

PROTECTING A CLIENT'S REPUTATION:
IMAGE REPAIR THEORY AND ITS SUITABILITY
TO A SOCIAL MEDIA-GENERATED CRISIS

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ABOUT THE PRESENTER

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For more than 30 years, Dr. James Parham has provided innovative and effective strategies and tactics to both public and private sector clients seeking solutions to communication problems.

He specializes in crisis communications and environmental expertise for a wide array of clients, including hospitals, school systems, private corporations and government agencies. His environmental work is also extensive. He facilitated hearings for the U.S. Department of Energy on nuclear waste issues at government-owned facilities, which required high-level conflict resolution skills and consensus building with various publics. He has conducted public outreach, education and communication planning for DOE enrichment facilities and conducted a series of high-profile meetings on U.S. and Russian nuclear non-proliferation treaties in 15 states.

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Jim has a wealth of management experience in the private and public sectors. He served as chief of staff for the National Park Service, managing a \$2.5 billion budget and an agency of 26,000 people in Washington, D.C.

Following his government stint, Jim was senior vice president for Science Applications International Corporation, a 46,000-person consulting organization. At SAIC, he led numerous teams through critical communication challenges. His time included work on nuclear waste and management issues for agencies such as the Department of Energy and NASA.

Closer to home, Jim served as the director of Indianapolis Parks and Recreation, an 800-person organization, for two years. Jim was also as a public affairs officer for 10 years for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

Jim has a bachelor's degree in communications from Ball State, with concentrations in natural resources and journalism. He also has a master's degree in public administration from American University School of Public Affairs.

He recently received his Ph.D. from Northcentral University, where he focused on "Protecting a Client's Reputation: Image Repair Theory and Its Suitability to a Social Media-Generated Crisis." He has also been an adjunct lecturer at Indiana University Media School and Franklin College teaching public relations writing, public relations campaigns and crisis management.

ABSTRACT

PROTECTING A CLIENT'S REPUTATION:

IMAGE REPAIR THEORY AND ITS SUITABILITY TO A SOCIAL MEDIA-GENERATED CRISIS

The impact of social media on traditional public relations activities is significantly changing the profession. This qualitative study evaluates whether William Benoit's image repair theory is still applicable and appropriate when dealing with a social media-generated crisis.

The study explored whether age, gender and experience affect a practitioner's strategic and tactical response to a social media-generated crisis, and whether image repair theory remains applicable as a theoretical framework during such a crisis.

The sample for this study comprised working public relations practitioners and current members of the Public Relations Society of America in Indiana. Research questions included:

- How do public relations professionals use traditional public relations strategies such as image repair theory?
- What traditional crisis communication strategies are employed by practitioners dealing with a social media-generated crisis?
- How do crisis managers choose response channels?
- Do age, gender or experience levels influence the manner and methodologies chosen by practitioners?

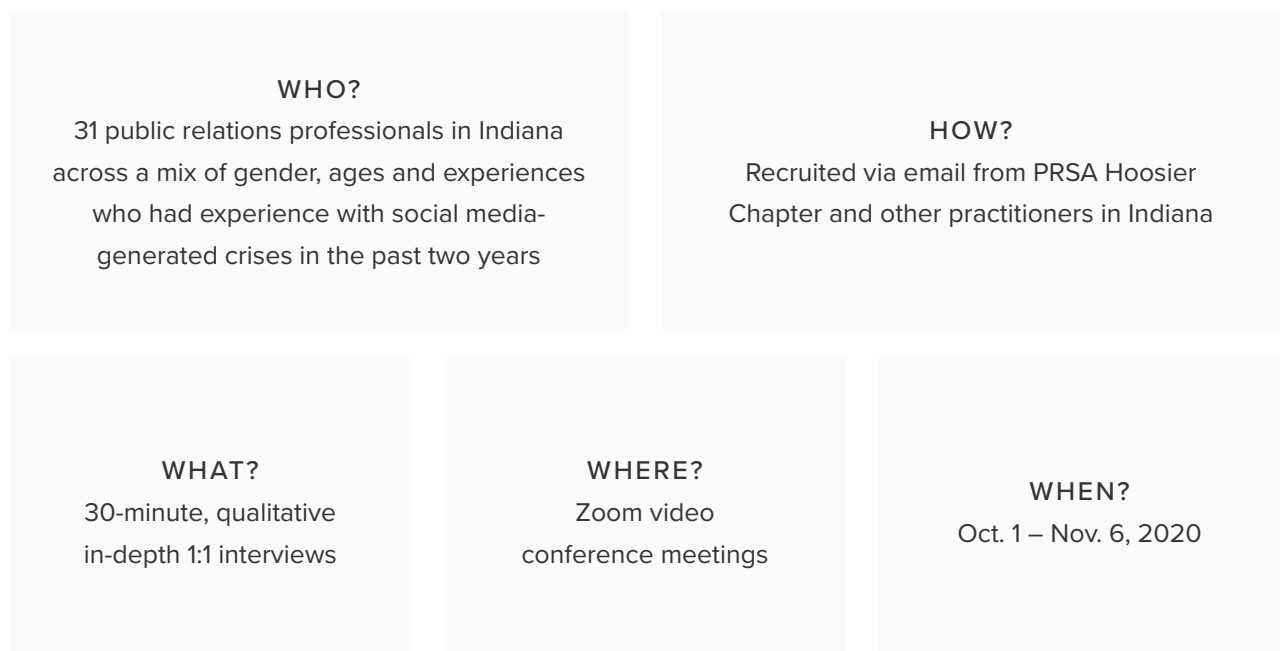
Through detailed executive interviews of 31 prequalified individuals, thematic analysis of the data resulted in several core findings. Public relations practitioners may find value in the study, which found Benoit's theoretical framework is still applicable in today's social media environment. Though participants identified and used most of Benoit's response categories, they did not include denial and apology among their preferred crisis response pathways during a social media-generated crisis.

This study found several critical implications for the public relations industry. First, response accuracy and speed are essential for successful outcomes. Second, study respondents preferred not to respond to negative social media posts, instead choosing to make no response or to take the conversations offline. This study suggests further research is needed with a more in-depth examination of how strategies are developed and deployed in a social media crisis. Additionally, it could also be advantageous to test messaging types that apply Benoit's image repair theory response categories, such as denial to mortification, with specific publics.

BENOIT'S IMAGE REPAIR THEORY (1995)

STRATEGY	KEY CHARACTERISTIC
DENIAL	
Simple Denial	Did Not Perform Act
Shift the Blame	Act Performed by Another
EVASION OF RESPONSIBILITY	
Provocation	Responded to Act of Another
Defeasibility	Lack of Information or Ability
Accident	Act Was a Mishap
Good Intentions	Meant Well in Act
REDUCING OFFENSIVENESS OF EVENT	
Bolstering	Stress Good Traits
Minimization	Act Not Serious
Differentiation	Act Less Offensive
Transcendence	More Important Considerations
Attack Accuser	Reduce Credibility of Accuser
Compensation	Reimburse Victim
CORRECTIVE ACTION	
Mortification	<i>Plan to Solve or Prevent Problem</i> Apologize for Act

RESEARCH APPROACH



FINDINGS OVERVIEW

DO TRADITIONAL PR STRATEGIES WORK?

- Most public relations practitioners interviewed use both traditional public relations strategies and newer, non-traditional strategies when facing social media-generated crises.
- While traditional PR strategies work, they are not sufficient in a social media setting.

WHICH TRADITIONAL PR STRATEGIES ARE USED?

- Many traditional PR strategies do work in a social media setting.
- Notably, PR professionals shared the importance of:
 - Having a crisis management plan
 - Showing empathy for the individuals or organization creating the crisis
 - Taking the time to be accurate before rushing to respond
 - Sharing the response to key internal audiences before responding publicly

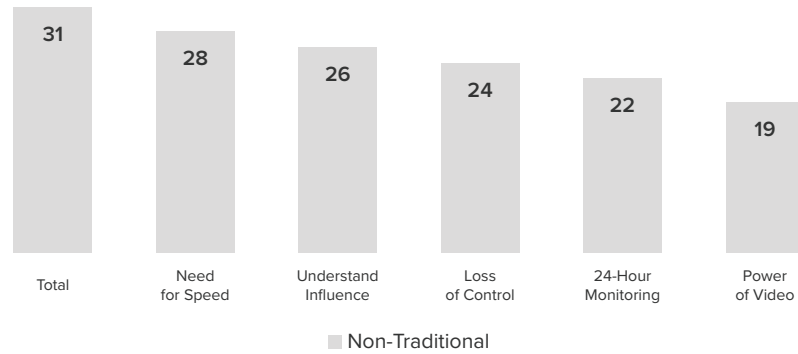


I think having a plan in place before you face that (crisis) is making sure that **everybody in your organization** knows that plan and understands.

WHICH NON-TRADITIONAL STRATEGIES ARE USED?

- PR professionals are even more likely to use non-traditional strategies in a social media setting.
- Key themes include:
 - The need for a speedy response
 - Understanding the influence of the individual and their reach among your key stakeholders
 - Managing the loss of control and unpredictable nature of social crises

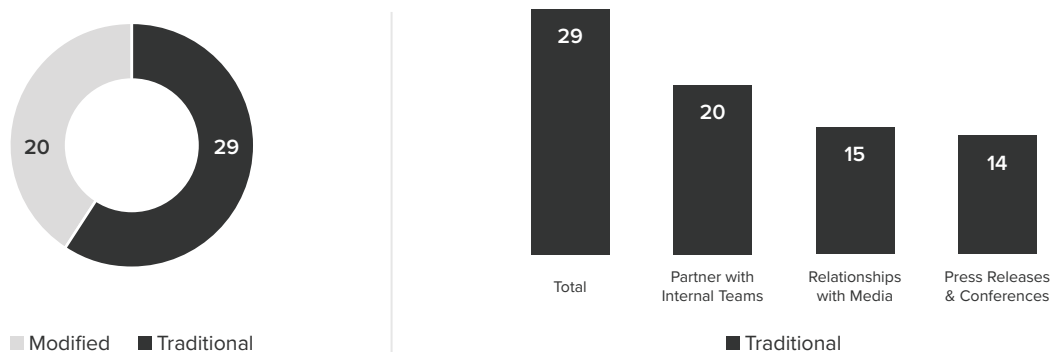
- The need to monitor around the clock
- The power of video, although many would like to use it more than they do



Even if we don't have anything to say, **we want to respond.**

WHICH TRADITIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES ARE USED?

- Most public relations practitioners interviewed use both traditional crisis communications strategies and modified traditional crisis communication strategies in social media-generated crises.
- Many traditional crisis communication strategies are used in managing social media-generated crises.
- PR practitioners look to:
 - Partner with leadership, legal, operations and other internal teams to develop messages
 - Rely upon strong relationships with media partners
 - Utilize press releases and press conferences

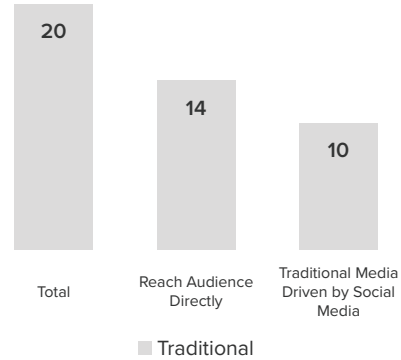




When something does flare-up, I can call them (subject matter experts) urgently to **sit down all at once** and go through what the truth is, what we can say.

WHICH MODIFIED CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TACTICS ARE USED?

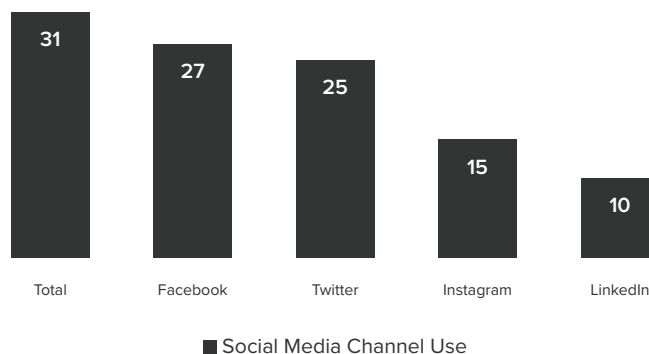
- PR professionals often modify their crisis communications tactics in managing social media-generated crises.
- Social media themselves are leveraged as a method of reaching the target audience directly to address a crisis.
- Traditional media also follow the organization's social media and can be driven indirectly.



Social media really gives you a chance to quickly say it yourself and take out that **middleman**.

HOW ARE RESPONSE CHANNELS CHOSEN?

- Facebook is the primary social media channel utilized by participants, primarily for consumer audiences.
- Twitter is almost as commonly used, primarily for media or industry audiences.
- Some utilize Instagram to share more visual content in their response.
- For those looking to reach B2B audiences, LinkedIn is leveraged.

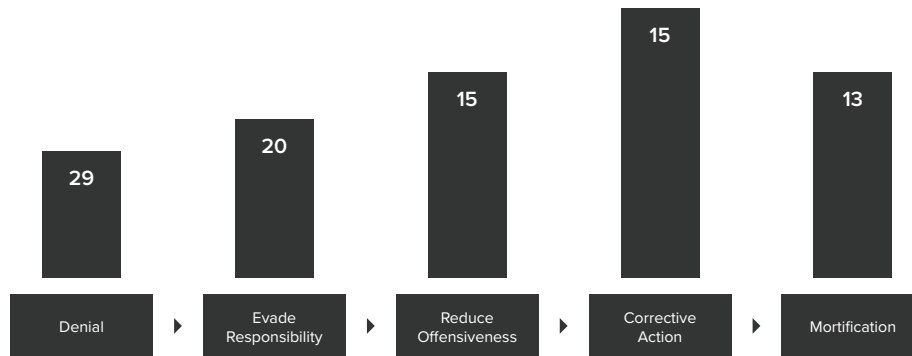




We use all of those platforms. It's almost by topic and where it's getting the **most traction** already.

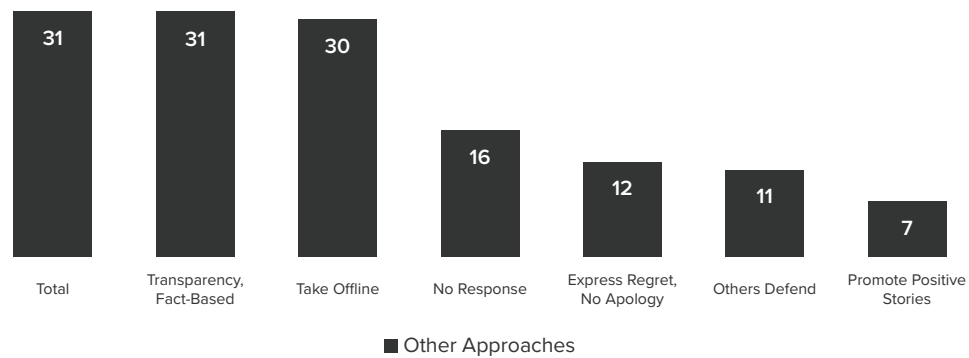
IS BENOIT'S CONTINUUM OF CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES RELEVANT?

- Most PR practitioners (28 of 31) utilize at least one of Benoit's IRT approaches.
- Corrective action is the most prevalent.
- Few deny or evade responsibility unless there is clear misinformation.



WHAT OTHER IMAGE REPAIR APPROACHES ARE USED?

- All PR practitioners in this research report being very transparent and fact-based in their response to a social media-generated crisis.
- Most seek to take the conversation offline as soon as possible and handle it on a one-to-one basis.
- About half choose not to respond depending on the reach and severity.



DOES AGE, GENDER OR EXPERIENCE INFLUENCE THE APPROACH?

- Generally speaking – no, based on this research.
- Only two notable differences:
 - Those in PR agencies are less likely to use 24-hour monitoring.
 - Younger PR professionals are more likely to use traditional crisis communication tactics of press releases and conferences.
- All other areas were directionally similar across age, gender and experience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PR PRACTITIONERS

In managing a social media-generated crisis:

- Benoit's 1995 study is applicable, but denial and evasion are not preferred.
- Silence is an option favored by PR pros – whether quickly taking the conversation offline or ignoring the online dialogue altogether.
- The social media platform selected for response was based on audience analysis/fit.
- Social media are viewed by PR practitioners as one-way communications devices rather than vehicles for two-way dialogue, as the literature suggests.
- A near-immediate response is required in social vs. the traditional response timeline.

APPENDIX: DISSERTATION MANUSCRIPT – CH. 4 FINDINGS

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine if image repair theory (IRT), as described by Benoit (1995), is useful for managing clients' social media-generated crises in 2020 in the United States. The study explored if age, gender, or experience impact a practitioner's tactical and strategic response to a social media-generated crisis. There was a need for public relations practitioners to properly understand and attempt to manage the unending barrage of negative stories and unsubstantiated claims arising from social media (Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016). The onslaught of social media activity challenged public relations practitioners since much of the web-based content is unverified, pervasive, and instantaneous to a worldwide audience. Better understanding how public relations practitioners have responded to a social media-generated crisis in their organizations or on behalf of clients provided an opportunity to explore best practices and offer pathways and channels to handle a crisis better.

While crisis communication strategies have evolved over the years, Benoit's IRT has been adopted and adapted by practitioners. This study examined how public relations practitioners' responses during a social media-generated crisis fit into categories developed by Benoit. The categories were further advanced in literature by Coombs when social media had progressed at light-speed, but communications theory had not (Cheng, 2018).

Despite some critiques of its universal application, IRT serves as the foundation of much crisis communication research and led to reformulations since it was first proposed (Marsen, 2020). Situational crisis communication theory refocused attention from company strategy to public perception by introducing the factor of attribution, borrowed from social psychology.

In this study, respondents indicated external factors, such as audience analysis and social media platform selection, were critical factors in strategy design and implementation. This conclusion supports Marsen's work posits that situational communication theory presents a more holistic view of the crisis due to the importance of external perception and attribution (Marsen 2020).

While Benoit's work has been exhaustive and succinct, other theorists point to the fact that crises involve many stakeholders with highly divergent perspectives and interests. Crisis communication research may cater to the multiplicity of voices, or multivocality, present. In a research effort by Kim, Avery, and Lariscy (2009), quantitative content analysis evaluated crisis response strategy analyzed in more than 18 years of research, published in crisis communication literature in public relations. Analysis of 51 articles in 11 different journals used two dominant theories in public relations crisis communication literature, Benoit's IRT and Coombs' situational crisis communication theory. The lack of diversity in the cases, and gaps between theory and practice, indicated pressing directions for future research.

This study did not consider other theories, such as Grunig and Grunig's excellence theory (1998), because they did not fit IRT's exactness and applicability. Grunig and Grunig's (1998) excellence study reveals a complicated but logically satisfying explanation of public relations' value. To be effective, an organization must strive to solve the problems and satisfy both stakeholders and management (Grunig & Grunig, 1998).

Another theory, attribution theory, highlighted and emphasized the communication and media dimension and the importance of public relations in crisis management. Attribution theory explained how people make sense of negative occurrences and why the event occurred. People

attribute responsibility for events. When applied to crisis management, stakeholders ascribe responsibility internally (organization) or externally (environmental factors). This audience-based theory attempted to identify the crisis factors that shape the crisis attributions stakeholders make (Coombs, 2010; Wise, 2004).

Results in this study confirm Benoit's Image Repair Theory (Benoit 1995) and its usefulness in combating damage to an organization's reputation. Various responses, ranging from denial to apology, may be appropriate in a crisis communication scenario. Many respondents said they use different responses in different social media settings depending on the crisis occurring. However, respondents did not favor or consistently use denial as described in Benoit's IRT as a response on social media. A few respondents favored denial, but only when clear-cut falsehoods emanated from social media publics and stakeholders.

Apology, another IRT attribute, was favored only when there was clear harm to an organization's reputation. Apology responses also required pre-vetting by the legal team at the organization.

The interviews discovered the option of "doing nothing at all" in cases of social media upheaval. This "no-response" option has been the subject of other research. Benoit's IRT framework does not include it as a strategy, suggesting broadening response strategies to include a "no-action" alternative in the continuum of responses.

An additional finding concerned the use of fact-based, neutral responses. When needed, respondents suggested basing a proper response on clear facts presented in a neutral tone. Also contradicting Benoit's IRT response schema, no category for neutral, fact-based responses appears in his early work.

One strategy that emerged from this study but was not in Benoit's early IRT framework was reinforcing the organization's reputation through positive stories and social media posts. This strategy is “bolstering” under Benoit’s reducing offensiveness category. Reducing offensiveness suggests the communicator accepts some measure of responsibility but offers external communication such as positive stories and information to "lessen the impact on their reputation." This strategy is identified as (a) bolstering the image of the communicator to lessen the impact of the harmful act; (b) minimization of the incident; (c) differentiation to contrast the specific act with even greater transgressions; (d) transcendence, in which the specific act is placed in a different light; (e) attacking the accuser; and (f) offering some form of compensation for the perceived harm caused by the communicator's actions (Armfield et.al. 2019).

Furthermore, this study did not confirm that age, gender, or experience affected the responses used by public relations practitioners. However, this limited sample size of 31 respondents among varied age groups, gender, and experience did not factor into decision making for crisis response, primarily related to social media crises.

Many practitioners noted that the use of social media platforms did not result in effective two-way communication on the various platforms in the digital space. Instead, most practitioners saw social media platforms as useful for one-way communication to distribute information and positive messages about the organization. This contradicts both researchers' and practitioners' opinions that social media platforms are effective for two-way communication with stakeholders. The idea that social media platforms contribute to better stakeholder involvement needs additional study as most respondents said they use social media to share positive information about their company or non-profit.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Public relations professionals struggle to understand and respond to an ever-increasing deluge of damaging content and unverified sources (Schwarz, 2012). The study also examined whether the public relations professional's age is related to efficacy in handling social media-generated crises. For example, would an older professional with more traditional experience in crisis management and less experience with social media-generated crises, be as comfortable and aggressive in social media responses as a younger practitioner? This paper proposed a qualitative approach to ascertain the viewpoints of professionals. Specifically, do age, gender, and experience matter when confronting social media-generated crises. The study assessed and interpreted practitioners' attitudinal and tactical approaches when crises develop, and their approach and deployment of social media proactive and reactive responses.

The following research questions guided the study.

RQ1. How do public relations professionals use traditional public relations strategies, such as IRT, in the fast-paced and unpredictable social media setting when it involves crises?

RQ2. What is traditional crisis communication strategies employed by practitioners when dealing with a social media-generated crisis?

RQ3. How are crisis managers choosing response channels (Facebook over Twitter, for example) when handling a crisis created by social media?

RQ4. How applicable are Benoit's continuum of response strategies from denial to mortification in today's social media crisis environment?

RQ5. How do age, gender, or experience levels influence the manner and methodologies chosen by public relations practitioners when confronting a social media-generated crisis?

Results

NVivo12 by QSR International assisted with the qualitative analysis of the questions, including transcribing and coding the interviews. The survey codes were then translated into themes and tabulated based on their number of references and the number of participants who shared them. NVivo12 produced the hierarchy of themes based on the frequency of participants' references of the themes (n=31). The study tagged the most frequently referenced themes as the *core themes* and identified those with fewer references participants' *other themes*. The researcher incorporated the main points of Benoit's image repair theory (1995) into the thematic analysis.

All participants were working public relations practitioners aged 18+ (not in government or academia full time) in Indiana, with a minimum of a B.S. or B.A. All participants had personal experience in at least one social media-generated crisis in the past two to four years. Table 2 contains the breakdown of the participants' PRSA membership, gender, age, education, and sector.

Table 2:

Breakdown of Participants' Demographics

Participant Number	PRSA Member	Gender	Age	Education	Sector
Participant 1	Yes	Female	18-24	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 2	Yes	Female	25-34	Bachelors	Corporation or Business
Participant 3	Yes	Male	55-64	Bachelors	Advertising agency
Participant 4	Yes	Male	25-34	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 5	Yes	Female	25-34	Bachelors	Corporation or Business
Participant 6	Yes	Male	35-44	Bachelors	Corporation or Business
Participant 7	Yes	Female	45-54	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit

Participant Number	PRSA Member	Gender	Age	Education	Sector
Participant 8	Yes	Female	45-54	Masters	Public Relations agency
Participant 9	No	Female	45-54	Masters	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 10	No	Female	35-44	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 11	No	Male	55-64	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 12	No	Male	45-54	Masters	Public Relations agency
Participant 13	No	Male	35-44	Bachelors	Public Relations agency
Participant 14	No	Female	55-64	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 15	No	Male	55-64	Masters	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 16	No	Male	35-44	Bachelors	Public Relations agency
Participant 17	Yes	Female	45-54	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 18	Yes	Female	25-34	Masters	Corporation or Business
Participant 19	No	Female	45-54	Bachelors	Public Relations agency
Participant 20	Yes	Female	45-54	Bachelors	Corporation or Business
Participant 21	Yes	Female	35-44	Bachelors	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 22	No	Male	Above 64	Bachelors	Public Relations agency
Participant 23	Yes	Female	25-34	Masters	Corporation or Business
Participant 24	No	Female	55-64	Masters	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 25	Yes	Male	55-64	Masters	Not-for-profit or non-profit
Participant 26	Yes	Male	55-64	Masters	Public Relations agency
Participant 27	Yes	Female	45-54	Bachelors	Corporation or Business

Continued on Page 93

Participant Number	PRSA Member	Gender	Age	Education	Sector
Participant 29	No	Female	55-64	Bachelors	Corporation or Business
Participant 28	No	Female	35-44	Bachelors	Public Relations agency
Participant 30	No	Female	45-54	Bachelors	Public Relations agency
Participant 31	No	Female	25-34	Bachelors	Corporation or Business

RQ1. How do public relations professionals use traditional public relations strategies, such as IRT, in the fast-paced and unpredictable social media setting when it involves crises?

Thematic analysis of the interviews grouped responses into two categories with several themes addressing the first research question. Most public relations practitioners interviewed use traditional public relations strategies (n=29) and newer, non-traditional strategies when facing social media-generated crises (n=31). Table 3 contains the breakdown of findings in response to the first research question.

Table 3:

Breakdown of Findings in Response to RQ1

Thematic Categories	Core Themes	Other Themes	Number of Participants Who Referenced Theme (n=31)	Percentage of Participants Who Referenced Theme
Thematic Category A: Traditional PR Strategies N=29	Have a Plan		20	65%
	Show Empathy		15	48%

Continued on Page 96

Thematic Categories	Core Themes	Other Themes	Number of Participants Who Referenced Theme (n=31)	Percentage of Participants Who Referenced Theme
Thematic Category B: Non-Traditional PR Efforts N=31	Accuracy Over Speed		15	48%
	Internal First		13	42%
		Concern Over Opposition Community	5	16%
	Need for Speed		28	90%
	Understand Influence & Reach		26	84%
	Loss of Control/Unpredictable		24	77%
	24-Hour Monitoring		22	71%
		Proliferation of Channels/Tech	9	29%
		Lack of Validity of Some Sources	8	26%
		Fear of Social Media Permanence	5	16%

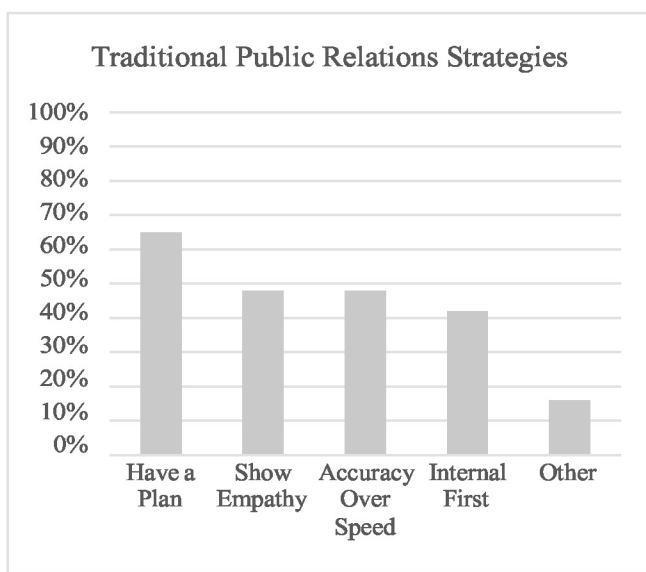
Thematic Category A: Traditional PR Strategies

The first thematic category covers the traditional public relations strategies and tactics used in addressing social media-generated crises. Four core themes emerged: 65% of participants

(20 of 31) emphasized the importance of having a plan including social media training and an escalation path for higher impact crises, 48% of participants (15 of 31) cited the importance of showing empathy and accuracy over speed, and 42% (13 of 31) mentioned the value of communicating internally first. One other theme also emerged among 5 participants: concern over the opposition community (16%)

Figure 1:

Traditional Public Relations Strategies



Core Theme 1: Have a Plan. Traditional public relations practice strongly encouraged developing crisis plans and contingency plans with previously developed messaging and responses. A total of 20 of 31 respondents suggested a social media crisis plan is advisable and helpful. Traditional public relations practice requires preparedness for a crisis, including planning, media training, and developing messaging for a fast-moving crisis. Participant 11 emphasized this need by stating, “I think having a plan in place before you face that in making sure that everybody in your organization knows that plan and understands.” Because social

media is immediate and pervasive, an external public may use a social media platform to engage in reputation-damaging attacks at a company without regard to the accuracy and validity of the statements or argument. Many participants (n=16) reported providing training to stakeholders specifically about how to address social media-generated crises. Participant 18 stated:

We have a crisis communications playbook where we have a binder full of every scenario that we have incurred already and what we anticipate. We have predisposed media statements, responses for tweets, responses for press conferences.

A total of 16 participants also cited escalating social media-generated crises internally to senior leadership if the risk of reputation damage is high.

Core Theme 2: Show Empathy. Of the 31 participants, 15 stressed the importance of showing empathy in crisis response. Sincere, emotive responses can assure internal and external publics that the company is at least acknowledging that something happened. Participant 8 said, "I think empathy is imperative, is paramount. You need to build some public sentiment. You must make sure that the public knows you are not taking this for granted." However, responses in social media channels may be viewed as defensive or incite additional comments and criticism. Participant 26 stated, "You need to acknowledge that and express sympathy, which is not the same thing as accepting or acknowledging responsibility. It is one of the trickiest and dangerous areas in crisis."

Core Theme 3: Accuracy Over Speed is a crucial strategy in a traditional setting, and 15 of 31 respondents said that social media responses must also be factual and accurate regardless of urgency. Participant 17 said, "It is one of the more critical jobs now more than ever to have a penchant for accuracy. Just do not be afraid to double-check and triple-check. Don't be

too quick about it.” Participant 2 added, “As much as you need immediacy, you need accuracy. There is nothing worse than putting out a message and having to backtrack.” Participant 3 said, “When you respond quickly, people want to share your response. It could be in a negative way, not the positive way, and you create flames for the fire or feed the fire.”

Core Theme 4: Internal First. Traditional public relations strategies have emphasized the importance of a concentric circles model (Roper, 1945) whereby the primary audience is contacted/informed first in times of a crisis. In many instances, internal publics (employees, board members, vendors) are told first to avoid rumor spread and ensure internal stakeholders have the facts first. Thirteen of 31 participants cited that for social media-generated crises as well. External information pathways such as Facebook were seen as critical, but only for information sharing purposes, and not as effective two-way dialogue with the public. Participant 19 shared:

The employees and volunteers or a very active board, other people are going to want to find out something before they see it in the media. Those people also can be posting to social media. If they are not informed correctly, they can be coming to the defense of an organization or they fueling the fire.

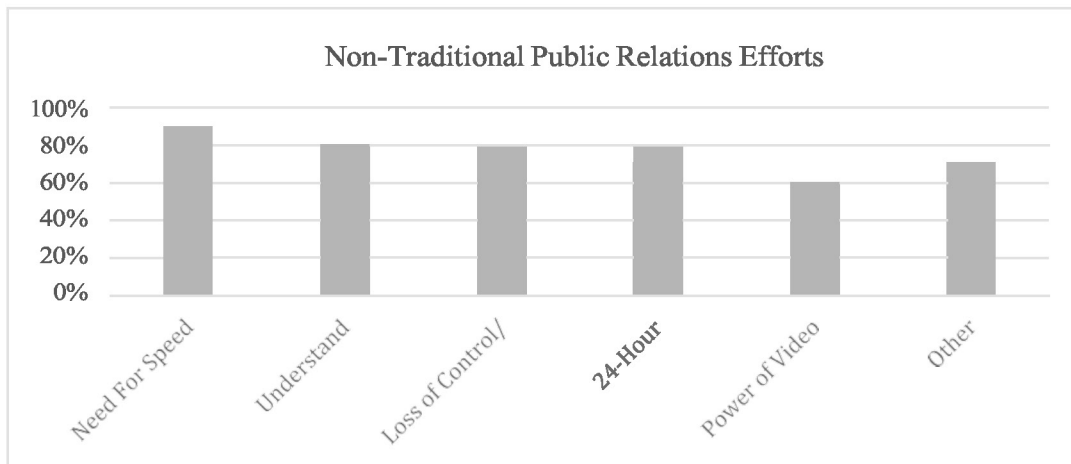
Other Theme: Concern Over Opposition Community. Historically concern about the opposition community has been common among PR practitioners. However, the depth and breadth of fast-rising social media crises suggest new, more complex challenges for professionals. Only 5 of 31 participants mentioned this concern. Speaking of opposition groups, Participant 7 shared, “They understand social media and how to look for the hot buttons. There are hot button groups that you want to stay ahead of.”

Thematic Category B: Non-Traditional PR Efforts

The second thematic category covers efforts that are beyond the traditional PR strategies. Five core themes emerged: 90% of participants (28 of 31) shared the need for speed, 85% of participants (26 of 31) mentioned the importance of understanding the influence and reach of a social media crisis, 77% (24 of 31) talked about the challenge of loss of control and unpredictability, 71% (22 of 31) discussed the need for 24/7 monitoring and 61% (19 of 31) mentioned the power of video to escalate and manage a social media crisis. Three other themes also emerged: the challenge in the proliferation of social media channels and technology (29%), the lack of validity of some sources (26%), and the fear of permanence of social media (16%).

Figure 2:

Non-Traditional Public Relations Efforts



Core Theme 1: Need for Speed. While accuracy is paramount, 28 respondents indicated the heightened need to respond quickly to a crisis when it occurs in the social media realm.

Participant 11 explained, “I always personally want to respond as quickly as possible, because I

don't want to give the impression that we are not taking somebody's comment or concern seriously. I like to keep it two minutes if possible.” Participant 14 said:

Our first statement is we are aware of the situation and we are looking into it, and that helps. The last thing we want to do is be quiet. Even if we don't have anything to say, we want to respond.

Participant 15 shared:

We go out to events, emergency scenes, and I see lots of people with their cell phones on. In many cases, they are live streaming. So we do have to push our operations people and our legal people to move statements out quickly because you can lose control of a message very quickly on social media.

Core Theme 2: Understand Influence & Reach. Twenty-six respondents recognized the importance of understanding the influence and reach of social media when a crisis occurs. They agreed that social media might exacerbate a crisis or threat to reputation management. Participant 19 said that they are “often trying to get a rapid handle on how many people are engaging in social; you can have hundreds of posts, but is it only 10 active people?” The size of the following often drives the response strategy. Participant 27 shared:

You will look at someone and see how many followers, what's their influence, are they just kind of venting a little bit and then it's done? It's not that we ignore it; we know what's happening, but we won't respond to it.

Core Theme 3: Loss of Control/Unpredictable. Most respondents (24 of 31) agreed that social media presents unpredictable situations that cannot be controlled or managed. Unlike traditional public relations, those situations may pose challenges to control the situation quickly

to quell the crisis. Participant 11 shared, “We did have one incident a couple of years ago that we could not control because somebody started posting things about us, but didn't tag us in the original post. Because of that, we couldn't directly respond to them.” Participant 13 said, “It's almost a Wild West of communication sometimes. Traditionally, we do not want to limit people's right or ability to chime in, because that seems like we're censoring the conversation or controlling the conversation.”

Core Theme 4: 24-Hour Monitoring. Twenty-two participants found this important compared to traditional monitoring of newscasts and morning papers in the historic news cycle. Many respondents reported using software tools to support their monitoring efforts and had significant staff time engaged in monitoring. Participant 3 said, “We use a couple of different services for monitoring. Some are better than others. For us, we feel it still takes the human eye to determine whether it is positive, negative, neutral.” Participant 31 shared, “Someone should always be monitoring the social platforms, even on nights and weekends.” Participant 7 mentioned, “Information gets out. You have to be ahead of it. So we are 24/7, and my team is a bunch of old news people. So they get that. We are always watching, always looking, always following and responding.”

Core Theme 5: Power of Video. Practitioners widely acknowledged video as something with growing importance in managing and responding to a crisis but agreed public relations professionals underutilize it. Participant 26 stated, “Video is very good in a crisis because coming back to the CEO or corporate spokesperson, people want to see and hear from someone.” Participant 3 said, “Video is trusted more than a statement because you can see someone's empathy and promise on camera that you can't see in a written document.” Some respondents

indicated that it might take too long to develop an appropriate video for distribution on social media channels to be effective. Participant 24 said:

We have used video. I don't think we're doing it enough. I feel what we're doing is antiquated. So I want to be more robust and have more video with a little bit of language versus a whole bunch of writing or this gloriously beautiful video that you're going to look at one time that you spent five thousand dollars to waste money.

Other Theme 1: Proliferation of Channels/Tech. The proliferation of new channels in social media, including adding new platforms that appeal to specific demographics, is a challenge mentioned by 9 participants. Participant 3 stated:

The fragmentation continues and that will keep changing every week as new channels come about. I think it's finding the channels that reach the audience you're talking about, and that might be some in social media and some in other ways.

Participant 8 shared, "I just want to make sure that if it's the platform we're going to use, it really is the right platform for crisis management."

Other Theme 2: Lack of Validity of Some Sources Eight people found unsubstantiated reports or invalid sources to be more likely in the expanded world of social media versus traditional media sources that are limited in scope. Participant 13 said, "A con [of social media] is you do not know all the time who these people are and what their background is like."

Participant 3 said that this distrust impacted the ability to handle social media crises: "The last couple of years have created a mistrust of information in social media, which makes it harder for companies to publish accurate, truthful information or be understood or believed."

Other Theme 3: Fear of Permanence of Social Media. Fear of permanence of social media was less of a concern (shared by only 5 participants) when compared to the accelerated news cycle and plethora of unending social media reports and stories requiring a need for speed. Participant 12 shared, “It’s permanent. If you pause before you hit send or post, then you should probably stop.” Participant 16 added, “I remind everybody the Internet is forever and that no matter what you put out there, even if it was deleted, it's out there forever.”

RQ2. What traditional crisis communication strategies are employed by practitioners when dealing with a social media-generated crisis?

The thematic analysis of the interviews grouped responses into two thematic categories with several themes addressing the first research question. Most public relations practitioners interviewed use traditional public relations strategies (n=29) and newer, non-traditional strategies when facing social media-generated crises (n=20). Table 4 contains the breakdown of findings in response to the second research question.

Table 4:

Findings in Response to RQ2

Thematic Categories	Core Themes	Other Themes	Number of Participants Who Referenced Theme (n=31)	Percentage of Participants Who Referenced Theme
Thematic Category A: Traditional Crisis Communications Tactics Used in Social Media Crisis N=29	Partner with Leadership, Legal and Other Teams to Develop Messages		20	65%

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Page 105*

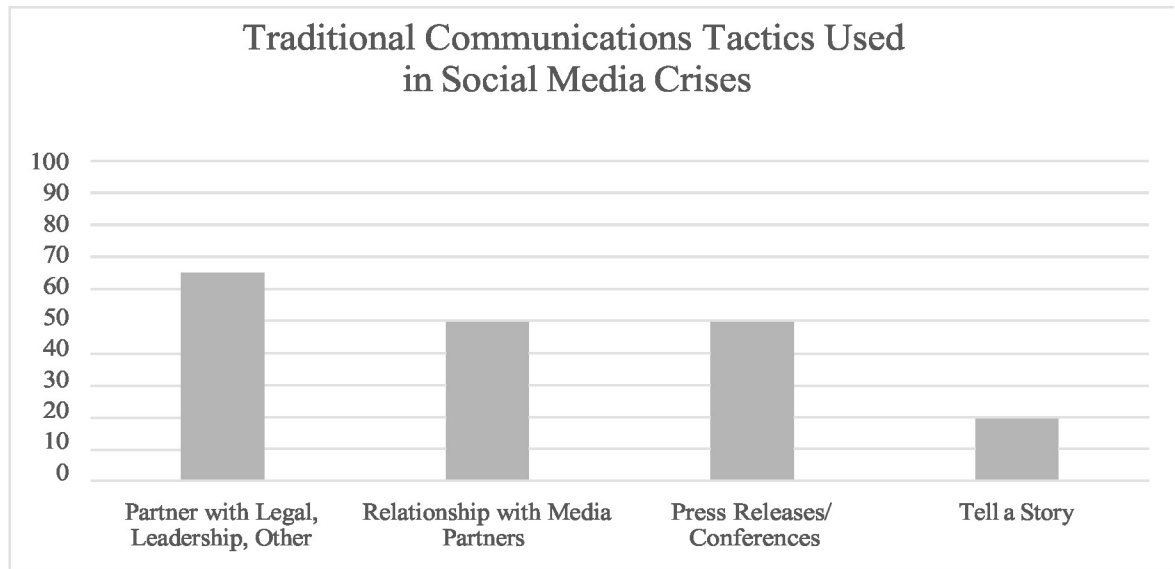
Thematic Categories	Core Theme	Other Themes	Number of Participants Who Referenced Theme (n=31)	Percentage of Participants Who Referenced Theme
	Relationship with Media Partners		15	48%
	Press Releases / Conferences		14	45%
		Tell a Story	6	19%
Thematic Category B: Modified Traditional Crisis Communications Tactics in Social Media Crisis N=20	Opportunity to Reach Audiences Directly		14	45%
	Traditional Media Driven by Social Media		10	32%

Thematic Category A: Traditional Communication Tactics Used in Social Media Crisis

The first thematic category covered the traditional communications tactics used in addressing social media-generated crises. Four core themes emerged: partnering with leadership, legal, and others, in advance to craft pre-approved messages, establishing strong relationships with traditional media, relationships with traditional media, and press releases and press conferences, and one other theme, the importance of telling a compelling story.

Figure 3:

Traditional Communication Tactics



Core Theme 1: Partnering with Leadership, Legal and Other Teams was the most frequently mentioned communication tactic. Participants shared that messages ideally are approved in advance of a crisis. If a new, unanticipated crisis emerges, participants quickly bring in those individuals to strategize and approve responses before communicating externally. Participant 13 shared, “Sometimes you have to be very careful and working directly with attorneys before you issue a statement.” Participant 14 stated, “When something does flare-up, I can call them (subject matter experts) urgently to sit down all at once and go through what the truth is, what we can say.”

Core Theme 2: Establishing Strong Relationships with Traditional Media. About half mentioned the importance of establishing strong relationships with traditional media (48%

of participants, 15 of 31). Because of the mutual trust, these relationships helped them manage the crisis, and buy time to formulate a response. Participant 28 said:

If you have a media request, it's important to acknowledge the request, but you don't have to give your statement then. You can write back and say, "we received your comment, your inquiry, and we're working to get a response." That is enough of a response that she knows you are working on it. Then your team can take a breath and come up with the best approach.

Core Theme 3: The Value of Press Releases and Press Conferences. Many participants cited the value of traditional communication methods such as press releases and conferences (45%, 14 of 31). Participant 1 stated, "Press conferences, those press releases, the statements you can release, those are good. I think those are the first step." Participant 29 shared an example where a press conference was effective: "We had a very well attended press conference that got a lot of attention and ended up really moving the dial on the whole thing." Participant 3 shared that press releases can help share their story on social media: "So many news organizations pick up press releases because they have to feed their digital machine and keep their content fresh."

Other Theme: Telling a Story. Some participants talked about the importance of sharing a compelling story to manage a crisis (19%, 6 of 31). Participant 3 summarized this sentiment:

You have to create interest, and you have to deliver a succinct and emotional story that people will understand. That's true in social media, video and newspaper. The

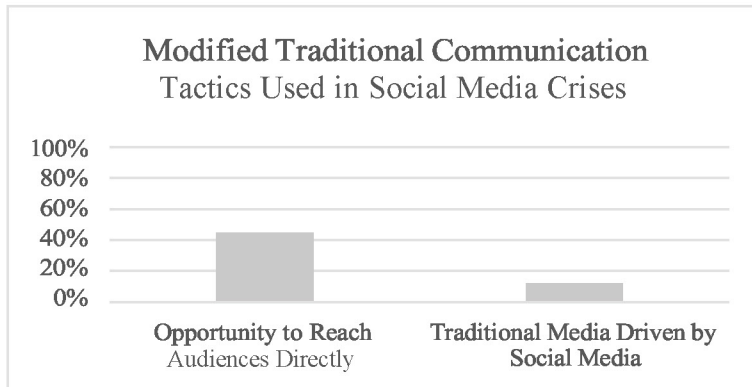
fundamentals of our business of communication hold true regardless of what the channel is, which is a good thing for people.

Thematic Category B: Modified Traditional Crisis Communications Tactics in Social Media Crisis

The second thematic category comprises communication tactics that are different or modified from traditional methods for handling a social media crisis. Two core themes emerged: going around traditional media and utilizing social media as an opportunity to reach audiences directly (45%, 20 of 31) and seeing the traditional media being driven by social media and reacting to online activity (32%, 10 of 31).

Figure 4:

Modified Traditional Communications Strategies



Core Theme 1: Opportunity to Reach Audiences Directly. Almost half of participants (45%, 14 of 31) mentioned that they utilize social media to get their message out without relying on traditional media channels. Participant 1 stated, “Social media has become the beast it has because it connects people over oceans, over states, and it can humanize an organization if used correctly.” Participant 12 commented, “You lead with social media because of the

immediate access. I can put out a statement on Facebook, Twitter from Mayor X, and it's out there, whereas with traditional media, you are at someone else's mercy." Participant 17 also emphasized the ability to take control: "Social media gives you a chance to say it yourself and take out that middleman. So it works well."

Core Theme 2: Traditional Media Driven by Social Media. About a third of participants mentioned that they see traditional media following and responding to developments they see on social media (32%, 10 of 31). Participant 14 stated, "Now the media saw the social media because they follow us. So then we were getting all the media calls locally and nationally asking us about what we were doing (based on what we shared on social media)."

RQ3. How are crisis managers choosing response channels (Facebook over Twitter, for example) when handling a crisis created by social media?

Thematic Category A: Audience Determined Channel.

The first thematic category represents participants' comments that social media channel selection and response strategies depend on the target audience the organization would like to reach. A total of 11 participants (35%) specifically emphasized that the social media platforms utilized will vary depending on the crisis. Participant 19 stated, "(It is important to) understand the platform they are working on because that makes a big difference. Understanding the audiences of who is using what." Participant 26 shared:

Social media is a tactic, not a strategy. It is a communications vehicle. So in terms of interacting with stakeholders and managing a crisis, well, it partly depends on is the crisis across multiple social media channels or not? It probably will be about how you interact with stakeholders, depends largely on where those stakeholders are and where

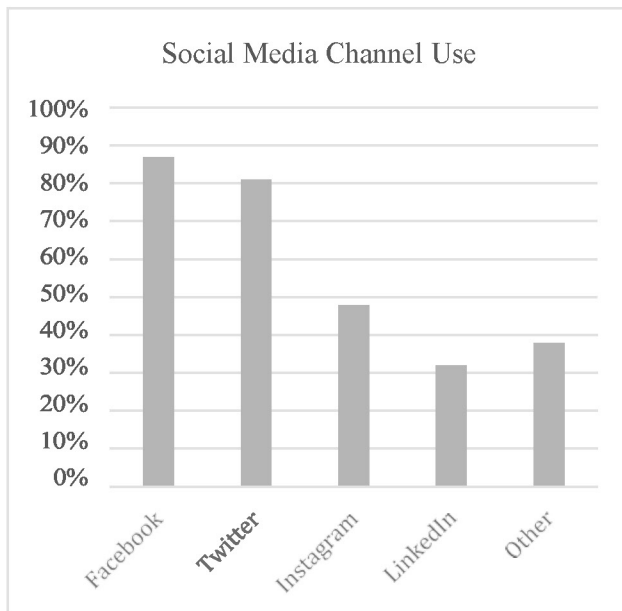
they're engaging with social media. People try to boil the ocean. They try to do everything. And that's very, very hard unless you have a huge team. You do have to prioritize.

Participant 29 added:

We use all of those platforms, of course, and it's almost by topic. It would depend where (a crisis) was getting the most traction already. If it's something that I'm not being proactive about, something I'm being reactive about, obviously I'm going to react where the kerfuffle is happening. I think social media platforms do have different personalities.

Figure 5:

Social Media Channel Use



Thematic Category B: Social Media Channel Use.

The second thematic category covers the specific social media channels chosen by participants to respond and manage a social media-generated crisis. Four core platforms were most prevalent: Facebook (27 of 31), Twitter (25 of 31), Instagram (15 of 31) and LinkedIn (10 of 31). Other platforms were less used among participants: TikTok (6 of 31), YouTube (4 of 31) and Nextdoor (2 of 31).

Core Theme 1: Facebook. In exploring the quickly evolving social media platforms, 27 respondents relied heavily on Facebook to share mostly positive news. They were reluctant to get into an online dialogue with detractors or critics. Participant 17 shared, “Facebook, again, is the big behemoth that is kind of an all-powerful platform for information we want to get out.”

Participant 11 stated:

Facebook is our primary tool. We do use Twitter and Instagram, but I wouldn't say we have a very robust presence on those forums. I had seen some research that in health care, Facebook is still very much the dominant social media tool.

Participant 8 said, “The beauty of it is that you could utilize Facebook to issue a more broad statement. It could be the overarching strategy or the overarching message.” Facebook is viewed as a social media channel to reach a broad range of ages. Participant 31 shared:

I think the older demographic is more active on Facebook. They're sharing more things. They're “liking” more things. But the younger demographic are just not as vocal. So they're still looking at things. They're just not as engaged an audience on Facebook.

Core Theme 2: Twitter. A total of 25 participants mentioned Twitter, indicating that it is used for quick, informational messages and noted that reporters monitored Twitter regularly for

news or information on a company. Participant 1 stated, “Twitter is a little more informational newsy.” Participant 11 mentioned, “Twitter was a little more important, especially when communicating in a crisis. Twitter was kind of our go to communication tool as far as plans for any kind of a major incident mainly because that's where the media is.” Participant 14 added, “Twitter feeds are mostly business. Everybody has been using it for politics and news.” If negative information appears that offers up a news opportunity on Twitter, reporters may seize upon the data. They may contact the company in question about the issue surfacing on the digital platform. Participant 18 added, “I would say most of our crisis issues arise from Twitter just because it's often used for reviews and commentary.” Participant 26 stated:

So many journalists today are on Twitter and want to interact with sources via Twitter. So you will find that a lot of crisis communication happens on Twitter as well as other platforms. Obviously things come up all the time.

Core Theme 3: Instagram. About half of participants reported using Instagram, primarily for the ability to share images (15 of 31). Participant 14 stated, “We have fabulous photography. So we were toying with Instagram. We put our stories out on Instagram. But again, the engagement is not as much as it is with Facebook.” Instagram also tends to skew to a younger audience. Participant 1 stated, “Instagram is a little more youthful. It talks a lot about the fun and the experiences and those Instagram-able moments.” Participant 17 mentioned, “We're trying to use Instagram for events that are geared toward young professionals.”

Core Theme 4: LinkedIn. Less often mentioned was the use of LinkedIn as a helpful tool in thwarting negative online mentions (10 of 31). LinkedIn appears to be focused on the business community and does not have the coverage depth of the large social media players like

Facebook or Twitter. Participant 16 said, "LinkedIn has a reputation of being good if you are trying to be a thought leader, push content." Participant 18 mentioned, "We really promote the different companies and organizations that we work with and that help boost our business."

Other Theme 1: TikTok. Few had experience with TikTok (6 of 31), and those who did now use the platform infrequently due to security concerns. Participant 14 said:

We experimented with a TikTok channel because we thought it would be fun for kids do. We had some educational videos, and then we had the whole cyber security issue with it, so we just took down our TikTok page. Our security had to take it down.

Other Theme 2: YouTube. The use of video options like YouTube was not common among public relations practitioners (4 of 31). Participant 20 shared:

We have a YouTube channel and share videos, and primarily used Facebook as more of a warehouse. To be honest, every time we get a video, we put it up there, and then we use other means to share the YouTube link to drive them back to our channel.

Some participants stated that video was an underused resource in their work at reputation enhancement or repair (see Power of Video in RQ1).

Other Theme 3: Nextdoor. Few participants mentioned this social media channel (2 of 31). The channel has potential value due to the ability to hyper-target a specific neighborhood. However, there is a barrier to organizations using Nextdoor more frequently. Participant 15 stated:

We do monitor the best we can the Nextdoor platform. But that's very difficult because Nextdoor is broken down literally by neighborhood. You have to be a member in

that neighborhood. So we depend on our employees to alert us to issues that they see on Nextdoor.

RQ4. How applicable are Benoit's continuum of response strategies from denial to mortification in today's social media crises environment?

In a 1994 study, Benoit and Hanczor, examined image restoration theories in relationship to sports, specifically the Tonya Harding crisis in skating. In the study (Benoit and Hanczor 1994) describe the various types of responses possible included within Benoit's image repair theory. In remarking about the opportunity to reduce the offensiveness of an act by providing positive attributes of the accused, the researchers discussed how providing positive characteristics of the speaker's image might offset negative perceptions (Benoit & Hanczor 1994).

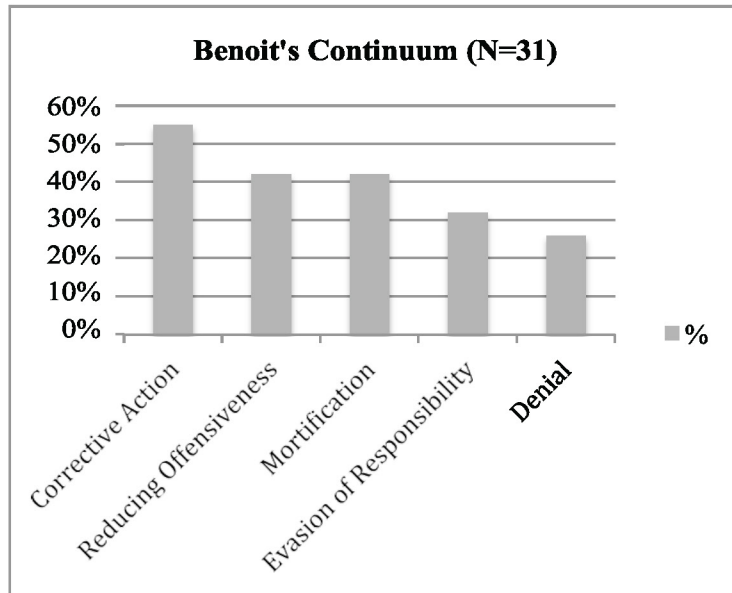
However, when asked about offsetting bad press or reputation damage with their clients, only seven of 31 respondents in this study suggested that was a potential strategy. Tactics include positive placement of non-controversial stories aimed at improving image. While this strategy holds some approval among practitioners, the overriding idea presented by 30 respondents was not to engage further online with critics, but try to take the conversation offline. Of the 5 categories in Benoit's continuum, only corrective action was mentioned by more than half of respondents (17 of 31). Table 5 provides the breakdown of responses to the fourth research question.

Table 5:*Breakdown of Results Addressing RQ4*

Thematic Categories	Other Themes	Number of Participants Who Referenced Theme (n=31)	Percentage of Participants Who Referenced Theme
Thematic Category A: Benoit Continuum N=28 (90%)	Corrective Action	17	55%
	Reducing Offensiveness	13	42%
	Mortification	13	42%
	Evasion of Responsibility	10	32%
	Denial	8	26%
Thematic Category B: Other Image Repair Approaches N=31 (100%)	Transparency, Fact-Based	31	100%
	Take Offline	30	97%
	No Response	16	52%
	Express Regret, Without Apology	12	39%
	Allow Others to Defend / Validate	11	35%
	Promote Positive Stories	7	23%

Figure 6:

Benoit's Continuum



Thematic Category A: Benoit's Continuum.

The first thematic category comprises the 5 response strategies outlined in Benoit's image restoration theory work (Benoit 1995). Corrective Action was the only response strategy mentioned by more than half of participants (55%). Other themes included Reducing Offensiveness (42%) and Mortification (42%) followed by Evasion of Responsibility (32%) and finally Denial (26%).

Core Theme 1: Corrective Action. A plurality of participants reported taking corrective action in response to a social media-generated crisis (17 of 31). Participant 18 shared:

Our philosophy is always to be customer service oriented when we respond. So we want to make sure that the customer feels heard. We want to answer their concern,

and we want to make sure that it's not just done in a direct message to them behind the behind the screen. We want to make sure that others are aware that we are aware of what happened. That we are acting to correct it, and we are listening. We may not be able to solve it, but at least we're going to take action, whatever that action maybe.

Participant 30 said:

The other big campaign that we worked on that we wanted to make sure the public knew is how things had changed and how things were better and new policies that had been put in place to ensure that nothing like this ever happened again. These are the positive changes we put in place. This is how it's different. This is how you can trust what we're doing. These are the all the positive moves that we've made to be the best we can be.

Other Theme 1: Reducing Offensiveness. Just 13 of 31 participants shared examples of reducing the offensiveness of the crisis by promoting positive traits and minimizing the act.

Participant 10 stated, “I think we're able to kind of take a little bit more of a reserved approach and kind of very fact-based, optimistic, reminding people it's our mission, reminding people that we do work with a difficult population.” Participant 15 shared an example of minimizing the issue:

We only operate for the benefit of our customers and the community. We don't have stockholders. We only exist for our customers. We are subject to the public open records law. So when there's an emergency or a problem, we don't try to deny it. We try to explain what the issue is and why it's occurring. We try to reassure our customers.

Other Theme 2: Mortification. A total of 13 of 31 participants did share occasions when they have accepted fault and expressed apologies for the situation. Participant 1 stated:

You should not be afraid to admit you're wrong. No one expects an organization to be perfect. You know, imperfect people run it, and we're all willing to give grace to people. Admitting that an organization screwed up, I think humanizes it. It's not a god.

Participant 13 added:

If there is death or a major injury as there was in the BP case, where there's billions of gallons of oil spilled damaging natural wildlife for decades to come, you have to acknowledge all of that first. If there is a situation where there is obvious culpability and it's not even that much of a thin line or a gray area, then I'm all for apologizing.

Participant 15 stressed the importance of legal involvement when apologies are given:

We have taken responsibility when those events occur. Now we are very careful about it. We have to make sure we were at fault. Once it's clear we are, then we do take responsibility. So we have to be very careful in our statements on social media, and in many cases, legal has to review initial statements before they go out.

Other Theme 3: Evasion of Responsibility. Less than a third of participants reported using evasion of responsibility in their crisis responses (10 of 31). Participant 27 stated:

It definitely was not an apology because we were doing everything that we were supposed to do. We had followed all the criteria everyone had set out that we had to do. In our messaging, what we talked about is all the things that we did do correctly. So there was no apology. But we talked about caring about our members.

Participant 3 shared:

I would reiterate your quality controls and the processes you use every day because you cannot control what every single location will do and every employee. There is just no promise there for that. You have to go back to your fundamental core values and quality and service and repeat that in every way.

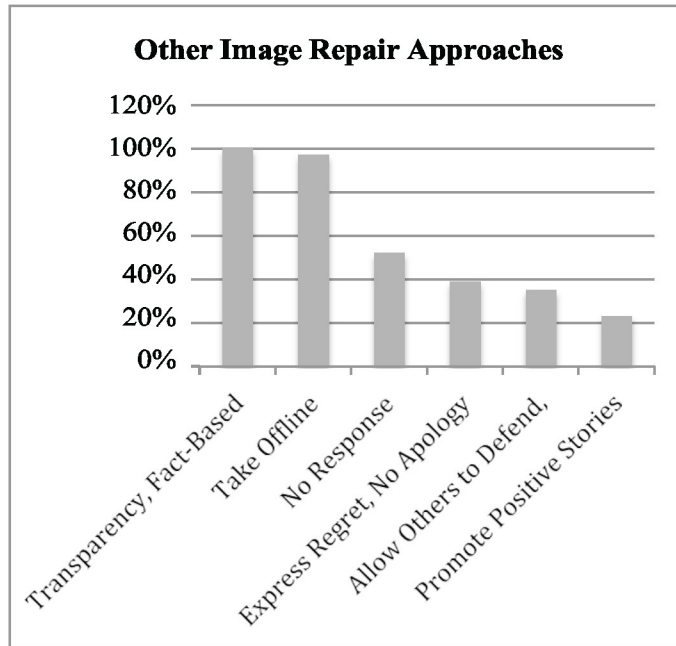
Other Theme 4: Denial. Of the response strategies in Benoit's continuum, denial was the least frequently mentioned by participants in this research (8 of 31). Participant 13 said:

Once we got the fact, the stories and the timelines, it was pretty clear that with the individual and her peer group, there were holes in what they were saying. We don't do this often, but we questioned the integrity of the newspaper and the integrity of the reporter.

In some cases, denial is used in the initial response to incorrect claims, but ultimately the goal is to take the conversation offline. Participant 17 said, "When we are faced with something online that is not correct, we will correct it, but we will not get into a war online about it."

Figure 7:

Other Image Repair Approaches



Thematic Category B: Other Image Repair Approaches.

The second thematic category covers other image repair strategies reported by participants that did not fall directly into the Benoit Image Repair Theory framework. The two most prevalent core themes included being very transparent and fact-based (100%), and taking the social media crisis conversation offline (97%). Another core theme that emerged was not responding to some social media issues depending on the reach and severity (52%). Three other themes were mentioned: expressing regret without apology (39%), allowing other stakeholders to defend or validate their brand/organization (35%), and promoting positive stories to drown out the negative (23%).

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Core Theme 1: Transparency, Fact-Based. All participants shared at least one example where they responded to a social media crisis by being very transparent and sharing factual information in their responses (31 of 31). Participants reported that they often acknowledge the situation right away as a response to give them time to research the issue and understand the concerns. Responses tended to be factual, without emotion, and to be updated as more details become available. Participant 11 stated, “We tried very hard to be as transparent as possible and to not hide from anything like that, but to address it as directly as possible.” Participant 12 shared their philosophy in responding as: “be as honest as you can, as fast as you can.” Participant 14 added:

We wanted to try to put as much truth out there to just stop people from posting. Our first statement in this case as we're aware of the situation and we're looking into it. So we at least said we're here, we're looking into it and that helps. So the last thing we want to do is be quiet. Even if we don't have anything to say, we want to respond.

Participant 25 stated, “I think that no matter what you do, transparency is the guiding principle and also knowing what you know and trying to be as objective as possible.”

Core Theme 2: Take Offline. Almost all participants reported striving to take a social media crisis offline as soon as possible to minimize the reach and escalation online (30 of 31). This included primarily proactive personal outreach to the individual creating the social media crisis, as well as secondarily stopping engagement online if the individual does not want to engage offline. Participant 1 said, "Let's contact the individual who's been hurt and hear his story before we release the statement. Maybe we can get things to change in that conversation." Participant 4 added, “It’s best to have a quick planned response so it can be taken offline immediately, like: ‘Please call this number and we will get back to you’ or ‘Thank you for letting us know. We will look into it and have somebody call you.’” Participant 31 said, "Especially when dealing with reviews and complaints, having people contact you directly because you do not want them to expand on their complaint on social either." Participant 24 shared, "Directly contact that person who is escalating and say, ‘Can we take this to an offline conversation?’ And then I would prefer phone versus writing.”

Core Theme 3: No Response. More than half of participants responded that for some social media issues, they choose not to respond at all (16 of 31). The fast pace of social media sometimes pushes crises out of the 'headlines' as quickly as they arise, and there's no need to address every issue, particularly if the reach is limited. Participant 11 said, "The advice was to let it play out, do not get involved. Doing some research, we found that the story was not exactly accurate.” Participant 14 shared an example:

So we look into it. It turns out a grandmother posted it. She had 10 followers and a closed Facebook group. So no one was going to see it and we could not have done anything with it. Actually knowing that helps the people internally (decide not to respond).

Participant 20 stated:

Well, if the crisis is about the profession and not necessarily our company, we are very selective in responding. When they are inquiring as to everyone, we tend to be very reserved and found great success in not responding.

Other Theme 1: Express Regret, Without Apology. Some participants reported taking a stance of expressing regret for the situation without a direct apology or acceptance of blame (12 of 31). Participant 11 stated:

Most of the times we usually avoid any kind of language that implies that we're apologizing because you don't want that to be misconstrued as an admission of guilt. What we try to do is acknowledge somebody's concern and want to hear more. And so we take it seriously, and we say we're concerned about the experience you had, or this is troubling to hear what you're telling us.

Participant 1 shared an example “In a statement, there was no apology. There was no acknowledgement that any wrongdoing had occurred. It was purely we regret that this situation has caused pain.” Participant 26 mentioned, “You need to acknowledge (the situation) and express sympathy, which is not the same thing as accepting or acknowledging responsibility. So this is one of the trickier and more dangerous areas in crisis management.”

Other Theme 2: Allow Others to Defend / Validate. About a third of participants mentioned allowing other supporters of the organization to defend the brand/organization in social media vs. the brand itself (11 of 31). Participant 12 shared, “Social media can buy you time and social media can also, if used properly, mobilize your allies. To say, hey, they got it right.” Participant 2 stated:

There is something to be said about balancing getting the message out, because when somebody else picks it up, it validates what you're saying, that somebody else believes it and it's giving that credibility. So that's why I actually choose not to post or drive traffic to our blog a lot of the times, but instead use one of our industry partners. But that means I have to wait.

Participant 7 said:

When we see our fans taking over for us, we let it ride because they're doing a good job and sticking up for us and they're trying to set the story straight. So if their information is correct, we'll let that conversation flow.

Other Theme 3: Promote Positive Stories. Some practitioners interviewed mentioned trying to promote positive stories online and in their social media feed to drown out the crisis story (7 of 31). Participant 10 stated, “Our challenge is putting enough time, resources and energy into positive PR so that when the negative comes because it will and it keeps coming, we're able to kind of manage it.” Participant 14 added, “There have been posts that are stupid or ignorant, and we will load things on top of it so it goes lower in the feed.”

RQ5. How do age, gender, or experience levels influence the manner and methodologies chosen by public relations practitioners when confronting a social media-generated crisis?

To address this question, we created cross-tabulations to slice the thematic analysis for RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 by age, gender, and industry sector. Given the nature of qualitative research, there are limited, statistically significant differences across demographic segments that were meaningful beyond the margin of error. Table 6 shows the results by demographic segment.

Table 6:*Breakdown of Results Addressing RQ5*

RQ#/ Thematic Category	Core Themes	Gender		Age		Industry Sector		
		Male (n=11)	Female (n=20)	<45 (n=13)	45+ (n=18)	Non-Profit (n=12)	Corporate (n=9)	PR Agency (n=9)
Margin of Error		±24.8%	±18.4%	±22.8%	±19.4%	±23.7%	±27.4%	±27.4%
RQ1. Traditional PR Strategies (n=29)	Have a Plan	55%	70%	62%	67%	67%	67%	56%
	Show Empathy	45%	50%	38%	56%	33%	33%	78%
	Accuracy Over Speed	55%	45%	54%	44%	50%	56%	44%
	Internal First	36%	45%	38%	44%	25%	44%	56%
RQ1. Non-Traditional PR Efforts (n=31)	Need for Speed	91%	90%	85%	94%	92%	89%	89%
	Understand Influence & Reach	100%	75%	85%	83%	83%	89%	78%
	Loss of Control/ Unpredictable	100%	65%	69%	83%	75%	56%	100%

	24-Hour Monitoring	55%	80%	77%	67%	83%	89%	33%↓
	Power of Video	64%	60%	62%	61%	58%	78%	44%
RQ2. Traditional Crisis Communications Tactics Used in Social Media Crisis N=29	Partner with Leadership, Legal and Other Teams to Develop Messages	70%	65%	77%	59%	64%	78%	56%
	Relationship with Media Partners	50%	50%	38%	59%	45%	33%	78%
	Press Releases / Conferences	30%	50%	69%	29%↓	36%	78%	22%
RQ2. Modified Traditional Crisis Communications Tactics in Social Media Crisis N=20	Opportunity to Reach Audiences Directly	40%	50%	62%	71%	64%	33%	44%
	Traditional Media Driven by Social Media	40%	30%	23%	41%	18%	33%	56%

RQ3. Audience Determined Channel N=11 (35%)	Audience Determined Channel	27%	40%	31%	39%	25%	22%	56%
RQ3. Social Media Channel Use N=31 (100%)	Facebook	73%	95%	85%	89%	92%	78%	89%
	Twitter	82%	80%	62%	94%	83%	67%	89%
	Instagram	36%	55%	54%	44%	50%	44%	44%
	LinkedIn	36%	30%	31%	33%	25%	44%	22%
RQ4. Benoit Continuum N=28 (90%)	Corrective Action	45%	60%	38%	67%	58%	67%	33%
RQ4. Other Image Repair Approaches N=31 (100%)	Transparency, Fact-Based	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	Take Offline	100%	95%	92%	100%	92%	100%	100%
	No Response	64%	45%	46%	56%	58%	56%	33%

We noted two significant differences across demographic segments. Participants who work in PR agencies are less likely to mention 24-hour monitoring than those who work in non-profits or corporations (33% vs. 83% and 89%, respectively). Younger participants (<45 years old) are more likely to report using the traditional crisis communication tactics of press releases and conferences in social media crises (69% vs. 29%) than older participants (45 years old or older). Responses of other themes across the research questions were not materially different across gender, age and Summary industry sector segments.

Evaluation of the Findings

Thematic analysis of the data resulted in several core themes addressing the five research questions of the study. In this section, the findings will be evaluated relative to the literature reported earlier. The evaluation also will be discussed in order of the research questions and the corresponding themes uncovered from the analysis.

The extent to which the study results augment or contradict existing theories and contribute to the existing literature is critically important. Overall, while Benoit's response categories are found in both existing research and results of this study, there are additional aspects of handling a social media-generated crisis not covered in current research. The study does confirm that the use of denial, apology, and reducing offensiveness are strategies deployed by public relations practitioners. However, the "no response," strategy and taking a social media discussion offline with stakeholders is significant to future studies.

Juxtaposed against the general response strategies put forth by IRT, best practice recommendations and diverse theories among the public relations community for dealing with negative online comments have been slightly different. Overall, Thomas, et al. (2012)

recommended seven different reactions to negative online comments that a company may enact in order to be viewed positively. Companies may delay a response, ignore the comment, respond, partner with an outside source that can act as a brand ambassador, take legal action, or delete the post. Each option comes with strengths and weaknesses and is best used on a case-by-case basis. However, current empirical evidence supports that companies should respond to negative electronic complaints (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

Some literature suggested that a crisis is defined by high consequences, low probability, and short decision time (Hale, 1997). Additional research supported the short decision-time scenario and placed emphasis on an organization's survival that may be highly dependent on the speed of response (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Crisis communication focused on responding immediately to public needs for information (Lachlan et al., 2016).

The opportunity to examine how public relations practitioners are coping with the meteoric rise in social media and social media-generated crises was being studied by scholars, but the level of academic examination was in its infancy (Jahng & Hong, 2017). Image repair theory (IRT) had grown substantially from its beginning with the developer of the concept William Benoit (1995a, 1995b; Benoit & Brinson, 1996; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). Benoit's early theory was developed with a variety of co-authors (e.g., Benoit & McHale, 1999); Benoit & Nill, 1998a, 1998b; Blaney & Benoit, 2001), and IRT was often used by other scholars beyond its original family (Anderson, 2000; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Thomsen & Rawson, 2000). Communication scholars and public relations practitioners integrated Benoit's material with their own approach to crisis communication (Alvarez, 2000;

Coombs, 2004; Ihlen, 2002; Jerome, Moffitt & Knudsen, 2007). Critiques of IRT also had been shared (Blaney & Benoit, 2001).

Despite some critiques of its universality, IRT serves as the foundation of much crisis communication research. It has led to diverse reformulations since it was first proposed (Marsen, 2020). Situational crisis communication theory refocused attention from company strategy to public perception by introducing the factor of attribution, borrowed from social psychology.

Crises are inevitable for any company, and the fate of a company's image rests on how well they respond. Few studies have experimentally tested the impact that common types of company responses can have on consumers' perceptions when a negative complaint has been made online. Marsen's (2020) research sought to expand the strategies put forth for crisis management by IRT using best practice research within the context of social-mediated crisis communication.

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Drawing from IRT and situational crisis communication theory, a study by Ferguson, Wallace, and Chandler (2018) advanced crisis communication theory through an analysis of 800 public relations professionals' perceptions of 15 image repair strategies. A national sample of United States public relations professionals evaluated communication strategies for their effectiveness and preference for use in three crisis scenarios (accidents, product safety, and

illegal activity). Compensation, corrective action, and mortification were the most highly ranked crisis response strategies, regardless of attribution of organizational responsibility or culpability, across three types of accidental and preventable crises (Ferguson et al., 2018). According to the authors, this hierarchical consistency suggested that using communication strategies for maintaining and strengthening an organization's relationships with its publics might be the best protection for sustaining and repairing a positive reputation long-term.

The study attempted to discover and distinguish if differences exist among public relations practitioners' approach to handling a social media-generated crisis, versus accepted, traditional crisis communication response strategies, such as IRT. Other theorists point to the fact that crises involve a multitude of stakeholders with highly divergent perspectives and interests. Crisis communication research may cater to the multiplicity of voices, or multivocality, present. In a research effort by Kim et al. (2009), quantitative content analysis evaluated crisis response strategy analyzed in more than 18 years of research, published in crisis communication literature in public relations. Analysis of 51 articles published in 11 different journals using two dominant theories in public relations crisis communication literature, Benoit's IRT and Coombs' situational crisis communication theory indicate a lack of diversity in cases analyzed by scholars, gaps between theory and practice, and pressing directions for future research in crisis communication.

Other theories examined, such as Grunig and Grunig's excellence theory (1998), were not further considered due to the exactness and applicability of IRT. Grunig and Grunig's (1998) excellence study reveals a more complicated but logically more satisfying explanation of the value of public relations. For an organization to be effective, it must behave in ways that solve

the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as that of management (Grunig & Grunig, 1998).

Another theory, attribution theory, highlighted and emphasized the communication and media dimension and the importance of public relations in crisis management. Attribution theory explained how people make sense of negative occurrences and why the event occurred. People make attributions of responsibility for events. When applied to crisis management, stakeholders ascribe responsibility internally (organization) or externally (environmental factors). This theory was audience-based and attempted to understand the factors in the crisis itself that shape the crisis attributions stakeholders make (Coombs, 2010; Wise, 2004).

A study designed by Mohamed (2017) bridged the gap in research of empirical studies in which public relations practitioners are using social media tools during the crisis. The purpose of the study was to bring attention to the dynamics of using social media among public relations practitioners during a crisis in countries with different economic, social, and political contexts. A random sample of 160 public relations practitioners was selected from different public and private organizations in the United Arab Emirates. The results indicated that public relations practitioners are active and heavy social media users in their organizations during a crisis. The study confirmed that the most commonly used communication strategies were compensation, corrective action, and justification. Additionally, the study suggested that the organization's website and Twitter were the most effective social media methodologies used during a crisis.

We tested Benoit's image repair theory's describing possible responses to a crisis in a social media environment. While all of the response continuum (denial to mortification) of Benoit's IRT was found within the interviews, some response tactics (such as taking the

conversation offline and fact-based, neutral responses) exist outside of IRT. Practitioners identified being transparent as very important to achieve accountability and fill the need for corporate social responsibility. Although limited in scope and sample size, respondents clearly do not favor denial as a regular response strategy, nor do they want to engage in an online, social media-generated dialogue with stakeholders. Apology (mortification) was an acceptable strategy for 13 respondents, but only after extensive fact-finding and legal review. Acceptance of responsibility was noted in those examples where there was a clear-cut need to do so, and only if responsibility was clear. More than half of respondents mentioned corrective action (17 of 31), but only if there was definitive proof offered that justified the action. Several respondents stated it was essential to correct wrongs, and that a public statement may be necessary to show good faith and responsiveness to stakeholders and the public, in general.

RQ1. How do public relations professionals use traditional public relations strategies, such as IRT, in the fast-paced and unpredictable social media setting when it involves crises?

Thematic analysis of the data revealed that while most public relations professionals utilize many traditional public relations strategies (94%), these approaches are not sufficient in managing social media-generated crises. Traditional crisis managing strategies included having a plan (65%), showing empathy (48%), accuracy over speed (48%), and internal first (42%), as well as concern over the opposition community (16%). All participants (100%) mentioned utilizing at least one non-traditional, emerging strategy or tactic in handling social media crises. These newer strategies included the need for speed (90%), taking the time to understand the influence and reach of a social media crisis (84%), loss of control/unpredictability (77%), 24-

hour monitoring (71%), and the power of video (61%). Additionally, some had concerns over the proliferation of channels and technology (29%), such as YouTube, TikTok, and Nextdoor, which lie outside those most mentioned. According to Coombs (2016), the abundance of ever-evolving new platforms makes it difficult to access and assess a moving target. Other concerns mentioned included the lack of validity of some sources (26%) and fear of the permanence of social media posts (16%).

RQ2. What traditional crisis communication strategies are employed by practitioners when dealing with a social media-generated crisis?

The thematic analysis of the data uncovered that most public relations practitioners interviewed utilize traditional communications tactics (94%). The most common traditional communications strategies utilized are partnering with leadership, legal and other in advance to craft pre-approved messages (65%), establishing strong relationships with those in the traditional media (48%), and press releases and press conferences (45%). One other theme also emerged, the importance of telling a compelling story (19%). While traditional communication strategies are used, many participants also reported using modified or newer communications strategies in dealing with social media-generated crises (65%). These approaches were going around traditional media and utilizing social media as an opportunity to reach audiences directly (65%) and seeing the traditional media as driven by social media and reacting to online activity (45%).

RQ3. How are crisis managers choosing response channels (Facebook over Twitter, for example) when handling a crisis created by social media?

The thematic analysis of the data revealed that many public relations practitioners believe the audience determines the social media channel to use (35%), and different social media

channels are preferred for different audiences/situations (100%). Facebook was the most common social media platform mentioned by 87% of participants, primarily for its broad reach and easily shared links to more information. Twitter was the next most prevalent response (81%) mentioned primarily for its fast-pace and access to news media. About half (48%) mentioned Instagram, valued for its visual appeal and access to a younger audience. LinkedIn was shared by about a third (32%) for its ability to reach a business-to-business audience. TikTok, YouTube and Nextdoor also were mentioned 19%, 13% and 6% respectively), but not as a primary channel for most.

RQ4. How do Benoit's continuum of response strategies from denial to mortification remain applicable in today's social media crises environment?

Of the 5 categories in Benoit's continuum, most participants do use at least one of these response strategies for social media crises. However, only corrective action was mentioned by more than half of participants (55%). The other 4 categories were less frequently mentioned: Reducing Offensiveness and Mortification (42%) followed by Evasion of Responsibility (32%) and lastly Denial (26%). All participants also reported using other response strategies to handle social media crises that fell outside of Benoit's framework. The two most prevalent core themes included being very transparent and fact-based (100%), and taking the social media crisis conversation offline (97%). Another core theme that emerged was not responding to some social media issues depending on the reach and severity (52%). Some participants mentioned three other themes: expressing regret without apology (39%), allowing other stakeholders to defend or validate the brand/organization (35%), and promoting positive stories to drown out the negative (23%).

RQ5. How do age, gender, or experience levels influence the manner and methodologies chosen by public relations practitioners when confronting a social media-generated crisis?

Age, gender, experience, and industry sector do not appear to influence the manner and methodologies chosen by the public relations practitioners that participated in this research when confronting a social media-generated crisis. The patterns of response to the first four research questions are largely similar across demographic segments.

Summary

Chapter 4 of the study contained the findings from the thematic analysis of the one-on-one in-depth interviews. The purpose of the qualitative study was to examine if image repair theory, as described by Benoit (1995), is effective for managing social media-generated crises in 2020 in the United States. The analysis led to the generation of core themes and other themes to address the five research questions. In the final chapter, the results are explained and discussed based on the literature reported in the second chapter. Recommendations, implications, and conclusions will be presented as well.

