*Public Relations*

# The Role of Prior Expectancies and Relational Satisfaction in Crisis

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### Abstract

This study empirically tests (1) expectancy violations theory's applicability to the setting of organization–public relationships and explores (2) the effectiveness of post-crisis communication in the post-crisis stage by employing a real crisis. The findings suggest that stakeholders' relational satisfaction and predictive and prescriptive expectancies are significant predictors, determining negative valence, uncertainty level, and other negative responses toward the organization in crises. Finally, the study also suggests that actively communicating crisis-related information, even during the post-crisis stage, is more effective in protecting positive corporate reputation than a no-message or a justification strategy.

### Keywords

expectancy violations theory, post-crisis communication, BP oil spill crisis, relational satisfaction, organization–public relationships

Just as people have expectations of others in interpersonal relationships, publics have certain expectations of organizations in organization–public relationships. Recently, publics have tended to hold increased expectations for organizations to operate their businesses in a socially responsible manner and to address ethical and social issues.[1] As a result, organizations are under extra pressure to engage in responsible and ethical actions to maintain positive organization–public relationships. In addition, just as transgressions violate a partner's expectancies in personal

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relationships,[2] organizations' transgressions can violate publics' expectancies in organization–public relationships.

Considering an organizational crisis as a transgression, this study attempts to expand the application of expectancy violations theory into the setting of organization–public relationships. According to expectancy violations theory, prior expectancies toward a violator tend to affect violation valence (i.e., positive or negative violation impact). Consequently, violation valence created by expectancy violations predicts possible reactions to the violation and the violator.[3]

Thus, employing the 2010 BP oil spill crisis, this study explores the consequences of publics' expectancy violations toward the organization. More specifically, this study investigates the relationships among publics' prior expectancies and relational satisfaction toward BP, as well as publics' possible responses, such as uncertainty levels toward BP's future performance, attributions of crisis responsibility (blame), and perceptions of corporate reputation. This will help determine significant predictors of stakeholders' possible responses in organizational crises.

In addition, most organizations tend not to communicate crisis-relevant information to their stakeholders after a crisis is contained or deemed to be over (i.e., post-crisis). Although previous crisis communication research, based on both the rhetorical crisis response tradition[4] and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT),[5] has emphasized the importance of crisis communication in all stages, including pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis, most of the crisis communication literature[6] seems to focus predominantly on testing the effectiveness of *immediate* crisis communication strategies, especially *during* the crisis stage. This predominant focus on crisis communication during the crisis stage tends to result in neglecting the need for post-crisis communication efforts in the post-crisis stage.

However, if publics' uncertainty regarding the organization's performance tends to remain consistently high even after the crisis is contained (according to expectancy violation theory, this is usually the case for interpersonal relationships),[7] the organization should continue to focus on active post-crisis communication to repair the damaged reputation. Thus, in an attempt to extend well-documented existing crisis communication literature, this study also explores the effectiveness of post-crisis communication strategies during the post-crisis stage rather than during the crisis stage.

## Literature Review

### *Applying Expectancy Violations Theory to a Crisis Situation*

Although expectancy violations theory was originally developed to predict consequences of personal space violations[8] during interpersonal communication, it has been widely applied to explain other nonverbal and verbal behaviors in interpersonal communication[9] and online communication.[10] As a core construct of the theory, expectancy is defined as an enduring pattern of anticipated verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are influenced by individual, relational, and contextual factors.[11]

Two different types of expectancies have been identified: prescriptive and predictive.[12] Prescriptive expectancies are anticipated behaviors, grounded in societal norms

for typical and appropriate behaviors (e.g., respect others' personal space in conversation; this is based on social norms), whereas predictive expectancies refer to anticipated behaviors that are particularized for a specific individual, often judged by the individual's past behavior or unique interaction style[13] (e.g., a partner is unusually quiet one night; this evaluation is based on the partner's habitual behavior, that is, predictive expectancy).

In this study, predictive expectancy is defined as BP's responsible behaviors based on its past commitments to establish "green" pedigrees focusing on a reputation for environmental corporate social responsibility (CSR), whereas prescriptive expectancy is defined as expectations based on social norms related to corporations' appropriate behaviors regarding CSR (e.g., protecting the environment, being responsible for society). These expectancies tend to serve as motivational or framing devices that determine how people process related information.[14]

The theory suggests that when people's expectancies are negatively violated, they tend to experience arousal and evaluate the violator (i.e., transgressor) more negatively.[15] Because organizational crises often involve transgressions or violations of rules, a crisis can function in a manner similar to expectancy violations in organization–public relationships, as partners' transgressions function as expectancy violations in close relationships. Thus, when applying this expectancy theory, corporate crises can certainly be considered violations of stakeholder expectancy toward an organization. In addition, stakeholders' reaction to the violator (i.e., organization in crisis) will be influenced by their previous prescriptive and predictive expectancies toward the organization. That is, when stakeholders expect corporations to be socially responsible based on social norms (i.e., high prescriptive expectancy) and also expect BP to act environmentally responsible based on its past commitment to environmental CSR (i.e., high predictive expectancy), they would reveal more negative reactions toward the organization after the oil spill crisis due to expectancy violations (i.e., negative violation valence).

In addition, the magnitude of violation valence (positive vs. negative) is also affected by violator reward valence (an evaluation of the violator), and this reward valence predicts people's reactions to unexpected behaviors.[16] For instance, a person can offer rewards to others, such as smiles or credibility in interpersonal communication. Normally, when a person invades the personal space of others in conversation, people reveal negative attitudes toward the violator (i.e., negative valence) because their expectancy has been negatively violated. However, when the violator is physically attractive or smiling (i.e., providing a reward), the negative violation valence can be mitigated by the reward. That is, the benefits of interacting with a physically attractive and smiling person might outweigh the costs of personal space violations. Burgoon[17] defined this reward valence as a function of previous relationships, or pre-interactional communicator characteristics.

Thus, when applying violator reward aspects to the BP case, one can see that how people react to the BP oil spill would vary depending on their previous relational satisfaction with BP (i.e., violator reward valence).[18] In this study, relational satisfaction is defined as the extent of rewards experienced from the relationship based on a social exchange perspective.[19] In other words, highly rewarding violators (i.e., organizations

with high relational satisfaction of stakeholders) will experience fewer negative consequences in negative expectancy violation situations than low-rewarding violators. Thus, stakeholders who perceived BP as highly rewarding (presenting high relational satisfaction toward BP) would perceive the BP oil spill crisis less negatively.

Furthermore, expectancy violations may also generate public uncertainty regarding future performance of the organization in crises.[20] Specifically, the congruence of the violation with past behavior tends to determine its impact on uncertainty. To wit, unexpected behaviors that display the opposite of patterns or meanings of past behaviors tend to increase uncertainty of relationships. Thus, negative violation valence toward the organization in crisis will also increase people's uncertainty levels toward the organization's future performance. In addition, because research has suggested that people tend to reveal negative responses toward a violator when violation valence is negative,[21] this study also proposes that negative violation valence will result in higher blame attributions to the violator (i.e., BP) for the crisis and more negative evaluation of BP's corporate reputation.

To address relationships among expectancy violations factors and stakeholders' responses, the following hypotheses have been proposed:

**H1:** Stakeholders' higher (**a**) predictive and (**b**) prescriptive expectancies will result in more negative violation valence toward BP, but (**c**) higher relational satisfaction with BP prior to the crisis will result in less negative violation valence toward BP.

**H2:** More negative violation valence toward the BP oil spill crisis will result in stakeholders' (**a**) higher uncertainty levels toward BP performance, (**b**) higher blame attributions to BP, and (**c**) more negative evaluation of BP corporate reputation.

## Definition of Post-crisis and Post-crisis Communication

There is discrepancy in previous crisis research regarding use of the term "post-crisis communication." Previous crisis research has tended to use the term "post-crisis communication" interchangeably with "immediate crisis communication" or "crisis response" in the crisis-event stage.[22] Part of the reason for the blurred distinction between "crisis communication" in the crisis-event stage and "post-crisis communication" in the post-crisis stage is ascribed to inconsistency in the literature regarding how to define a crisis and what constitutes the post-crisis (e.g., when a crisis ends and when an organization enters into the post-crisis stage). Jaques suggested two distinct approaches to crisis management: (1) crisis as an event and (2) crisis as part of a process.[23] However, these represent two distinct approaches to the definition of crisis, not to crisis management.

In the event approach, a crisis is defined as "a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization."[24] Thus, when assuming an event approach, any communication efforts made after the crisis event can be classified as post-crisis communication. In this way, even crisis communication efforts before the

crisis is deemed to be over can be part of post-crisis communication. However, in a process approach, a crisis is perceived as "a long incubation process that suddenly manifests itself under the influence of a 'precipitating' event."[25] Roux-Dufort argued that defining a crisis as a specific and punctual event makes it difficult to identify the stages of evolution of a crisis (or situation).[26]

Despite confusion in the literature regarding the term "post-crisis communication," this study argues that immediate crisis responses that occur right after a crisis event should be considered "during-crisis communications" rather than "post-crisis communications." Furthermore, "post-crisis communication" should be defined as communication efforts that occur after a crisis is resolved. In this regard, Heath and Millar[27] clearly stressed that post-crisis communication differs from pre-crisis or during-crisis communication in that it is narrower in latitude. That is, post-crisis communication should focus on providing information to stakeholders related to "how, why, and when the organization has put things right,"[28] because many issues associated with the crisis have been resolved by the time the organization enters the post-crisis stage. In addition, Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow[29] suggested that post-crisis communication should include the discourse of renewal, arguing that such discourse extends beyond image restoration to organizational post-crisis innovations and adaptations. However, while many have discussed the importance of post-crisis communication,[30] the use of the term, "post-crisis communication" interchangeably with "during-crisis communication" still seems to be prevalent because of the crisis-as-event approach.

Moreover, when defining post-crisis communication as communication efforts after a crisis ends, one can see a clear gap in the existing literature, as most of the literature has focused on testing the effects of *immediate* crisis response strategies *during* the crisis stage. As a result, not enough attention has been given to how organizations should communicate with their stakeholders after a crisis is deemed to be over. The current study attempts to fill this void by testing the effectiveness of post-crisis communication efforts, adopting the BP oil spill crisis as an example. Considering that the BP oil spill occurred in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010, that the leak was finally contained on July 15, 2010, and that media attention to the crisis increasingly subsided a year after the event (i.e., April 2011), it is reasonable to say that BP has entered into the post-crisis stage at the point of this study (one year passed after the crisis was contained).[31]

In addition, expectancy violations caused by a crisis tend to increase uncertainty about an organization's performance in the crisis-related area.[32] To decrease such uncertainty, the organization should continue to focus on communicating its commitment to crisis-relevant environmental issues during the post-crisis stage, especially when stakeholders' uncertainty about the organization's performance in the crisis-related area is still high (i.e., environment-related CSR performance in BP's case).

Thus, in the BP oil spill case, this study proposes that crisis-relevant communications containing environment-focused messages would generate more favorable responses from stakeholders because they could reduce stakeholders' uncertainty related to BP's environmental commitment more effectively than a "no message" strategy (i.e., no communication efforts at all) or communicating other areas of the

organization's performance, such as corporate ability (CA)-related messages (e.g., BP's expertise and excellence as a world leader in the oil and natural gas industry) and other areas of CSR messages (e.g., BP's commitment to public education). Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

> **H3:** The organization's crisis-relevant communications (e.g., environment-focused messages) in the post-crisis stage will be more effective than no messages (i.e., a "no message" strategy) or noncrisis-related messages (i.e., public education-focused CSR messages or CA-promoting messages) in (**a**) lowering blame attributions by stakeholders to BP and (**b**) increasing favorable perceptions of organizational reputation.

In addition, with regard to crisis-relevant communication strategies in post-crisis communication, organizations may adopt existing crisis response strategies. Crisis communication strategies have been well documented and increasingly tested for their effectiveness, as reported in the literature.[33] However, the focus has been predominantly on immediate crisis responses, testing the effectiveness of such strategies for the crisis stage. Thus, this study attempts to test the effectiveness of such crisis communication strategies as post-crisis communications for the post-crisis stage, not as immediate crisis responses. SCCT suggests two components of crisis response strategies: base crisis response and reputation management strategies.[34] Base crisis communication includes providing updated crisis-related information, such as what the in-crisis organization has done to prevent similar crises. Reputation management crisis communication includes denial, diminishing, and rebuilding strategies. SCCT argues that the denial strategy option (e.g., denial strategy) can be employed when the challenge is unwarranted (i.e., victim crisis type). The diminishing response option (e.g., minimization) is recommended for technical error accident crises (i.e., accident crisis type). The rebuilding response option (e.g., compensation) is recommended for preventable crisis types, such as human error accidents and organizational misdeeds.[35] Because publics tend to attribute high levels of crisis responsibility to BP (i.e., preventable crisis type), the combination of the base and rebuilding reputation management strategies is expected to be more effective than any combination of the other strategies. Thus, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

> **H4:** The combination of the base and rebuilding strategies will be more effective than the combination of the base and diminishing strategies or a "no message" strategy in (**a**) lowering blame attributions of publics to BP and (**b**) increasing favorable perceptions of organizational reputation.

## Method

### Design and Procedure

This study employed both survey and experimental phases. Phase I (survey) tested relationships among previous expectancies, relational satisfaction, negative violation valence, and other public responses after the crisis. Phase II (experiment) tested the

effectiveness of crisis communication options during the post-crisis stage. For Phase I, all participants responded to survey questions regarding pre-crisis relational satisfaction and pre-crisis prescriptive and predictive expectancies toward BP. These variables were obviously retrospective in nature. Thus, respondents were asked to think about their satisfaction and expectancies *before* the crisis happened. Then respondents were asked to answer questions regarding negative violation valence created by the BP oil spill crisis, attributions of crisis responsibility, uncertainty about BP's future performance, and perceptions of BP's corporate reputation.

In Phase II, after an hour intermission during which participants listened to a class lecture, participants were randomly assigned to one of the five experimental conditions and asked to read BP's post-crisis corporate messages and answer questions regarding manipulation checks of message focus and dependent variables (i.e., blame, corporate reputation). Participants in a control group were not assigned to read any corporate messages, but their responses for dependent variables were measured again in Phase II.

The five conditions of post-crisis communication included both noncrisis-related and crisis-related post-crisis messages: (1) crisis-relevant CSR messages (i.e., environmental CSR using the combination of base and rebuilding strategies), (2) noncrisis-relevant CA messages, (3) noncrisis-relevant educational CSR messages (EduCSR), (4) the combination of base and diminishing strategies, and (5) a "no message" strategy. BP's noncrisis relevant CA condition included promoting messages on BP's expertise and excellence as a world leader in the gas and oil industry. The noncrisis-relevant EduCSR condition included BP's commitment to education CSR (i.e., the creation of a $4.5 million high school scholarship program) (see the appendix for message stimuli).

For crisis-relevant post-crisis communication messages, the combination of base and rebuilding strategies (Base + Rebuild: environment-related messages) was used. For the base crisis response, this study included updated crisis information about the BP oil spill (e.g., what activities BP has taken for crisis recovery). The compensation strategy was chosen for the rebuilding response crisis communication (e.g., BP's pledge of $20 billion for recovery). In addition, for the condition of base and diminishing strategies (Base + Diminish), a minimization strategy was selected for the diminishing response, in addition to the same base response (see the appendix for message stimuli).[36] Finally, a control group (no message exposed) was included.

All the messages developed were based on BP's actual post-crisis communication messages regarding its commitments to related areas. In addition, sixty students participated in a pre-test to examine differences of message strength and clarity across the conditions. No significant differences were found across the conditions ($p > .10$). On average, the study took twenty to twenty-five minutes for both phases, excluding the one-hour intermission.

## Participants

A total of 207 U.S.-based undergraduate college students participated in the Phase I study in exchange for extra credit, while 149 students participated in Phase II. This

study tried to limit observations to 30 per cell (i.e., 5 conditions × 30 respondents) to reduce chances of Type I error (i.e., false positive), following recommendations of previous literature.[37] On average, 29.5 students were exposed to one of the five conditions in Phase II. The average age was 20.10 ($SD = 1.74$). Participants were 66.7% female ($n = 138$). About 68.5% were Caucasian/white ($n = 142$). Although using a student sample can be an issue for generalizability, many scholars have argued that a student sample can be useful in testing multivariate relationships, that is, testing processes that are theoretically linked.[38] In addition, the sample was deemed to be appropriate for this study related to the BP oil crisis because our participants (1) have lived in one of the crisis-affected states, (2) had experience purchasing BP products, and (3) were identified as consumers of automobile gas/fuel products (i.e., drive a car).

## Measures

All measurement items were adapted from previous research, using a 7-point Likert scale anchored by (1) *strongly disagree* and (7) *strongly agree*.[39] Table 1 displays measurement items,[40] descriptive statistics, and Cronbach's α for all variables.

# Results

## Manipulation Checks for Post-crisis Communication Messages

As intended, participants in the condition of CA-promoting messages ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.40$) thought the message was more CA related than those in other conditions, EduCSR: $M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.27$; Base + Diminish: $M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.26$; Base + Rebuild: $M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.24$; $F(3, 113) = 46.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .55$, and those in the noncrisis EduCSR condition ($M = 6.34$, $SD = .93$) identified the message as BP's commitment to education more than other conditions, CA: $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.56$; Base + Diminish: $M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.08$; Base + Rebuild: $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.28$; $F(3, 113) = 90.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .71$. Lastly, participants who were exposed to Base + Rebuilding (crisis-related environmental CSR messages: $M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.64$) considered the messages were more relevant to BP's oil spill crisis than CA and EduCSR conditions, noncrisis-related messages: $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.49$; $F(1, 115) = 90.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .44$.

## Measurement Model Test: CFA

Before testing relationships among expectancy violation factors, previous relational satisfaction, blame, and BP's corporate reputation (**H1** to **H2**), a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. The results of the CFA indicated that all measures included in the model revealed acceptable convergent[41] and discriminant[42] validities.[43] The overall fit statistics of the CFA suggested the measurement model had a good fit,[44] $\chi^2 = 439.9$ with 268 *df* ($p < .01$) $\chi^2/df = 1.64$, confirmatory fit index (CFI) = .96, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .052, $p$ of Close Fit (PCLOSE) > .05.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Measures.

| Variables | Measures | *M/SD* | α |
|---|---|---|---|
| PDE: Burgoon (1993) | | | .90 |
| I expected BP . . . | | | |
| PDE1 | to operate its business in a socially responsible way. | 6.11 (1.06) | |
| PDE2 | to operate its business to protect our environment. | 5.89 (1.29) | |
| PDE3 | to be an environmentally friendly company. | 5.71 (1.42) | |
| PSE: Burgoon (1993) | | | .88 |
| Corporations/businesses should . . . | | | |
| PSE1 | operate their business to protect our environment. | 6.05 (1.16) | |
| PSE2 | live up to responsibility to society. | 6.22 (1.04) | |
| PSE3 | not harm our communities (reversed). | 6.52 (.83) | |
| RST: Ki and Hon (2007) | | | .86 |
| Prior to BP oil spill crisis . . ., | | | |
| RST1 | I benefited from my relationship with BP. | 4.44 (1.35) | |
| RST2 | I was satisfied with my interaction with BP. | 4.90 (1.22) | |
| RST3 | I enjoyed dealing with BP. | 4.71 (1.13) | |
| NVV: Afifi and Metts (1998) | | | .89 |
| BP oil spill crisis . . . | | | |
| NVV1 | made me feel a lot worse about BP. | 5.48 (1.38) | |
| NVV2 | made me feel that BP does not care about the environment. | 5.08 (1.58) | |
| NVV3 | made me feel negative about BP. | 5.49 (1.41) | |
| NVV4 | BP disappointed me a great deal. | 5.58 (1.41) | |
| UCT: Afifi and Metts (1998) | | | .89 |
| BP oil spill made me . . . | | | |
| UCT1 | a lot less confident about BP's CSR commitment. | 5.45 (1.30) | |
| UCT2 | a lot less confident about BP's environment-friendly performance. | 5.66 (1.31) | |
| UCT3 | become much less able to predict BP's commitment to the environment. | 5.44 (1.37) | |
| BL | three items were included from Klein and Dawar, "Corporate Social Responsibility." | | .95 |
| BL1 | BP is highly responsible for Gulf oil spill crisis. | 5.74 (1.33) | |
| BL2 | BP should be held accountable for Gulf oil spill crisis. | 5.83 (1.26) | |
| BL3 | Gulf oil spill crisis is the fault of BP. | 5.71 (1.31) | |
| CR | Harris-Fombrun Reputation Quotient scales were used: twelve items with four dimensions (emotional appeal, vision & leadership, workplace environment, social and environmental responsibility dimensions) (Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever, "The Reputation Quotient"). | 3.48 (1.12) | .95 |

*Note.* PDE = predictive expectancy; PSE = prescriptive expectancy; RST = relational satisfaction; NVV = negative violation valence; UCT = uncertainty; CSR = corporate social responsibility; BL = blame; CR = corporate reputation.
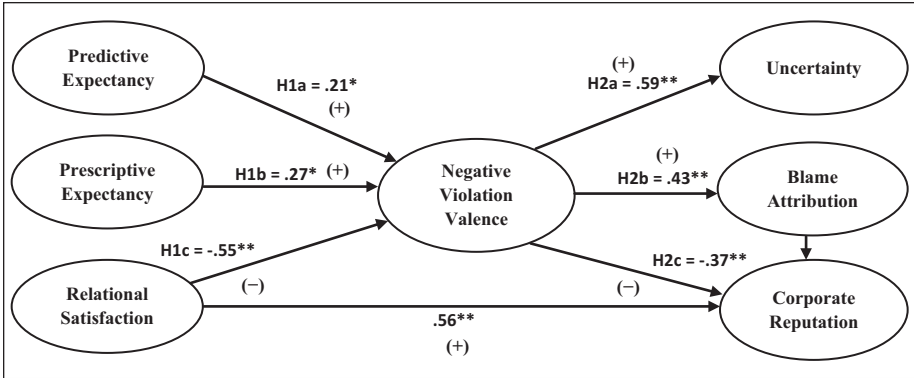
**Figure 1.** Estimated standardized effects among the constructs in the model.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

## Test of Hypotheses

***H1*** *and* ***H2:*** *Effects of prior expectancies and relational satisfaction on public responses.* Results of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) for testing relationships among related constructs supported **H1** and **H2**. The estimated standardized effects testing **H1** and **H2** are presented in Figure 1, $\chi^2$ = 391.12 with 217 *df* ($p < .01$) $\chi^2/df =$ 1.74, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .056, PCLOSE > .05. As seen in Figure 1, the higher predictive and prescriptive expectancies participants had toward BP prior to the crisis, the higher their negative violation valence levels were, supporting **H1a** and **H1b** (predictive expectancy: $t = 2.53$, $SE = .10$, $p < .05$; prescriptive expectancy: $t = 3.38$, $SE = .16$, $p < .001$). **H1c** was also supported, suggesting the more participants perceived the relationships they had with BP to be satisfactory, the less negatively they considered the violation valence ($t = −.783$, $SE = .82$, $p < .001$). In addition, the higher negative violation valence participants had for BP crisis, the higher their uncertainty toward BP's future performance ($t = 11.42$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$) and the higher their attributions of blame to BP ($t = 6.20$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$), supporting **H2a** and **H2b**. Participants with higher negative violation valence tended to reveal less positive evaluation of corporate reputation ($t = −5.90$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), supporting **H2c**. In addition, participants with positive prior relational satisfaction with BP revealed more positive perceptions of BP's croporate reputation ($t = 7.81$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$).

***H3*** *and* ***H4:*** *Effects of post-crisis communication strategies.* In order to test the effects of crisis-relevant messages in the post-crisis stage (**H3a-b**), (1) crisis-relevant messages (the combination of base and rebuilding strategies), (2) noncrisis CA messages, (3) noncrisis education CSR messages, and (4) "no message" strategy (i.e., control group) were included. To test crisis-relevant message effects on the blame variable (**H3a**), this study treated pre- and post-test scores of blame for a within-subjects factor and message conditions as a between-subjects factor. The results of this mixed factorial analysis indicated that there were no significant interaction effects in the pre–post

**Table 2.** Means and *SD*s of Dependent Variables by Message Conditions for Phases I and II.

| Conditions | Phase I (before stimuli) | | Phase II (after stimuli) | | M diff | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | BL | CR | BL | CR | BL | CR |
| H3 | | | | | | |
| Crisis relevant[a] | 5.68 (1.29) | 3.25 (1.01) | 5.45 (1.15) | 3.83 (0.86) | −.23 | .58 |
| Noncrisis CA | 6.15 (0.91) | 3.52 (1.02) | 5.95 (1.16) | 3.96 (0.97) | −.20 | .44 |
| Noncrisis EduCSR | 5.77 (1.27) | 3.38 (1.15) | 5.78 (1.25) | 3.87 (1.10) | .01 | .49 |
| Control | 5.90 (1.23) | 3.42 (1.21) | 5.92 (1.21) | 3.41 (1.11) | −.01 | −.01 |
| H4 | | | | | | |
| Base + Rebuilding | 5.68 (1.29) | 3.25 (1.01) | 5.45 (1.15) | 3.83 (0.86) | −.23 | .58 |
| Base + Diminish | 5.61 (1.17) | 3.58 (0.80) | 4.98 (1.29) | 3.59 (0.83) | −.69 | .01 |
| Control | 5.90 (1.23) | 3.42 (1.20) | 5.92 (1.21) | 3.44 (1.25) | −.01 | −.02 |

*Note.* BL = blame attribution; CR = corporate reputation perception; EduCSR = educational CSR messages; CA = corporate ability.
[a]Crisis-relevant communication messages included SCCT-recommended strategies of Base + Rebuilding.

differences of blame measures by the message conditions, $F(3, 115) = 0.86$, $p > .01$, suggesting changes in participants' perceptions of blame after being exposed to message conditions were not significantly different by conditions (see Table 2 for *M diff*). To test such difference in more detail, analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were used. For ANCOVA, post-test blame measurement was treated as a dependent variable, and pre-test of blame was assessed as a covariate. The results also revealed that there were no significant differences among the conditions in participants' attributions of blame to BP, $F(3, 114) = 0.90$, $p > .01$. Thus, **H3a** was not supported.

As to **H3b**, the same procedures were followed for the corporate reputation dependent variable. The results of mixed factorial analysis showed significant interaction effects in the pre–post differences of corporate reputation measures by the message conditions, $F(3, 115) = 5.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$, suggesting changes in participants' perceptions of BP's reputation were significantly different by the conditions (see Table 2 for *M diff* in corporate reputation). In addition, the results of ANCOVA also revealed that there were significant differences among the four conditions in corporate reputation, $F(3, 115) = 6.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .138$. Crisis-relevant post-crisis CSR messages generated significantly more favorable perceptions of corporate reputation than a "no message" strategy (estimated marginal *M diff*: .548, $p < .001$) when controlling for the pre-test corporate reputation variable, while no significant difference was found in comparison with noncrisis-related CA messages (*M diff*: .09, $p > .05$) or noncrisis-related eduCSR messages (*M diff*: .07, $p > .05$). Thus, **H3b** was only partially supported.

To test **H4a** and **H4b**, the effects of post-crisis communication strategies, Base + Rebuild, Base + Diminish strategy, and the control group were included. The mixed factorial analysis suggested that there were significant differences in the pre–post differences of Blame by the three conditions, $F(2, 84) = 0.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$ (see Table 2). Base + Diminish strategy condition revealed significantly higher decreases

in post-measures of Blame than the control group (*M diff* = −.63, *SE* = .31, *p* < .05), but there were no significant differences in the decreases of Blame attribution between Base + Diminish and Base + Rebuild conditions (*M diff* = .30, *SE* = .31, *p* > .01). In addition, the results of ANCOVA suggested that there were significant differences among the three conditions in participants' attributions of Blame, $F(2, 83) = 9.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$. Interestingly, Base + Diminish condition was significantly more effective in lowering Blame attributions than the control group (estimated marginal *M diff* = −.73, standard error [*SE*] = .17, Bonferroni *p* < .001) and Base + Rebuilding strategy condition (*M diff* = −.47, *SE* = .17, *p* < .05) when controlling for the pre-test of Blame variable. Thus, **H4a** was not supported.

As to **H4b**, the effects of post-crisis response strategies on corporate reputation, Base + Rebuild strategy condition revealed significantly higher increases in post-measures of BP reputation than either control group or Base + Diminish strategy condition—see Table 2 for *M diff,* $F(2, 85) = 9.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$. In addition, the results of ANCOVA suggested that there were also significant differences among the conditions in participants' perceptions of BP's reputation, $F(2, 84) = 9.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$. Base + Rebuild strategy generated significantly more favorable perceptions of corporate reputation than Base + Diminish strategy (*SE* = .10, *p* < .001) and the control group (*SE* = .09, *p* < .001) (see Table 2). Thus, **H4b** was supported.

## Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that stakeholders with positive prior predictive and prescriptive expectancies tend to reveal more negative valence regarding the crisis. In turn, those with more negative violation valence reveal higher uncertainty toward BP's future performance, place higher levels of blame on BP for the crisis, and perceive a more negative reputation of BP. These findings are consistent with the expectancy violations theory literature in the interpersonal communication field.[45]

However, stakeholders with prior positive relational satisfaction toward BP are likely to reveal less negative violation valence, and they also tend to perceive a more positive corporate reputation. This is consistent with previous crisis research, especially related to SCCT, suggesting that positive organization–public relationship history can mitigate negative impact inflicted by crisis.[46] This finding indicates that prior positive relational satisfaction mitigates the damage inflicted by crisis, suggesting that stakeholders' relational satisfaction functions differently from their prior expectancies in organizational crises. Because stakeholders' prior expectancies are anticipated behaviors based on either social norms or past behavioral patterns of the organization, expectancies do not necessarily operate as an "insurance policy" in a crisis in the same way that relational satisfaction (i.e., reward) does. This is because those expectancies reflect stakeholders' anticipation of the organization's behaviors, not necessarily including a positive evaluation of the quality of relationships. This indicates that relational satisfaction is based on stakeholders' evaluations of the quality of organization–public relationships or the extent of rewards experienced from the relationships rather than an organization's behavioral patterns or socially desirable behaviors.[47] This also confirms expectancy violations theory, suggesting that positive reward valence can mitigate or

offset negative violation valence created by negative expectancy violations.[48] The mitigating effect of previous relational satisfaction found in this study suggests the importance of managing relational satisfaction as part of pre-crisis management.

The current study also suggests that during the post-crisis stage, the corporate reputation of the organization is more effectively protected by active post-crisis communication strategies than a "no message" strategy or a minimization strategy. In addition, actively addressing environmental concerns related to the crisis (crisis-relevant messaging) is more effective than no post-crisis communication strategy in increasing positive corporate reputation, but no differences are identified in comparison with actively communicating noncrisis-relevant messages, such as CA-promoting or education-focused CSR messages. This indicates that organizations should either actively focus on communicating crisis-relevant commitments during the post-crisis stage or emphasize other areas of commitment rather than make no communication efforts. Especially among SCCT crisis strategies, the combination of base and rebuilding strategies is likely to be more effective in protecting corporate reputation than the combination of base and diminishing strategies or a "no message" strategy even during the *post-crisis* stage. This is consistent with the findings of previous research studying the effectiveness of crisis response strategies during the crisis stage.[49] Thus, it suggests that the recommended SCCT strategy for the crisis stage can also be effective in protecting corporate reputation during the post-crisis stage.

However, in regard to lowering publics' crisis responsibility attributions to the organization, the combination of base and diminishing strategies was more effective than the SCCT recommended strategies (i.e., Base + Rebuilding) or a "no message" strategy, whereas in protecting corporate reputation, the base and rebuilding strategies were more effective than the other strategies. This means that even if publics attribute high levels of crisis responsibility to the organization, they would not necessarily perceive a negative reputation. The majority of previous crisis literature has suggested that stakeholders tend to have less favorable perceptions of corporate reputation when they attribute higher levels of crisis responsibility to the organization in crisis.[50] However, some research, testing immediate crisis communication options, has indicated that when an organization adopts apology or compensation crisis communication strategies, such action tends to increase stakeholders' attributions of crisis responsibility, but decrease negative attitudes toward the organization.[51] This might imply that a higher attribution of crisis responsibility does not automatically link to more negative attitudes. In addition, considering the magnitude of an oil spill crisis, regardless of what the organization tries to communicate in the post-crisis stage, publics will attribute high crisis responsibility to the organization. However, with active commitments to recovery from damage and communication of those commitments, the organization can still protect its reputation better than if using the "no-message" strategy or the base and diminishing strategies.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to existing crisis communication research by extending expectancy violations theory's applications of interpersonal relationships[52] to

organization–public relationships and corporate crisis settings. By empirically testing the consequences of stakeholders' prior expectancies and relational satisfaction in an organizational crisis situation, this study supports clear relationships among prior expectancies, relational satisfaction, violation valence, uncertainty, blame, and corporate reputation. In addition, considering that increased expectancies prior to a crisis will have negative impacts due to the expectancy violations created by the crisis, managers should be cautious in promoting "unrealistic" expectations of stakeholders. Raising unrealistic expectations prior to a crisis will backfire when a crisis occurs, increasing negative violation valence after the crisis. However, unlike unrealistic expectations, positive prior relational satisfaction will cushion against damage created by a crisis. Thus, this study suggests that organizations should focus on increasing relational satisfaction through substantial commitments rather than raising unrealistic expectations with empty promotions.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that expectancy violations theory is closely related to SCCT. That is, as expectancy violations theory suggests the mitigating effects of positive reward valence (i.e., how much reward the violator can provide: pre-crisis relational satisfaction) found in this study, SCCT has also suggested the buffering effect of positive relationship history[53] in crisis. The pre-crisis positive relationship history of an organization can be perceived as "reward" from the perspectives of publics, buffering negative damage inflicted by a crisis. Thus, given that expectancy violations theory clearly explains the negative impact of prior expectancies, as well as the buffering effect of positive reward perceptions, as illustrated in this study (i.e., prior expectancy as a backfire, but relational satisfaction as a buffer), the expectancy violations theory can be a useful framework for the study of organizational crisis in organization crises by contributing new understanding to existing crisis research.

The findings of this study also confirm that higher expectancy violations result in higher levels of uncertainty toward BP in the organization–public relationships.[54] This uncertainty should be resolved by communicating BP's rigorous commitment to the environment. The "no-message" strategy does not help to resolve publics' uncertainty. The results suggest that publics tend to appreciate the organization's willingness to provide updated crisis information even in the post-crisis stage. Employing a "no-message" strategy might be acceptable to avoid publics' attributions of blame to the organization, but it does not generate positive perceptions of corporate reputation. Thus, managers should focus more on active post-crisis communication rather than a no-message strategy.

Finally, by testing existing crisis strategies' effectiveness for the post-crisis stage, this study suggests that crisis response strategies used mostly during the crisis stage can also apply to the post-crisis stage as effective post-crisis communication strategies. In particular, given that higher attributions of crisis responsibility do not automatically link to negative attitudes toward the organization, managers should prioritize long-term aspects of corporate reputation by actively communicating updated crisis-relevant information and relationship-building efforts over short-term aspects of blame reduction.

## Limitations and Future Research

Although this research provides meaningful implications, it is limited by several factors. Even though our participants were considered acceptable given that they have lived in one of the four crisis-affected states and had experience purchasing BP products, they are only part of stakeholders for BP, and this study used the participants as surrogates for stakeholders or publics in testing the hypotheses of this study. Thus, future research should investigate whether any significant difference in responses exists among different publics, such as between active and apathetic publics or between consumers and nonconsumers. This will provide a clearer picture in terms of expectancy violations in times of crisis. In addition, some measures, such as pre-crisis relational satisfaction and prescriptive/predictive expectancies toward BP, were retrospective since this study used a real crisis case. This may be a common issue when adopting a real crisis case because researchers cannot predict when an organization will experience a crisis. However, future research might plan a longitudinal study with a certain organization to avoid this limitation.

Taken as a whole, the results of this study provide several compelling considerations for practitioners and scholars in crisis communication and reputation management. Expectancy violations theory can be an effective theoretical framework to explain organization–public relationships in a crisis. This study also adds new understanding regarding the effectiveness of post-crisis communication strategies for the post-crisis stage, which will help organizations focus more effectively on active post-crisis communication efforts.

## Appendix

### Post-crisis Communication Stimuli Excerpts

1. Noncrisis-relevant Corporate Ability (CA) Message Condition
   - No crisis-relevant information is provided.
   - CA messages focused on BP's expertise and market capability (CA messages).
   - As the nation's largest producer of oil and natural gas, we are leaders in providing America's traditional energy needs. ( . . . ) We have built our American wind power business from zero in 2005 to a gross generating capacity of over 1,300 megawatts (MW), enough to power a city the size of Washington, D.C.
2. Noncrisis-relevant Education CSR Message Condition
   - No crisis-relevant information is provided.
   - Messages focused on BP's Education CSR commitment activities.
   - We created a $4.5 million high school scholarship program aimed at providing financially challenged students with the opportunity to study abroad and gain intercultural skills needed to succeed in a global economy.

3. Crisis-relevant Environment-related Message Condition (SCCT: Base + Rebuilding)
   - Crisis-relevant information is provided (SCCT base strategies): The Deepwater Horizon oil spill impacted the people and natural environment of the Gulf Coast region. ( . . . ) Although the well was successfully capped on July 16, 2010 and permanently sealed by the drilling of a relief well on September 16, 2010, our work in the Gulf is far from over. Taking lessons from the event, we are redoubling our commitment to safety, both of our workforce and the communities where we operate.
   - Environmental CSR relevant Rebuilding strategy message: We have pledged a $20 billion independent trust fund to pay for environmental restoration and the legitimate claims of claims of individuals, businesses and government. Assessing the long-term effects of the spill on the Gulf's fragile ecosystem is also a priority, so we are making $500 million available to fund the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative (GRI).

4. SCCT Base + Diminishing Strategy Condition
   - The same crisis-relevant information above is provided (SCCT base strategies).
   - Diminishing strategy message: Deepwater Horizon accident was complex and was the result of multiple causes, involving multiple parties. ( . . . ). Decisions made by "multiple companies and work teams" contributed to the accident arose from "a complex and interlinked series of mechanical failures, human judgments, engineering design, operational implementation and team interfaces."

5. Control Group (No Post-crisis Communication Messages)
   - No message strategy

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

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41. Convergent validity was examined with three criteria: (1) factor loadings for all measures were >. 69 and significant ($p < .001$), (2) composite reliability for each construct was > .70, (3) average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was > .50.

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