



Research in brief

A quantitative review of crisis communication research in public relations from 1991 to 2009[☆]

Elizabeth Johnson Avery^{a,*}, Ruthann Weaver Lariscy^b, Sora Kim^c, Tatjana Hocke^d

^a *Public Relations, The University of Tennessee, 476 Communications Building, Knoxville, TN 37996, United States*

^b *The University of Georgia, Athens, GA, United States*

^c *DePaul University, Chicago, IL, United States*

^d *The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, United States*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 October 2009

Received in revised form

30 December 2009

Accepted 5 January 2010

Keywords:

Public relations

Crisis communication

Situational crisis communication theory

Image restoration theory

ABSTRACT

This study quantitatively examines 18 years (1991–2009) of data, 66 published articles, from the crisis communication domain in public relations using Coombs' situational crisis communication theory and Benoit's image restoration theory as the theoretical foundation for analysis. Overall recommendations indicate crisis communication research in public relations may be enriched both theoretically and pragmatically through more diverse contextual and methodological applications and could be less descriptive and more prescriptive through richer scholarly commentary and criticism in support for the models.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Few topics have been so fully embraced within public relations as crises. To date, no research has documented the totality of published studies in this burgeoning field; there has not been a documentation of which methods are used, with what findings, or an explanation of how and why discrepancies in prescriptions exist. This study seeks to partially fill this void; quantitative content analytic techniques were used to examine crisis literature in public relations and communication journals over an 18-year period with a goal of documenting the methods employed, the schema or theory base, overall levels of theoretical support, and other longitudinal trends in crisis communication theory and research. Our goal is to contribute an objective schema for reviewing a large body of work and hopefully assist other scholars in deciphering such a wide array of findings.

There are two primary streams of research that account for the majority of published studies on crisis management and communication in public relations, the theory of image restoration (Benoit, 1995, 1997) and the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995). This investigation of 18 years of that research focuses on those two bodies of work, as they have established somewhat of a dominant paradigm in crisis communication research in public relations. The following questions are asked for analysis of a census of published articles employing Benoit's and Coombs' work.

1. Research questions

RQ1: What are longitudinal trends in use of crisis communication theory in public relations research and its contextual applications between 1991 and 2009, with regard to: (a) frequency of use; (b) level of support; (c) contextual applica-

[☆] The complete study can be requested from the first author.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 706 254 7020; fax: +1 865 974 2826.
E-mail address: ejavery@utk.edu (E.J. Avery).

tions (crisis context, organizational type, and goal of crisis response); and (d) nature of the research stream, including publication outlets, methodology employed, and sample characteristics?

RQ2: What are the relationships between the nature of crises analyzed and the body of work (Benoit or Coombs) used for the analysis in public relations research, with regard to: (a) crisis stages analyzed (pre-crisis, during crisis, and post-crisis), (b) organizational type, and (c) methodology?

2. Methods

A census of relevant articles was retrieved from databases of communication and business related journals. The key terms “crisis communication,” “crisis management,” “image restoration strategy,” and “crisis response strategy” guided the search. The final sample of articles was drawn from 16 journals and includes articles published between 1991 and 2009 that utilized either Benoit’s or Coombs’ work in some capacity. Of the 66 articles in the final sample, Benoit himself was a lead or co-author on 19, and Coombs was lead or co-author on 14. Overall, Benoit or Coombs authored 33 (50%) of the total sample. Of the census of articles, 24 (36%) used Benoit’s work alone, 11 (17%) used only Coombs’ work, and 7 (11%) used both Coombs’ and Benoit’s work. Five of the articles (8%) used Benoit’s work in combination with others’ work, and 4 articles (6%) used Coombs’ work in combination with others’ work for analysis. Two articles (3% of the sample) also used Coombs’, Benoit’s and others’ work in combination. In intercoder reliability analyses, Krippendorff’s alphas ranged from .8088 to .9410 for all variables.

3. Results

3.1. RQ1(a)

Crosstabs revealed that Benoit’s work has been used increasingly over three time periods, but there was little difference between 1997–2002 (11 articles) and 2003–2009 (13 articles). For Coombs, there has been a more dramatic increase in use of his work from 1991–1996 (1 article) to 1997–2002 (2 articles) to 2003–2009 (12 articles).

3.2. RQ1(b)

A crosstab analysis revealed significant difference ($\chi^2(6, N=53)=41.458, p=.000$) in support for the work over the three time periods. All of the 29 Benoit articles received full support from the authors. Likewise, all articles that tested Coombs’ work with author evaluations of performance gave it full support (60%), although in 6 of those 15 articles (40%) authors did not make any judgments for coding. In articles that used both Benoit’s and Coombs’ work in combination, many (44%) of authors offered partial support in 4 articles. Two articles (22%) offered full support, and two offered no claims of support. Authors of one article (11%) offered little support for the theory.

3.3. RQ1(c)

With respect to organizational type, there was no significant difference among the articles over time ($\chi^2(10, N=66)=8.438, p=.586$). There was little overall variance in types of organizational or individual crises examined; almost half of those organizations were corporations ($n=31, 47%$). Seventeen articles (26%) focused on individuals.

With respect to context, overall, the majority of articles’ crisis contexts were coded as political (17%, $n=11$), and second most popular was the transportation context (15%, $n=10$). For contexts, there was significant difference in the overall model indicating temporal shifts in contextual applications ($\chi^2(26, N=66)=44.603, p<.05$).

There was no significant difference in the organization’s goal in crisis response ($\chi^2(8, N=65)=6.185, p=.627$), which again may likely be due to lack of variance in the category. Of those articles with identifiable organizational goals in crisis response, the goal of 86% of them was organizational image restoration or repair.

3.4. RQ1(d)

There is overall significance in where the articles were published over the past 18 years ($\chi^2(28, N=66)=54.977, p<.002$). The most notable increase has been in *Public Relations Review*. One notable decrease has occurred in *Communication Quarterly*, where three articles were published early, 5 in the middle-range, and none between 2003 and 2009. For methodology, there have been no significant temporal trends or shifts in methods used to test the theory ($\chi^2(14, N=66)=15.390, p=.352$). This may again be due to lack of overall variance; the articles have steadily and frequently adopted rhetorical analysis ($n=28, 42%$) and experiments ($n=18, 27%$). Only 5 of the articles (8%) utilized qualitative methodology. With respect to sample used, no longitudinal trends emerged in the 22 studies that used quantitative methods. Overall, student samples were most popular ($n=10, 45%$), followed by managerial samples ($n=5, 23%$), student and general population combinations ($n=3, 14%$), general population ($n=3, 14%$), and 1 study that used “others.”

3.5. RQ2(a)

Most of the articles ($n = 25$, 38%) focused on the post-crisis, recovery stage. Next most frequently, communication during the crisis was the focus of 19 articles (29%). Twelve articles (18%) analyzed both the during- and post-crisis states. Only 3 articles (5%) analyzed prevention and preparation in the pre-crisis stage, and 3 articles (5%) analyzed all three stages together. There was no significant relationship in the body of work (Benoit's or Coombs') used for analysis and the stage analyzed ($\chi^2(10, N = 53) = 12.083, p = .280$).

3.6. RQ2(b)

A cross tabulation revealed a significant overall difference between the organizational type variables ($\chi^2(8, N = 53) = 18.073, p < .05$). For the few articles on public agencies/departments, two used Benoit's work for analysis while only one used Coombs' or a combination of the two. The articles on corporations were fairly evenly split between using Benoit's work ($n = 11$) and Coombs' work ($n = 10$). Fifteen of the 16 articles focused on individuals used only Benoit's theory for analysis, while the remaining article used both.

3.7. RQ2(c)

Chi-square tests using crosstab analysis revealed significant difference between methods used and theoretical frameworks ($\chi^2(14, N = 53) = 38.828, p = .000$). In the cross tabulation table were that 24 of 29 articles using Benoit's work were rhetorical analyses; the other five were case studies ($n = 2$), experiments ($n = 2$), and 1 "other." For articles using Coombs' work, the majority of the 15 were experiments ($n = 9$), followed by rhetorical analyses ($n = 2$).

4. Discussion

In addition to providing somewhat of a "state-of-the-art" review of crisis communication literature in public relations, the true value of this research lies in its heuristic function as it reveals contextual and methodological gaps as important areas for future research in public relations. Results indicate crisis communication research in public relations may benefit both theoretically and pragmatically through more diverse contextual and methodological applications. Overall, it seems that the body of work could be less descriptive and more prescriptive through richer scholarly commentary and criticism in support for the models. This research supports Coombs' (2009, p. 113) contention that "much of the existing reputation repair research has generated more speculation about what should be done rather than testing of actual prescriptive claims." Ideally, another review of crisis communication literature in public relations 18 years later may reveal the following longitudinal shifts in sum: more theoretical critique, more variance in organization/entity type, increased attention to outcomes and goals beyond reputation maintenance, continued attention to cross-contextual applications, more publications in mainstream communication journals, enhanced methodological diversity such as qualitative and survey methods, broader sampling, and more attention to the pre-crisis stages. Overall, this research concludes that over the past 18 years crisis communication theory in public relations research has experienced remarkable growth and extensive application yet remains open for new direction in context and critique.

References

- Benoit, W. L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 23, 177–186.
- Coombs, W. T. (1995). Choosing the right words: The development of guidelines for the selection of the "appropriate" crisis-response strategies. *Management Communication*, 8, 447–476.
- Coombs, W. T. (2009). Conceptualizing crisis communication. In R. L. Health, & H. D. O'Hair (Eds.), *Handbook of risk and crisis communication* (pp. 99–118). New York: Taylor & Francis.