate the importance of a third type of crisis communication strategy: message framing.

## **2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF FINDINGS**

Overall, the dissertation indicates that organizations need to consider the impact of three dimensions of crisis communication: timing, content and framing (cf. Figure two). More specifically, they should first decide when they disclose the crisis information. Based on that decision, they need to determine the content. Do they solely offer information about the crisis or do they add a crisis response strategy. When a crisis response strategy is offered, which response strategy should that be? In order to determine the content of the crisis response organizations should estimate if it is possible to match the response strategy to the crisis type. After determining the content, the message should be framed in the most suitable manner. In addition to determining the timing, content and framing of crisis communication, organizations should take a number of situational factors into account. These factors can determine the impact of the crisis communication strategies and can have a direct impact on post-crisis reputation as well.

The three dimensions of crisis communication and the situational factors are discussed separately below. An overview is given of the most important findings, along with the theoretical contributions and practical implications. Finally, after discussing the crisis communication strategies and situational factors, a number of ethical considerations are discussed.

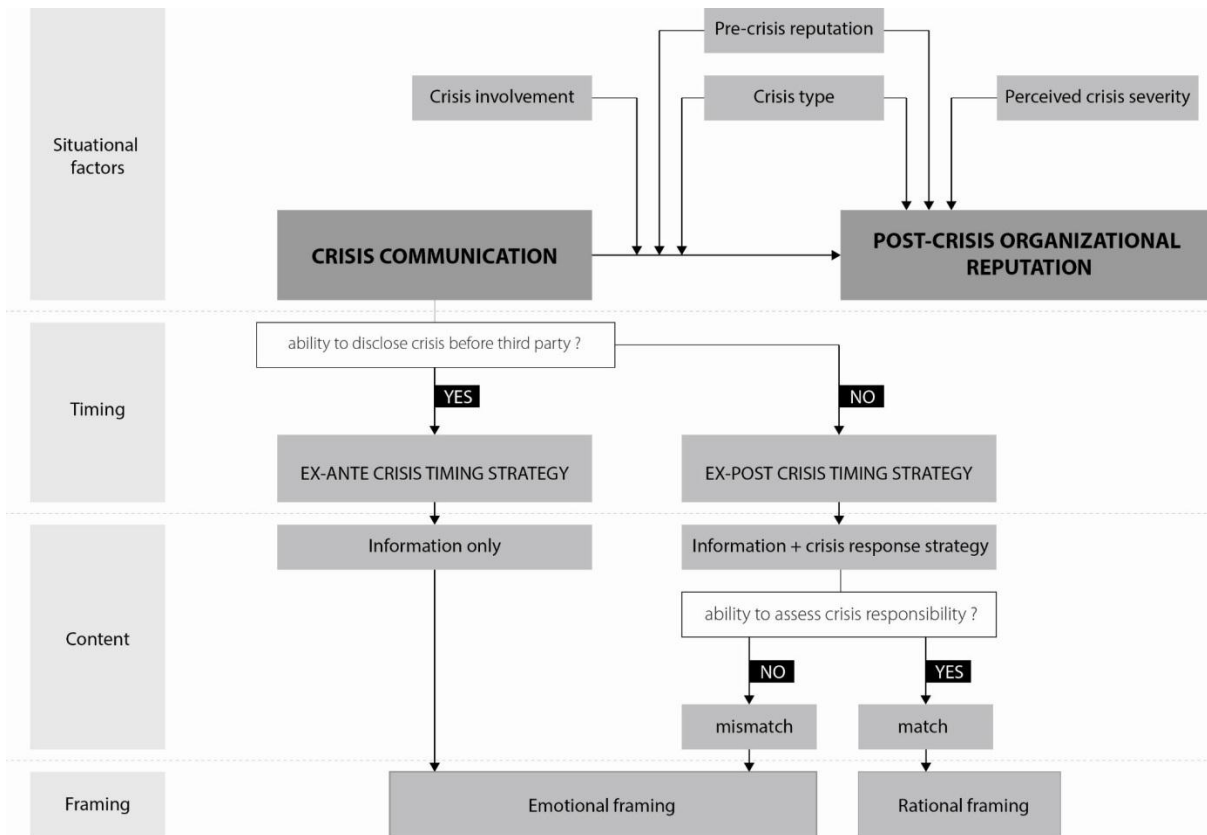


Fig. 2: Findings regarding the appropriate selection of the timing, content and framing of crisis communication

## 2.1 Timing

### *Theoretical contributions*

The first theoretical contribution of this dissertation is that it confirms by means of several studies (chapters four, five and six) that organizations should not only be concerned with the content of their crisis communication but with the timing of information disclosure as well. Numerous studies have stressed the importance of the content of crisis communication (cf. Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Yet little research attention has been paid to the impact of crisis communication timing on organizational reputation (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). This dissertation illustrates that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy minimizes crisis damage compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy. First, self-disclosing a crisis can increase perceptions of credibility and post-crisis reputation (chapters four and six). Second, self-disclosing a crisis can minimize stakeholders' attention for negative publicity and the impact of

that negative publicity on the post-crisis reputation (chapter five). Third, the positive impact of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy in comparison to an ex-post crisis timing strategy in terms of the minimal impact of negative publicity on post-crisis reputation occurs irrespective of stakeholders' crisis involvement (chapter five).

The second theoretical contribution of this dissertation concerning the timing of information disclosure is that it can determine the impact of the content of crisis communication (chapter four). The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) indicates that it is necessary to always add a crisis response strategy to objective information about the events in the case of a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2004). The findings from this dissertation show that this is only needed for an ex-post crisis timing strategy. When an organization applies an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, it can restore its reputation equally well by solely offering objective information about the crisis than by adding the correct crisis response strategy. Consequently, the SCCT should take into account that organizations cannot only afford to omit crisis response strategies from their communication when the crisis is mild. When organizations apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, it also is not necessary to add a reputation restoring crisis response strategy.

A third contribution is that this dissertation adds to our knowledge of the theoretical explanations for the impact of crisis timing strategies (*RQ4*). Research on the content, the crisis response strategies, has started a couple of decades before an interest grew in crisis timing strategies. In this period of time, the study of the content of crisis communication has gone through an evolution from descriptive case study research to more theoretically based experimental studies (cf. Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007a). In addition, the SCCT was developed to offer a theoretical explanation for the impact of the crisis type on the effectiveness of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007a). In contrast, the theoretical explanations for crisis timing strategies have not been adequately tested yet, since the importance of self-disclosure was mainly considered common sense (Coombs, 1999) or best practice (Seeger, 2006) in the past. This dissertation shows how the effects of crisis timing strategies on the post-crisis organizational reputation can be explained theoretically.

While chapter four did not aim to test the disconfirmations of expectations theory as an explanatory mechanism for the effectiveness of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, it offers support for its explanatory value. The interaction between crisis timing and crisis response strategies on post-crisis organizational reputation can be explained by an increase in perceived organizational credibility. This finding is in line with previous research which indicated that news reporters consider public relations practitioners more credible in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy than in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). In addition, stakeholders consider an organization applying an ex-ante crisis timing strategy more credible. This increased credibility can subsequently lead to a lower perceived crisis severity (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Consequently, the findings from this dissertation offer some support that the mere application of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can improve stakeholders' evaluations of an organization due to an increase in credibility compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy.

The main focus was however on the investigation of the explanatory value of commodity theory and the framing hypothesis. Past research on the theoretical explanations behind crisis timing strategies was one-sided in its focus on explanations for the positive impact that the mere use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can have on stakeholders' evaluations of an organization in crisis (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Commodity theory explains how an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can also minimize the impact of negative publicity in the aftermath of a crisis. In addition, this dissertation offers the first investigation in the context of organizational crisis communication on the framing hypothesis according to which an ex-ante crisis timing strategy allows organizations to frame the crisis in the most beneficial manner (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993).

Based on the commodity theory (Brock, 1968) it was expected that when information on a crisis is scarce or difficult to obtain, it becomes more valuable to stakeholders. An ex-post crisis timing strategy reflects scarcity of crisis information, since no information is disclosed by the organization in crisis (Williams et al., 1993). The findings confirm that in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy stakeholders pay more attention to negative publicity expressed by external parties than in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. Moreover, the post-crisis reputation is

affected by that negative publicity under the condition of an ex-post crisis timing strategy but not in the case of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. Crisis involvement can affect the impact of crisis timing strategies on stakeholders' desire to read negative publicity. However, it does not affect the impact of negative publicity on the post-crisis reputation. Stakeholders with low crisis involvement may feel less inclined to read negative publicity in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy. Yet the impact of negative publicity on post-crisis reputation in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy occurs irrespective of the crisis involvement.

Support is also offered for the framing hypothesis as an explanatory mechanism for the benefits related to the use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy (chapter six). The findings confirm the assumption that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy is a useful strategy since it offers organizations the possibility to frame crises in the most beneficial manner (Williams et al., 1993; Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003). In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy the framing hypothesis assumes that message framing is less advantageous since a third party was already given the opportunity to frame the crisis first. Chapter six shows that in the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy emotional message framing does not result in a more positive outcome in terms of reputation than rational message framing. Chapter three offers an indication that under that condition of crisis timing, the impact of message framing may depend on the crisis response strategy. Rational message framing may be useful in the case of a matched crisis response strategy, since it can stimulate stakeholders to evaluate the content of the message more thoroughly (MacInnis, Rao, & Weiss, 2002; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005; McKay-Nesbitt, Manchanda, Smith, & Huhmann, 2011). Emotional message framing may then be useful for a mismatch, since it can draw away the focus from the response strategy.

### *Managerial implications*

Figure two illustrates that whenever organizations are aware that a crisis has hit, they should self-disclose this information before a third party gets the chance to do this. Even though the importance of proactive communication in times of crisis is considered best practice among communication practitioners (Seeger, 2006), organizations often feel reluctant to apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy (Kline, Simunich, & Weber, 2009). However, this study illustrates in several ways how advantageous it can be to self-disclose a crisis. Not only can it make the

organization appear more credible and increase the post-crisis reputation compared to when a third party announces a crisis (chapters four and six), it also releases organizations from the necessity to take explicit responsibility in the case of a preventable crisis (chapter four). Thus, an ex-ante crisis timing strategy offers communication managers an alternative for offering an apology and risking financial liabilities (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). An ex-ante crisis timing strategy could be a solution that offers benefits for the organizational reputation on the one hand, since it is perceived by stakeholders as a responsible action. On the other hand, the ex-ante crisis timing strategy cannot be used against the organization in trial, since no explicit responsibility is taken.

Not only does the mere use of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy increase the reputation of an organization in the eyes of stakeholders (chapters four and six), it is also beneficial since it minimizes the value of negative publicity (chapter five). Stakeholders feel less inclined to pay attention to negative publicity, and this publicity does not result in reputational damage, when an organization applies an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. While stakeholders may also pay little attention to external attacks under the condition of an ex-post crisis timing strategy if their involvement with a crisis is low, that negative publicity can still cause reputational damage under these circumstances. Consequently organizations should beware of using an ex-post crisis timing strategy in the hopes of sweeping a crisis under the carpet. Even the best hidden crises have large chance of surfacing someday (Coombs, 2002). When they do, the organizational reputation suffers damage, irrespective of how involved stakeholders are with a crisis.

Crisis communication practitioners argue that if information about a crisis is not shared openly by the organization, the public is likely to obtain the information from other sources and the organization loses its ability to manage the crisis message (Seeger, 2006). This dissertation clearly confirms that when a third party self-discloses a crisis, the organization loses the chance to frame that crisis in the most beneficial manner (chapter six). Whenever organizations apply an-ex ante crisis timing strategy they do not only minimize reputational damage compared to an ex-post crisis timing strategy, they additionally get the chance to further minimize the reputational harms by means of emotional message framing. In the case of an ex-post crisis timing strategy, emotional message framing does not increase the post-crisis reputation



compared to rational framing. Then, framing should be chosen in function of the crisis response strategy.

## 2.2 Content

### *Theoretical contributions*

This dissertation contributes to the theoretical knowledge on crisis response strategies. It first indicates that diminish crisis response strategies may be the most harmful strategies in terms of post-crisis reputation. While chapter two confirms earlier findings on the impact of crisis response strategies in terms of the benefits of taking full responsibility by means of rebuild crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2008), the findings for the diminish strategy are surprising. Considering the assumption that stakeholders develop a more positive attitude toward the organization if it takes more responsibility, one would expect that the deny strategy results in the lowest post-crisis reputation scores. Since this was not the case in this dissertation, the findings offer some indication that stakeholders may particularly want organizations to take a clear stand in terms of responsibility. Either they take responsibility by means of a rebuild crisis response strategy, or they reject it by means of a deny crisis response strategy.

A second contribution that is illustrated in chapter four is that the importance of applying a crisis response strategy may depend on the timing of information disclosure (*RQ3*). The stress in most research on crisis communication is on the importance of crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Huang, 2006; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Sisco, 2012). Their impact is usually investigated in the context of an ex-post crisis timing strategy condition (Coombs, 2004; Huang, 2006). This study illustrates that it is especially necessary to use crisis response strategies in that condition. Yet, it also shows that the best strategy is to simply apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, under which condition the use of a crisis response strategy is not necessary. This dissertation therefore puts the importance of these crisis response strategies into a broader perspective.

A third contribution of this dissertation is that it puts the importance of matching the crisis response strategy to the crisis type into a broader perspective as well. It therefore expands

knowledge on the matching principle of the SCCT (Coombs, 2007a). Based on the SCCT it was generally accepted that organizations should always match their crisis response strategy to the crisis type if they want to restore their reputation. The second chapter did not find however that a matched crisis response strategy results in a better post-crisis reputation than a mismatched crisis response strategy (*RQ1*). The findings from chapter three strongly indicate that the importance of applying the matching principle depends on stakeholders' crisis involvement and the organizational message framing (*RQ2*). Both elements affect the importance of the content of a message in affecting stakeholder attitudes (MacInnis et al., 2002; McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). It is crucial for organizations in crisis that want to minimize reputational damage to match the crisis response strategy to the crisis type whenever stakeholders' involvement with the crisis is high or the crisis communication is framed rationally (chapter three). A matched or mismatched crisis response strategy does not have a different impact on post-crisis reputation when the involvement is low or the message is framed emotionally. The SCCT should therefore take these moderating conditions into account.

### *Managerial implications*

If organizations are not in the possibility to disclose a crisis before the media or another third party announces it, they apply an ex-post crisis timing strategy to diminish the reputational harms of a crisis (cf. Figure two). When they do this, it is important for them to not only offer objective information about a crisis but also to add a reputation restoring crisis response strategy (chapter four). In general, the crisis response strategy that is most effective for reputation repair is a rebuild crisis response strategy in which the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis (chapter two). Communication managers should take into account that while stakeholders generally prefer that an organization takes its responsibility in times of crisis, in second instance they may want an organization to offer an answer that is clear in terms of taking or rejecting responsibility. The findings illustrate that the worst strategy is the diminish strategy, in which organizations neither take nor reject full responsibility.

When organizations are able to estimate their responsibility for the crisis, they should attempt to use a crisis response strategy that allows them to take that same amount of responsibility. They should match their crisis response strategy to the crisis type. Even though a matched crisis

response strategy does not always result in more reputation repair than a mismatched crisis response strategy, it is generally the safest option (chapters two and three). Moreover, under some conditions a matched crisis response strategy has a more positive impact on post-crisis organizational evaluations than a mismatched crisis response strategy (chapter three). Whenever stakeholders are highly involved with a crisis or the organization frames its communication in a rational manner, a matched crisis response strategy is advantageous. The importance of involvement also implies that communication managers can differentiate between different groups of stakeholders based on their level of involvement with a crisis. That way, they can tailor the content of their communication. Also, practitioners should be aware that the way they frame a message can differentiate the importance of its content.

### 2.3 Framing

#### *Theoretical contributions*

This dissertation offers an important theoretical contribution to the field of crisis communication by introducing an additional type of crisis communication strategy. The general aim of this dissertation was to investigate the impact of crisis communication strategies on post-crisis organizational reputation. The focus was on two types of crisis communication strategies entailing two dimensions of crisis communication: crisis response strategies reflecting the content of crisis communication and crisis timing strategies reflecting the timing of information disclosure. Based on the findings from the third and sixth chapter however, this dissertation introduces a third dimension of crisis communication: message framing.

Even though more research needs to be conducted on this topic, two studies in this dissertation clearly indicate that communication practitioners should be aware of the impact of their message framing as well as the content and timing (chapters three and six). While emotional message framing is often applied in the practice of crisis communication (e.g., Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Kauffman, 2008; Legg, 2009), this dissertation offers proof that it can be more effective in restoring reputation damage than rational message framing. In addition, chapter six offers a first important indication of why emotional framing might be beneficial, namely because

of the increased perceptions of organizational sincerity. Crisis communication therefore entails, at least, three dimensions that can affect the post-crisis reputation: timing, content and framing.

### *Managerial implications*

The findings from this dissertation indicate that after organizations have established the timing of crisis disclosure and the content of the message, they should decide on the best type of message framing (chapters three and six) (cf. Figure two). If an organization was able to apply an ex-ante crisis timing strategy, it should frame the objective information offered in an emotional manner. By doing so, stakeholders will perceive the organization as more sincere and the post-crisis reputation will be less damaged compared to rational message framing. When however an organization needs to apply an ex-post crisis timing strategy, the message framing should be determined based on the content. Ideally, organizations offer a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis type. In that case, they should frame their response in a rational manner so stakeholders are stimulated to scrutinize the content (MacInnis et al., 2002; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005; McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). If the responsibility of the organization is unclear however and organizations are not able to offer a matched crisis response strategy (yet), they should frame the message emotionally. Then stakeholders are not affected differently when the response they receive is a match or a mismatch.

The findings for the impact of message framing should also make practitioners aware of the importance of sincerity for the impact of crisis communication (chapter six). Emotional message framing is beneficial because it makes the organization appear more sincere. Practitioners already acknowledge the importance expressing genuine concern (Seeger, 2006). This dissertation clearly indicates that perceptions of sincerity can be established by communicating emotionally.

## 2.4 Situational factors

### *Theoretical contributions*

The SCCT posits that situational factors play a crucial role in determining the reputational damage on the one hand, and the impact of crisis communication on post-crisis reputation on the

other hand (Coombs, 2007a). This dissertation investigated four situational factors which were found to determine the post-crisis reputation and/or the impact of crisis communication on the post-crisis reputation: crisis type, perceived crisis severity, pre-crisis reputation and crisis involvement (cf. Figure two).

The first situational factor examined by this dissertation was the crisis type. The crisis type is determined by the amount of responsibility stakeholders attribute to an organization in crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This dissertation confirms the assumption from the SCCT (Coombs, 2007a) that the more responsible an organization is considered for a crisis, the more its reputation is likely to suffer (chapter two). It contributes to our theoretical knowledge of these crisis types by illustrating that the crisis type may determine the impact of other situational factors. More specifically, chapter two illustrates that high perceptions of crisis severity may only be detrimental to the post-crisis reputation when an organization is considered at least somewhat responsible for the crisis (accidental or preventable crisis). If the organization is not responsible for the crisis at all, crisis severity does not affect the reputation. Therefore, this dissertation shows that the crisis type does not only have a direct impact on the post-crisis reputation (cf. Coombs, 2007a), but that it can also determine the impact of other situational factors.

A second contribution of this dissertation is that it offers a clear view on how the impact of pre-crisis reputation on reputation loss, the so called halo effect (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006), operates (*RQ 5*). A favorable pre-crisis reputation can protect an organization from reputational harms because the organization will be considered less responsible for the crisis (chapter seven). In addition to offering an explanation for the halo effect of a favorable pre-crisis reputation on crisis damage, this dissertation contributes because the effect was tested in a clean manner. While prior studies examined the halo effect of pre-crisis organizational reputation on crisis damage by measuring the impact on post-crisis attitude (Griffin, Babin, & Attaway, 1991) or post-crisis reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2001), this study examined the reputation loss. That way it was possible to establish not just whether an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation still has a better reputation than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis

reputation after the crisis, but whether an organization with a favorable pre-crisis reputation suffers less reputation loss than an organization with an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation.

A third contribution is that this dissertation adds to our knowledge of the intensifying factors as proposed by the SCCT. These factors, such as crisis severity and pre-crisis reputation, are characteristics of the crisis other than the crisis type which can intensify the crisis damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007a). As indicated, the findings show that crisis severity may only intensify the reputational damage when the organization is attributed a basic amount of responsibility based on the crisis type. The findings also confirm the proposition of the SCCT that an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation can operate as an intensifying factor (Coombs, 2007a). While chapter six shows that an ex-ante crisis timing strategy can minimize the impact of an external attack in the aftermath of a crisis, chapter seven indicates that this is not the case if an organization has an unfavorable pre-crisis reputation.

A fourth and last contribution in terms of the situational factors is that this dissertation adds a new factor: crisis involvement. Literature on crisis communication has stressed the importance of stakeholders' crisis involvement on stakeholders' evaluation of crises and crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Choi & Lin, 2009). The findings from this dissertation confirm this presumption and show how involvement affects the impact of crisis communication. These findings can be explained by the fact that individuals with high involvement pay more attention to the content of messages than those with low involvement (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; MacInnis et al., 2002). Based on these results it may be valuable to incorporate crisis involvement into the SCCT as a situational factor.

### *Managerial implications*

In order to determine the right crisis communication strategy, organizations should first estimate the crisis situation. The crisis situation first allows organizations to establish the potential crisis damage. When organizations are to blame for what happened, when the crisis is considered to be highly severe and/or when the organization did not have a good reputation to begin with, the reputation will suffer much reputational damage. Second, organizations need to assess the crisis situation in order to determine their crisis communication. The crisis response strategy should be

adapted to the crisis type. Especially when stakeholders are highly involved with the crisis, because then they will thoroughly evaluate the content of the response (Petty et al., 1983; MacInnis et al., 2002).

Finally, the findings for the pre-crisis organizational reputation illustrate that communication practitioners should not only consider which crisis communication strategies to apply in terms of timing, content and framing, they should attempt to keep a favorable reputation throughout their lifecycle. While crisis communication strategies play an important role in recovering from a crisis, a favorable pre-crisis reputation can help reduce crisis damage.

## 2.5 Ethical considerations

While the focus of this dissertation is on the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies in minimizing organizational reputational damage, it is important for both theorists and practitioners to take some ethical considerations into regard. The results of this dissertation may appear to indicate that organizations can avoid taking responsibility whenever stakeholders' involvement with a crisis is low or when they frame their communication emotionally. However, no organization should evade responsibility when it knows it is at fault. The findings from chapter three may be used by practitioners at the beginning of a crisis, when the causes and responsibility are still unclear. However, it is ethical to take full responsibility for the crisis from the moment that responsibility is established (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). The risk of abuse is inherent in crisis management literature since some of the findings that are beneficial to the organizational reputation may disadvantage stakeholders. Yet *“ultimately, the ethicality lies in the individuals using the crisis management principles, not in the principles themselves”* (Coombs, 2002, p. 344).

An important conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this dissertation however is that, in general, organizations in crisis restore their reputation best by communicating in the most responsible way. Overall, the results indicate that the most ethical communication strategy results in the most positive post-crisis reputation. Chapter two suggests that in terms of crisis response strategies, organizations should take full responsibility by means of rebuild strategies in

order to best restore their reputation. Chapters four, five and six offer support for the effectiveness of organizational self-disclosure by means of an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. Chapter six additionally illustrates the importance of organizational sincerity. Besides communicating ethically during a crisis, it is also important for organizations to behave ethically and responsibly throughout their activities. The last study shows that it is crucial for organizations to maintain a favorable reputation at all times. Consequently, the overall results from this dissertation illustrate to communication practitioners that “*ethical and effective should not be mutually exclusive terms*” (Hobbs, 1995, p. 343).

### **3 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

In spite of the contributions for both theory and practice, there are some limitations within this dissertation. Each of the limitations will be discussed, followed by the resulting propositions for further research. In addition, some new avenues for future studies on crisis communication are suggested.

The *first limitation* involves the manipulation of the crisis type. All chapters involved private organizations. In addition, all chapters besides the second one involved preventable crises. All organizations described in the scenarios were private companies. To our knowledge there is no literature to argue that the impact of a crisis or of crisis communication strategies differs between public or private organizations. Also, both types of organizations fear reputational loss from crises (Coombs, 2002; Watson, 2007). However, since both types of organization serve different purposes, stakeholders may have different expectations from them and consequently respond differently when they are confronted with a crisis. Further research should therefore investigate if there is a difference between both. Nonetheless, the organizations described in the scenarios were very diverse, which is beneficial for the generalizability of the results. The organizations used for these studies were an organization that produces juices (chapter two), an organization in charge of water treatment installations (chapter three), a producer of computer hardware (chapter four), a soap company and a vegetable distributor (chapter five), a dance club (chapter six) and a warehouse (chapter seven).



Also, apart from the second chapter, all crisis scenarios involved a preventable crisis type. The studies focused on preventable crises since this is the crisis type that results in the most reputational loss and for which it is most urgent to apply a crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2004; Coombs 2007a). Further research may however try to corroborate the results from chapters three and four by means of different crisis types. Chapter three compares a matched crisis response strategy to a mismatched crisis response strategy and chapter four compares a matched crisis response strategy to objective information only. Future studies may replicate the findings from these studies with different crisis types and crisis response strategies. In addition to the crisis type in terms of attributed responsibility, crises can also differ based on their consequences (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Some of the crises described in this dissertation explain how stakeholders were hurt due to the actions of the organization (chapters two, three, five and six). Other scenarios involved fraud crises that did not harm customers directly (chapters four and seven). Future research should investigate if the impact of a crisis in terms of reputation differs based on this differentiation.

A *second limitation* is the measurement of reputation. All chapters besides chapter seven described a scenario with a fictitious organization in order to rule out the confounding effects of prior reputation (Laufer & Jung, 2010). However, the use of fictitious organizations entails a difficulty to accurately measure stakeholders' evaluation of the organizational post-crisis reputation. Reputation is a multidimensional construct (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). Even if the measurement contains all those dimensions, it is still hard to measure the actual reputation. Namely because reputation develops over time and is constantly renegotiated (Fombrun et al., 2000) and the participants were only exposed to the organization once. In order to answer this predicament, further research may try to study the effects of crisis communication in a more natural setting. Survey research may also be helpful in this respect.

A *third limitation* involves the manipulation of emotional framing in the third and sixth chapter of this dissertation. The emotion that was manipulated in these studies was sadness, which makes sense in the context of a crisis. In addition, case studies describing emotional crisis communication often involve the expression of sadness (e.g., Benoit & Brinson, 1999;

Kauffman, 2008). However, organizations have been found to express anger as well (Jin, Park, & Len-Rios, 2010). Also, when organizations express sadness stakeholders may consider this an admission of guilt. They might think that the organization feels guilty. In addition to negative emotions, research should explore the impact of message framing by means of positive emotions as well. When David Letterman, an American talkshow host, was confronted with an extortion attempt by a man who threatened to expose his affair with several female employees (Wigley, 2011) he applied an ex-ante crisis timing strategy. He chose to disclose his story in a humoristic manner. Further research might investigate under which conditions organizations in crisis could apply humor in their message framing. Crisis type or severity can be investigated as a moderating variable within this respect.

A *fourth limitation* might be that sincerity was only taken into regard for the study of organizational message framing. Chapter six suggested that sincerity may be an important element in determining the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies. Further research should investigate if sincerity is also crucial for the impact of crisis response and crisis timing strategies on post-crisis reputation. Research in social psychology indicates the importance of sincerity in attempts to be forgiven for misdeeds (McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997; Davis & Gold, 2011). Research could investigate if it is necessary for a rebuild strategy to be considered sincere. Also, research should investigate the potential backfiring effect when crisis communication is considered insincere. Because while this dissertation concludes that emotional message framing can be beneficial, this advantage is entirely due to the fact that it increases perceived sincerity. When an emotional response is not considered sincere, when it is only applied for strategic reasons, it might backfire.

A *fifth limitation* that applies to all the studies in the dissertation is that all of the respondents were Dutch-speaking Belgians. Even though the results correspond to theory and to previous research in other countries, cultural differences can have an impact in the context of crisis communication. Research shows that cultural differences determine not only the way in which stakeholders perceive crises and crisis communication, but the way in which an organization communicates as well (Taylor, 2000; Gaither & Curtin, 2008). When Belgian school children became ill after drinking Coca Cola in 1999, several European countries in which Coca Cola was

active, responded in highly different ways (Taylor, 2000). In addition, Coca Cola communicated in a way that resulted from its own cultural (American) context. However this global response of Coca-Cola in several countries was not suited for all consumer markets. Another example illustrates that cultural differences cannot only impact the efficacy of certain crisis response strategies, but stakeholders' perception of crises as well. When a Danish newspaper published cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims were angered because Islam prohibits the publication of images of the prophet and because the images were considered offensive (Gaither & Curtin, 2008). As a consequence, some countries declared a boycott on all Danish goods. These countries perceived the crisis entirely different than the Danish consumers did.

The impact of cultural differences on perceptions of crises and crisis communication is also reflected in a case study on former President of the United States, Bill Clinton, and Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi. Both politicians were involved in highly publicized sex-scandals during their mandate and responded to these crises very differently (Garcia, 2011). Nonetheless, both managed to survive their crisis since each of them offered crisis communication which was suited in their cultural contexts. These examples illustrate that people from different cultures perceive crises and crisis communication differently. Therefore, more cross cultural research is needed in the field of crisis communication. This way, international organizations can estimate how they should communicate to different consumer markets based on the cultural perceptions of stakeholders.

Besides the suggestions for further research resulting from the limitations to this dissertation, some **other relevant proposals** can be made **for future studies on crisis communication**. A first direction for further research involves a focus on *the impact of (social) media during crises*. Some of the past studies in this area focus on the difference in the way traditional and social media cover crises (e.g., Liu, 2010). Liu (2010) for instance found that external blog posts cover organizational crises in a more subjective manner than online newspaper articles. In addition, blogs are more likely than online newspapers to frame stories in a negative tone. Other studies have started to investigate the potential advantages for organizations in crisis of including the corporate website in organizational crisis communication. Taylor and Kent (2007) argue that organizations can benefit from making use of their website for crisis communication, since it is a

medium they can control themselves. Consequently, communication through the organizational website allows companies to disperse their message without media filters.

Research also indicates the advantages of communicating about a crisis by means of organizational blogs. When stakeholders read organizational blogs they report lower crisis perceptions than when they do not (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). However, some organizations still seem reluctant to using the internet for their crisis communication. About half of the organizations in crisis use the internet (Taylor and Perry, 2005). Those organizations that use the internet tend to use traditional communication techniques (e.g., press release on corporate website). Contrary to what was expected, the implementation of the internet into crisis communication does not appear to augment. Further research on the impact of media during crises is therefore needed in order to make communication managers aware of its possible effects.

The upcoming research on social media also instigated a research stream focused on channel effects in general. Schultz, Utz and Göritz (2011) investigated the impact of traditional versus social-media for communicating crisis responses. They concluded that the medium may be more important than the message (i.e., crisis response strategy). The authors found an effect of medium on organizational reputation but not of crisis response strategy. While stakeholders tend to talk more about newspaper articles, tweets may have a more positive effect on their reactions. These results contradict earlier findings from Coombs and Holladay (2009) which suggest that the type of medium, print media versus video, does not affect the impact of crisis response strategies. Further research should investigate for instance if emotional message framing may be more effective through social media then through traditional media. Since these social media allow for a quicker and more spontaneous response, the emotionally framed response may seem even more sincere under this condition.

A second suggestion for further research is *the impact of nonverbal communication during crises*. Experimental research on crisis response strategies has almost exclusively relied on print media for the crisis response stimuli (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). We live in an increasingly visual culture however and video messages have the ability to deliver not only verbal cues, but

nonverbal cues as well. Studies on nonverbal communication suggest that crisis communication research should study the impact of nonverbal crisis communication besides focusing solely on the verbal aspect (i.e., crisis response strategies). Past research on crisis communication found for instance that the appearance of a spokesperson affects stakeholders' organizational evaluations during crisis situations (Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008). Research on political crisis communication found that the sex of a politician in crisis can have an impact on public evaluations (Smith, Smith Powers, & Suarez, 2005).

An important form of nonverbal communication, which has not been studied in the context of crisis communication yet however, are nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, facial expression and body posture (Aguinis & Henle, 2001). Stakeholders may rely on these behaviors when evaluating the crisis communication of an organizational spokesperson. Because when people are in situations in which they could potentially be deceived, they are likely to use nonverbal behaviors as a mental shortcut to help evaluate the credibility of a message (Burgoon, Blair, & Strom, 2008). People are generally inclined to trust the communication of others, except when the nonverbal communication can be considered deceptive (e.g., gaze aversion, posture shifting). Future research could investigate by means of mock video interviews with organizational spokespeople how nonverbal behavior impacts stakeholders' evaluations of a crisis and the organization.

A study could for instance examine if nonverbal behavior that can be considered as either deceptive or non-deceptive, impacts the efficacy of crisis response strategies. Rebuild strategies may be more likely be considered insincere when a spokesperson expresses deceptive nonverbal behaviors while deny strategies may have more chance of being accepted if the nonverbal behavior appears truthful. The perceived deceptiveness of nonverbal behavior might also affect the efficacy of attempts to "dodge" a question. Previous research has shown that stakeholders do not seem to notice when a spokesperson tries to dodge a tricky question by replying in a way that does not offer a sufficient answer to that question (Rogers & Norton, 2011). However, when the nonverbal behavior of that spokesperson appears deceptive, stakeholders may play closer attention and notice that the spokesperson is avoiding the actual question. Another study may investigate if expressions of nonverbal communications should fit the verbal communication

strategies (i.e., crisis response strategies) in order for those strategies to be effective. Because research suggests that the effectiveness of a communication strategy increases when the verbal strategy is combined with a congruent nonverbal style (Fennis & Stel, 2011).

A third suggestion for further research is to investigate *the impact of crisis communication on other stakeholder groups*. This dissertation, like most studies on crisis communication strategies, focuses on consumers. However, shareholders, employees, governments and communities are also affected by an organization's actions (Mitchell, Angle, & Wood, 1997; Agle, Mitchell, & Sonnenfeld, 1999). Therefore these can also be important stakeholder groups to consider for crisis communication. Organizations may need to adapt their communication to each stakeholder group. The interests of shareholders and crisis victims may for instance conflict (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Shareholders may react negatively when organizations open themselves up to litigation by offering an explicit apology. Organizations should also know what the best way is to communicate to journalists (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Usually, consumers are informed about crises through news media, which have the ability to determine the perceptions of organizational responsibility (Coombs, 2007a). It is therefore important for organizations in crisis to communicate effectively towards journalists as well.

A fourth suggestion is to investigate *the impact of crisis communication strategies in different crisis stages*. This study focused on a specific moment during the development of a crisis. The study focused on the crisis event (Coombs, 2007c), and more specifically on the end of this phase. All scenarios described the moment in which the organization was still in crisis, but the negative event causing the crisis had already passed. At that moment, organizations do not need to offer instructing or adjusting information anymore, but the focus is already on reputation restoring strategies. Some crisis communication strategies may be interpreted differently earlier on in the crisis life cycle. When the negative event has not passed, stakeholders may for instance need spokespeople to rational instead of emotional. They may desire an organization that appears 'in control' rather than sincere. If a widely sold food product is contaminated and a recall needs to be initiated, communicating emotionally may be detrimental. In addition, research could investigate if stakeholders respond negatively to the use of reputation restoring crisis response strategies in that stage of the crisis. Even if a rebuild

strategy matches the crisis type, when a recall is urgent stakeholders may not appreciate that the organization is addressing reputational concerns.

A final suggestion for further research involves *corporate advertising*. Corporate advertising serves to build a positive image for organizations (Pashupati, Arpan, & Nikolaev, 2002). This specific type of advertising since long is a preferred tool of communication managers during crises because it is a medium which can be controlled by the organization (Kinnick, 2003). Organizations are also known to apply corporate advertising in attempts to inoculate stakeholders' positive evaluation of an organization against the negative impact of a crisis (Pashupati, et al., 2002). Advertisements guarantee organizations that they can decide the content, placement and timing of a crisis response. Further research may study if the impact of crisis communication strategies differs when it is offered in the form of advertising instead of through forms of publicity.

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