
Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Prepared for COM 501
Applied Communication Theory
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Presentation Preview

1. What is a crisis?
2. Overview of Situational Crisis Communication Theory
 - Brief summary from textbook
 - Ties to / application of foundational vocabulary
3. Origins / Impact of W. Timothy Coombs and SCCT
4. Meta Reflection
5. Research Studies Using SCCT
6. SCCT in practice: What would you do?



Definition of Crisis:

A “sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat”
(Coombs, 2007, p. 163).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

from Dainton and Zelley (2023)

- “Developed” by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007
- The crisis type—victim, accidental, or intentional—determines level of **reputational threat** the organization faces
 - Organization’s history of experiencing/managing crises in the past can also impact reputational threat
- An organization’s crisis response should be based on how the organization’s publics will **attribute responsibility** for the crisis (Attribution Theory)!
- SCCT provides specific **response strategies** based on crisis type/reputational threat



SCCT Framework Dainton and Zelley (2023)

Crisis Type/Cluster	Attribution Level	Crisis Response	Strategy
Victim (organization is also a victim of the crisis)	Weak attributions of responsibility	Deny	• Attack the accuser • Denial of the crisis • Scapegoat (blame something else)
Accidental (organizational actions associated with crisis were unintentional)	Minimal attributions of responsibility	Diminish	• Excuse • Justification <i>minimize responsibility</i>
Intentional / Preventable (organization knowingly engaged in actions that sparked crisis)	Strong attributions of responsibility	Rebuild	• Compensation • Apology <i>take responsibility</i>
		Bolster (secondary strategy)	• Reminder of good past works • Ingratiation with stakeholders • Victimage (reminder that org is a victim too)

SCCT Tradition, Paradigm

Traditions (Craig, 1999)

1. Rhetorical: manipulation, power of words, practical art of discourse
2. Socio-psychological: Communication is the process by which individuals interact and influence each other
 - The social-psychological tradition is rooted in **attribution theory**
 - Attribution theory posits that people search for the cause of events, especially events that are unexpected and negative (Coombs, 2015).

Paradigm

SCCT was created in accordance with the beliefs of the dominant (social-scientific) paradigm

- Theoretical, objective, characterized by empirical research (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2014)
- Alignment with Coombs research methods



Dr. W. Timothy Coombs

PhD in Communication, Purdue University (1990)

M.A., Purdue University (1985) | B.A., Bowling Green State University, 1982

Past Academic Appointments

Professor of Communication Studies, Eastern Illinois University

- Where he developed/published SCCT

Professor of Communication, University of Central Florida

Professor, Department of Communication, Texas A&M University



Image Source: Texas A&M University Library

Scholarly Works

61 academic articles, 18 book chapters, 7 books

Areas of Academic / Professional Interest

Crisis communication, organizational reputation, crisis management, crisis response, public relations

LinkedIn Profile: 2021-Present: Advisor, Centre for Crisis & Risk Communication (Canada). No longer at Texas A&M

SCCT Origins and Methods

SCCT summarized / published in **2007**, but the research was done prior...

1995: Coombs' research forges a link between Attribution Theory and crises.

1996: Proved that crisis responsibility is negatively related to org. reputation (Coombs & Holladay)

2002: Identified 3 crisis clusters based on attributions of crisis responsibility by crisis type (Coombs & Holladay)

2004: crisis history and an unfavorable prior reputation intensifies attributions of crisis responsibility

2005: Post-crisis communication can be used to repair the reputation and / or prevent reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay).

Coombs conducted **experiments** with college students who read crisis case studies and reported opinions of crisis response and responsibility using **survey** mechanisms.

*"Evidence-based guidance for decision making in a crisis must be supported by **scientific evidence from empirical research**"*
(Coombs, 2007, p. 163)

Even tested student vs. non-student response difference!

SCCT Meta Reflection

Our textbook: brief synopsis of Coombs' 2007 article. Practical focus. Appropriate for purpose of strat com chapter.

My reflection: Many experimental studies by Coombs contributed to SCCT. Prior to Coombs' studies, scholars had little to no scientific evidence on which to evaluate crisis communications. Coombs also continued to study crisis coms post-2007 to refine SCCT. Social media engagement, political coms, and power of moral outrage are a few areas that developed/improved upon SCCT

SCCT and Cool Applied Research

Scholars have used SCCT to study...

- Reputation of Chinese public sector organizations during COVID-19 (Chunxia et al., 2022)
- Crisis communication strategies of Trump and Cuomo during COVID-19 (Tian & Yang, 2022)
- Orlando hotels' Twitter responses to Pulse nightclub shooting, Zika virus, alligator snatching (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2018)
- The Impact of Religious Rhetoric and Religiosity in SCCT (Morehouse & Austin, 2022)
- An examination of the situational crisis communication theory through the General Motors bankruptcy (Cooley & Cooley, 2011)
- Red Cross crisis response and SCCT (Fussell-Sisco et al., 2010)
- Many, many more



Article Summary: Tian & Yang (2022)

Deny or bolster? A comparative study of crisis communication strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19

- Considered Trump and Cuomo's tweets as a proxy to access their crisis communication strategies
 - January - July 2020
- Conducted a systematic **content analysis** to critically evaluate COVID-19 crisis communications of Trump and Cuomo
- Examined the degree to which they conformed to or deviated from recommendations of SCCT
 - Partially deviated from SCCT with creation of a new category...

Tian, Y., & Yang, J. (2022). Deny or bolster? A comparative study of crisis communication strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19. *Public Relations Review*, 48(2), 102182. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102182>



Article Summary: Tian & Yang (2022)

Study results / percentages of Tweets in each crisis response:

Politician	Deny (place blame elsewhere)	Diminish (excuses, minimize responsibility)	Rebuild (compensation / apology)	Bolster (ingratiation, praise, achievements)	Cohesion (cooperation, patriotism, inclusion)
Trump	51%	21%		75%	41%
Cuomo	7%	10%		95%	55%

“Our study revealed that in the context of messaging a pandemic that knows no bounds, Trump and Cuomo’s strategies digressed from SCCT recommendations and linked to their policy agendas and political purposes” (Tian & Yang, 2022, p. 9)

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Applying SCCT: Case Study #1

You're in charge of communications for upcoming annual conference. 1,000 already registered, paying ~ \$1K each

March 1, 2020: Events everywhere getting cancelled due to COVID

- Conference registrants emailing, calling support, commenting on social media, asking about safety, refunds
- CEO: We're not in a position to refund \$1 mil.
- Response to public: we will take all safety precautions. Conference is on!

March 11, 2020: W.H.O. declares Covid-19 a pandemic

- Conference starts on March **13**, 2020
- **Conference registrants are upset**, calling/emailing, commenting on social, asking about safety, refunds

Was Covid-19 the crisis, or the way the organization ignored dangers of Covid-19?

Identify the crisis cluster/type:

- Victim
- Accidental
- Intentional

What are appropriate response strategies based on SCCT framework?

- Deny
- Diminish
- Rebuild
- Bolster

Applying SCCT: Case Study #2

You are in charge of social media for a Catholic nonprofit.

June 24, 2022: Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade and Catholic orgs nationwide take to social media, applauding the decision.

Your large followings on FB and IG expect you to respond publically.

Before you can craft a response, your unrelated, previously-scheduled content posts to your social channels.

Followers are upset; dozens of negative comments about your org appear on social because you didn't show support for S. C. decision.

Other points to consider:

1. Your org has a policy prohibiting communications surrounding "political" issues.
2. You personally are not in favor of S. C. decision and think your younger followers/customers might also not agree with decision to overturn Roe v. Wade.

Identify the crisis cluster/type:

- Victim
- Accidental
- Intentional

What are appropriate response strategies based on SCCT?

- Deny
- Diminish
- Rebuild
- Bolster

Ideas on specific messaging/strategy?

What do you next post on social media?

Thank you!

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