Crisis History Tellers Matter: The Effects of Crisis History and Crisis Information Source on Publics' Cognitive and Affective Responses to Organizational Crisis

LaShonda L. Eaddy, MA, APR, Doctoral Student, University of Georgia ~ lashonda.eaddy25@uga.edu
Yan Jin, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Georgia ~ yanjin@uga.edu

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to bridge the literature gap regarding the impact of crisis history and information source on publics' crisis emotions, their perception of crisis responsibility, personal control and organizational reputation. The results of this study provide valuable insight for crisis communicators who may be challenged to prioritize crisis communications efforts to various publics.

Background

Theoretical Background

SCCT posits that the public attributes more or less crisis responsibility depending on the nature of the crisis. Furthermore, the theory suggests that other factors such as performance history and crisis stability can intensify attribution of responsibility.(Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Currently, there is a gap in crisis communication literature regarding the impact of performance history, which includes crisis history and relationship history. Crisis history refers to crises that organizations have experienced in the past. There is also literature that suggests the source of information can impact how people accept the information and use it. (Hovland and Weiss (1951))showed that communication sources that were perceived as credible were more effective in changing respondents' opinions. Additionally, Jin and Pang (2010) alluded to the fact that much of crisis communication scholarship has not widely explored how publics' emotion experiences during crises impact how they process crisis information, behave and assess crisis communication effectiveness, which could be jointly affected by crisis history and crisis information source .

Method and Sample

The present study used a 3 (crisis history: no mention vs. positive mention vs. negative mention) x 3 (information source: peer vs. media vs. organization) between-subjects experiment. The 174 participants for this study were undergraduate students from the Southeastern United States. The undergraduate students were enrolled in communication courses and recruited from a university research pool.

Stimulus
Respondents were randomly assigned one of nine crisis scenarios regarding a shooting at a university sporting event.

Dependent Measures
Crisis emotions. The questionnaire asked participants to rate how likely what happened in the story made them feel. The scale items ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely). (Jin, 2010)

Crisis control. The question asked participants to rate their level of agreement with statements such as: "The cause of the crisis was something {the university} could control. " The scale items ranged from 1(strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The personal control scale in the present study had a Cronbach's alpha of .744. (Coombs and Holladay, 2002)

Crisis responsibility. The measure asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: "Circumstances, not {the university}, are responsible for the crisis. "The scale items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The crisis responsibility scale in the present study had a Cronbach's alpha of .766. (Coombs and Holladay, 2002)

Organizational reputation. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: "{The university} puts student care as the top priority." The scale items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Participants completed this measure before and after reading the crisis scenario. The organizational reputation scale in the present study had a Cronbach's alpha of .821. (Turk et al., 2012) Coombs and Holladay's (2002) organizational reputation measure was used also. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: "{The university} is concerned with the well-being of its publics (students, fans, and community)." The scale items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The organizational reputation scale in the present study had a Cronbach's alpha of .750.

Research Questions

Crisis History 1.1-1.4

RQ1.1: How, if any, does crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) affect publics' perception of the organization's control over the crisis?
Result: Participants were more likely to perceive the organization as having more control over the crisis if there was a positive

Source 2.1-2.4

RQ2.1: How, if any, does crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) affect publics' perception of the organization's control over the crisis?
Result: Participants were more likely to perceive the organization as having more control over the crisis if the source was the media or organizationversus peer.
RQ2.4: How, if any, does crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) affect publics' crisis emotions?
Result: When the media was the source of the information participants felt more anger than when the source was organization or peer.

Crisis History and Source Interaction 3.1-3.4

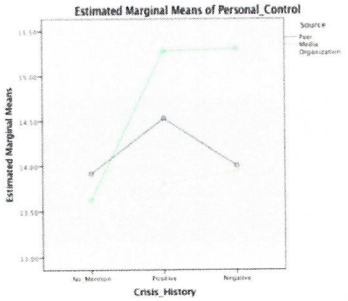
RQ3.1: How, if any, do crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) and crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) jointly affect publics' perception of the organization's control over the crisis?
Result: A negative mention of the university's crisis history by the media led to the highest perceived organizational control among participants.

RQ3.4: How, if any, do crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) and crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) jointly affect publics' crisis emotions?
Result: Participants tended to feel the most anger if there was a negative crisis history reference from the media

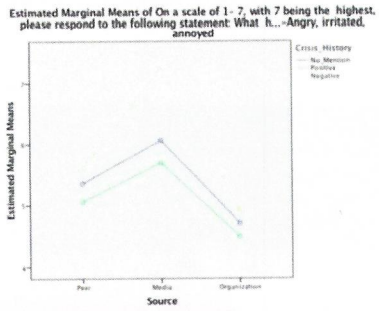
CONCLUSION: The media may not be the most desirable crisis history information source.

INTERACTION EFFECTS

Interaction Effects of Crisis History and Source on Organizational Control



Interaction Effects of Crisis History and Source on Anger



Crisis History Valence

If your organization has had a previous similar crisis that was handled positively or negatively, the public may perceive that you have more control over the event. Therefore, perhaps the crisis response and strategy should be developed with this consideration.

Key Takeaways for Crisis Communicators

1 Source Impact

Respondents expressed more anger when the media was the crisis information source, also supporting the idea of identifying and employing different channels for information dissemination.

2 Source Impact

...crisis information. Respondents perceived less organizational ...ontrol when receiving the crisis ...rmation from a peer. Therefore, crisis communicators may need to look for additional ways to disseminate crisis information so that the public is more likely to

Crisis History Valence & Source Impact

If your organization has not handled crises well in the past, perhaps you should focus on alternative media channels during crises or proactively informing key media of the improvements your organization is making in case another crisis occurs.

Crisis communicators who are concerned with the public anger towards their organizations are posed with two options:

- Focus heavily on the media strategy since they are most likely to illicit anger among the public.
- Forgo traditional media relations and focus more on new media to reach other gatekeepers who can relay information.

Closing Thoughts

Organizations in crisis that have experienced similar crises in the past must be prepared to employ crisis response strategies that relate to organizational control regardless of the crisis history valence. Counter-intuitively, organizations with a positive crisis history do not necessarily benefit from a halo effect, but must also be prepared to respond to higher perceptions of organizational control in spite of handling similar past crises well.

For paper and references: lashonda.eaddy25@uga.edu

Grady College
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA