

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF CORPORATE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT: This study conducts a conceptual analysis to examine the role of public relations (PR) in crisis communication and corporate reputation management. The approach involves a conceptual synthesis of key crisis communication theories with illustrative corporate cases to analyze effective response strategies. It explores prominent theoretical frameworks, specifically Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Repair Theory, and Excellence Theory, to provide insights into how organizations can mitigate reputational damage. This paper's original contribution lies in demonstrating how the integration of these theories offers a more robust explanatory model for reputation recovery, particularly in the context of modern, social-media-driven crises. The analysis of well-known corporate responses illustrates best practices for managing crises and protecting organizational value. This study concludes with theoretical and practical implications for PR practitioners seeking to enhance organizational resilience.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Public Relations, Corporate Reputation, Stakeholder Engagement, Crisis Management

INTRODUCTION

In today's hyper-connected and volatile business environment, the significance of corporate reputation has reached unprecedented heights. With information flowing instantly across digital platforms, organizations are becoming vulnerable to public scrutiny, making consumer and stakeholder trust fragile (Hartiana, 2024). A strong reputation not only differentiates a brand but also serves as a critical protective shield during crises (Hartiana, 2024).

A crisis is defined as an event in which an organization is perceived as having failed to meet key stakeholder expectations, resulting in negative outcomes, including operational disruptions and severe reputational harm (Bataille & Cordova, 2023). Crisis communication emerges as a strategic function within public relations (PR), intrinsically linked to PR's broader objective of maintaining and enhancing an organization's public image (Asemah, 2024). PR professionals are pivotal in shaping the narrative, ensuring communication is clear, consistent, and ultimately helps to rebuild trust among affected publics (Claeys & Coombs, 2020).

The existing literature provides robust frameworks for understanding crisis communication, including Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory. However, a gap remains in the comprehensive conceptual synthesis of these models, particularly concerning

their joint explanatory power when integrated with foundational concepts like Excellence Theory and Stakeholder Theory in the modern context of digital immediacy. Furthermore, many analyses of illustrative corporate crises, such as the Johnson & Johnson Tylenol crisis, often focus on event retelling rather than deep theoretical interpretation of the strategic PR decisions made.

This paper, therefore, addresses this gap by pursuing the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical and theoretical foundations of public relations' role in crisis communication,
2. To synthesize and comparatively analyze the strategic guidance offered by SCCT, Image Repair Theory, and Excellence Theory for reputation recovery;
3. To interpret classic and modern corporate crises through the integrated lens of these theories to identify best practices.

By conceptually analyzing these established frameworks and interpreting their application in contemporary social media-driven crises, this study provides a novel and holistic model for PR strategy. It is particularly relevant for practitioners in a situation where the speed of information and demands for transparency necessitate sophisticated, theoretically grounded, and preemptive communication planning.

The effective management and subsequent recovery of corporate reputation during a crisis requires a strategic integration of post-crisis response strategies (SCCT and Image Repair Theory) with pre-crisis relational foundations and ethical imperatives (Excellence Theory and Stakeholder Theory).

Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

This section analyzes the key theoretical perspectives relevant to crisis communication and reputation management, moving beyond mere description to establish the interconnectedness of these frameworks.

Classical Crisis Communication Theories

1. **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT):** Propounded by W. Timothy Coombs (2007), SCCT is an explanatory framework suggesting that crisis managers should match strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat posed by a crisis. The theory classifies crises based on responsibility attribution (victim, accidental, or preventable) and offers response strategies categorized into three main clusters: Deny (e.g., attacking the accuser), Diminish (e.g., excusing or justifying), and Rebuild (e.g., compensation or apology). Crucially, the theory emphasizes that the organization's crisis history and prior relational reputation influence stakeholder attribution and, consequently, the effectiveness of the chosen response (Coombs, 2017).
2. **Image Repair Theory:** Developed by William Benoit (1995), this theory is a rhetorical framework focusing on how organizations and individuals can respond to and repair their damaged reputation. Benoit (1997) identifies five primary defensive strategies used in response to reputational harm: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness

(e.g., bolstering), corrective action, and mortification (apology). While Image Repair focuses heavily on the post-crisis messaging content, its strategies often align with SCCT's response clusters, providing a valuable rhetorical toolbox for enacting the chosen SCCT strategy.

Reputation Management Frameworks

1. **Excellence Theory:** Developed by James E. Grunig and colleagues (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992), Excellence Theory posits that public relations achieves its greatest value when it practices the two-way symmetrical model of communication. This model emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and balance between the organization and its stakeholders. The theory posits that organizations that establish strong, trusting, and symmetrical relationships prior to a crisis are significantly more resilient and better equipped to weather reputational storms (Grunig, 2013). Excellence theory provides the essential relational context that dictates the success of tactical responses prescribed by SCCT and Image Repair Theory.
2. **Stakeholder Theory:** A foundational management concept articulated by Freeman (1984), Stakeholder Theory asserts that an organization must create value for all its stakeholders, not just shareholders. In a crisis, this means PR efforts must prioritize the concerns of all groups, including employees, customers, the community, and others who can affect or are affected by the organization's achievement of its objectives. Sturges (1994) emphasizes that effective crisis communication necessitates a nuanced understanding of stakeholder dynamics, prioritizing the needs of those most directly affected by the crisis while maintaining transparency and accountability to all relevant groups.

Modern Context: Digital Crisis Communication

The evolution of media from print to digital and social media has significantly transformed crisis communication (Sheehan & Quinn-Allan, 2015). The immediacy of platforms like Twitter and Facebook means that organizations must continuously monitor public sentiment and engage directly to mitigate misinformation and negative narratives (Veil et al., 2011). The challenge lies in the rapid, global spread of information, often outpacing official communications, necessitating swift, transparent, and authentic responses (Muhammad et al., 2022). This environment amplifies the need for the pre-crisis relationship building advocated by Excellence Theory.

Gaps in the Literature

The existing literature clearly establishes the components of effective crisis communication: strategic response (SCCT), rhetorical content (Image Repair), and relational foundation (Excellence/Stakeholder Theory). However, the literature often treats these as distinct theories. This study identifies a need for a conceptual model that articulates their integrated function. The subsequent analysis will demonstrate that post-crisis efforts (SCCT/Image Repair) are significantly moderated by the quality of pre-crisis relationships and ethical stance (Excellence/Stakeholder Theory).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual review and thematic synthesis approach, which is non-empirical and focused on the scholarly interpretation and integration of established theories and documented illustrative cases.

The primary method is conceptual review, which involves systematically examining, summarizing, and synthesizing existing literature to create a new framework or understanding. This study is non-empirical as it does not involve primary data collection (e.g., surveys, interviews, or content analysis of original crisis communication texts). The rationale for this approach is to provide a deeper, analytical understanding of the theoretical mechanisms underpinning successful and unsuccessful crisis responses, thereby establishing a robust conceptual model for PR practitioners.

This review drew on seminal and contemporary peer-reviewed literature and high-quality secondary analyses concerning:

1. **Crisis Communication Theories:** SCCT (Coombs), Image Repair Theory (Benoit), and Excellence Theory (Grunig).
2. Reputation Management and Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, Sturges).
3. Digital/Social Media Crisis Communication (post-2011 studies).

Inclusion criteria for theoretical literature focused on texts published in leading communication, management, and public relations journals and books. This study ensured credibility by relying almost exclusively on peer-reviewed sources and triangulating theoretical principles across multiple authors.

Three classic and widely documented corporate crises were selected as illustrative cases for comparative analysis:

1. **The Johnson & Johnson Tylenol Crisis (1982):** Selected as the quintessential best practice example, representing a victim crisis requiring maximum rebuild strategy.
2. **The BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill (2010):** Selected as a clear example of unsuccessful communication in a major preventable crisis.
3. **The United Airlines Passenger Dragging Incident (2017):** Selected as a contemporary example illustrating the challenges of social-media-driven crises and poor initial response.

These cases were chosen not for formal case study rigor but because they are richly documented in secondary scholarly literature, allowing for focused comparative analysis of the theoretical predictions versus the observed outcomes.

The analysis of the literature and the interpretation of the illustrative cases followed a process of thematic synthesis. This involved: (1) identifying the core themes/principles within the integrated theoretical framework (e.g., attribution of responsibility, preemptive relationship quality, strategic message selection); (2) examining the secondary scholarly accounts of the three cases to identify

corresponding communication actions and outcomes; and (3) drawing explicit connections between the observed actions/outcomes and the predictions of the combined theoretical model.

RESULTS

PR Strategy and Reputation Management

The analysis moves beyond a simple retelling of events to interpret the strategic implications of the three illustrative cases through the integrated lens of SCCT, Image Repair Theory, and Excellence Theory.

Theme 1: The Criticality of Pre-Crisis Relational Capital (Excellence Theory)

The success or failure of a crisis response is often determined before the crisis occurs, as predicted by Excellence Theory and Stakeholder Theory.

Table 1: *Analysis of Case Studies*

Case Study	Crisis Type (SCCT)	Pre-Crisis Reputation/Relationship (Excellence)	Theoretical Outcome
Tylenol (1982)	Victim Crisis (Low Responsibility)	High: Strong history of customer focus and ethical conduct.	Success: Existing goodwill provided necessary credibility for a "Rebuild" strategy (compensation, apology).
BP Oil Spill (2010)	Preventable Crisis (High Responsibility)	Low: History of safety violations and perceived environmental negligence.	Failure: Lack of pre-crisis goodwill made a "Diminish" strategy (downplaying severity) appear defensive and amplified public outrage.
United Airlines (2017)	Preventable Crisis (High Responsibility)	Low: Long history of poor customer service perception.	Failure: Initial dismissive response (Denial/Evasion) was magnified by low existing trust, causing reputational freefall.

In the Tylenol crisis, Johnson & Johnson's immediate, proactive, and transparent communication (Asemah, 2024) aligned with a maximum "Rebuild" strategy (Coombs, 2017). This response was credible due to the company's strong, ethical reputation, which has been built over time—a classic dividend of the two-way symmetrical communication advocated by Excellence Theory. Conversely, both BP and United Airlines entered their crises with weak relational capital. BP's attempts to downplay the disaster (Diminish strategy/Evasion of Responsibility) were met with

extreme skepticism, validating the theoretical principle that a weak pre-crisis relationship severely hinders the effectiveness of any crisis response.

Theme 2: Strategic Alignment of Response and Responsibility (SCCT & Image Repair)

The choice of post-crisis communication strategy must be strategically aligned with the organization's perceived level of responsibility, as prescribed by SCCT. In the Tylenol crisis (a victim crisis), the decision to quickly recall all products nationally and communicate openly was a powerful demonstration of corrective action and mortification (Benoit, 1997). This action perfectly matched the low-responsibility/high-concern scenario, allowing the company to assume a victim role itself (of product tampering) and swiftly repair the shattered trust.

The initial response of United Airlines to the passenger dragging incident was a poor strategic alignment. The CEO's initial statement, which defended employees and blamed the passenger, was an attempt at denial/evasion of responsibility (Benoit, 1997) in what was clearly a high-responsibility, preventable crisis (Utarindah et al., 2024). This misaligned approach fueled the crisis and necessitated a more robust, delayed, and costly remediation strategy to initiate reputation repair.

BP's response suffered from a similar misalignment. Its PR strategy was perceived as defensive and focused on damage control, a diminishing strategy that failed to meet the public's demand for accountability commensurate with the crisis's severity. This defensive posture contradicted the demands of Stakeholder Theory for dialogue and transparency, resulting in a significant and sustained decline in corporate reputation.

Theme 3: Stakeholder Responsiveness and Transparency (Stakeholder Theory)

Effective reputation management during a crisis requires PR professionals to engage with diverse and often competing stakeholder interests actively, prioritizing the needs of those most affected (Sturges, 1994). Johnson & Johnson's success lay in its immediate prioritization of public safety (the ultimate stakeholder need) over short-term financial interests. By communicating transparently and swiftly, they addressed the concerns of consumers, regulators, and the media simultaneously.

In contrast, United Airlines' initial focus on its internal operating procedures and employee defense was seen as prioritizing organizational self-interest over customer well-being. This failure to demonstrate empathy and transparency with its core stakeholders (customers and the broader public) escalated the crisis, illustrating the risk of ignoring Stakeholder Theory principles in the pursuit of narrative control.

These cases collectively demonstrate that reputation repair is an integrated process: pre-crisis goodwill (Excellence) determines the initial credibility, the response strategy (SCCT/Image Repair) must align with the perceived responsibility, and a genuine commitment to transparent, empathetic stakeholder engagement must underpin all efforts.

Conclusion

This conceptual review and thematic analysis confirm the integral role of public relations in managing and recovering from organizational crises. The primary analytical finding is that reputation recovery is not the result of a single tactical response but rather a function of integrated theoretical practice. Specifically, the long-term success of post-crisis strategies (driven by the selection of appropriate SCCT or Image Repair techniques) is powerfully moderated by the organization's commitment to Excellence Theory principles, namely, the quality of pre-existing stakeholder relationships and ethical transparency. The Tylenol crisis serves as the exemplary model of this integration, where relational capital allowed a swift, credible Rebuild strategy to work, while the BP and United Airlines failures highlight the severe consequences of misalignment.

Implications

This study suggests that a more robust explanatory model for crisis communication should be adopted, integrating the prescriptive nature of SCCT and the rhetorical framing of Image Repair Theory with the foundational, ethical, and relational mandates of Excellence and Stakeholder Theories. Future theoretical work should refine crisis typologies to better account for the unique, amplifying mechanisms of social media.

PR practitioners must shift their focus from reactive damage control to proactive relationship management. Key guidelines for practice include:

1. Prioritize transparency and symmetrical communication as defined by Excellence Theory to build the reputational "cushion" needed during a crisis.
2. Use SCCT to diagnose crisis responsibility and Image Repair Theory to select the specific rhetorical message (e.g., an apology or corrective action) that is strategically aligned.
3. Use digital monitoring to actively listen to and address the concerns of the most vulnerable stakeholders first, ensuring communication is authentic and empathetic, not merely controlled.

Limitations and Future Research

A key limitation of this study is its non-empirical design and reliance on a limited number of well-documented, secondary cases. The findings are conceptual and interpretive, not generalizable statistical conclusions.

Future research should focus on:

1. Conducting longitudinal or comparative empirical studies to test the integrated model (SCCT + Excellence Theory) across a larger, more diverse sample of recent, social-media-driven crises.
2. Quantifying the direct influence of pre-crisis relational metrics (e.g., social media engagement rates, perceived transparency scores) on the effectiveness and speed of reputation recovery following various SCCT-prescribed responses.

3. Examining how cultural variables influence stakeholder attribution and response strategy selection across international organizations.

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