

Does What They See Affect How They React: Exploring the Effects of Victim and Neutral Photographs on Reactions to Crisis Events

W. Timothy Coombs
wtcoombs@eiu.edu
Sherry J. Holladay
sjholladay@eiu.edu
Eastern Illinois University

Abstract

Understanding perceptions of crisis situations is important to developing appropriate crisis responses. Given that visual images commonly appear with online and traditional media reports, we should explore their effects on crisis responsibility and other variables associated with perceptions of crises. Three image conditions (victim image, neutral image, and no image) were compared. Perceptions of crisis responsibility, reputation, anger toward the organization, and negative word-of-mouth intentions were similar across experimental conditions.

A strong theme in crisis communication research is the need to understand the crisis situation. The rationale is that the crisis situation helps to dictate what is required for an appropriate or effective crisis response, the words and actions offered in response to a crisis. Following the “it depends” logic of Contingency Theory (Cameron, Pang & Jin, 2008), the crisis response depends on the nature of the crisis situation. A critical component of the crisis situation is how people perceive crisis responsibility—the degree to which people feel the organization is responsible for the crisis (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996). This is the audience-centered aspect of the crisis situation. How people perceive crisis responsibility and other relevant crisis factors will limit which crisis response strategies can be used effectively. Research can help to map the factors that will shape audience perceptions. In turn, crisis managers can use this information to anticipate how stakeholders are likely to react and plan their crisis response accordingly.

It is common for most stakeholders to experience a crisis as a mediated event (Deephouse, 2000). A small percentage of people are actual victims of a crisis. Most people learn about the crisis from stories that appear in the traditional and online media, including news stories and blogs. Whether traditional or online, crisis news stories often include visual elements such as a photograph or diagram. For online news stories, it is common to supply a slideshow of multiple pictures related to the crisis. These visual cues could have an important effect on people how perceive the crisis, thus affecting the crisis response efforts of the organization. Unfortunately, we know little about how visual images of a crisis affect perceptions of a crisis. In light of our increasingly visually-oriented culture, researchers should explore the impact of the visuals that accompany media reports of crises. Understanding how visual images influence crisis perceptions would add to our understanding of the factors that shape crisis situations and hold implications for crisis communication.

Perceptual Nature of Crises

A crisis can be defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007b, pp. 2-3). A key component of this definition is the perceptual nature of a crisis. We could argue that a crisis does not exist if stakeholders do not perceive it. This also means a crisis does exist if stakeholders believe there is one. As such the definition honors the co-creation aspect of public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Meaning is socially constructed and that would hold true for crises as well.

As both Contingency Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) note, the effectiveness of the crisis response depends the crisis situation. How people perceive the crisis situation, especially crisis responsibility, is a critical factor in understanding the crisis situation (Coombs, 1995, 2007a, 2007c). Of course, other factors including culture (Lee, 2004; Huang, 2006) or any of the internal variables from Contingency Theory such as organizational characteristics, public relations department characteristics, and individual characteristics (Shin, Cameron & Cropp, 2006) are also important. The focus here is on factors that shape stakeholder perceptions of the crisis situation, what we can term *audience perception factors*. The term “audience” is used to denote that the research is audience-centered. The point is to understand how the audience is likely to perceive the crisis so that the crisis response can fit with those perceptions. Failure to take into account audience perception factors may leave the organization appearing out of touch, arrogant, and irresponsible.

Research from SCCT and Contingency Theory have provided some insights into audience perception factors. SCCT emphasizes *crisis responsibility* as the key element of the theory. The type of crisis, history of previous crises, and relationship reputation (prior reputation) have all been shown to shape audience perceptions (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006, 2007). Contingency Theory examines a wider range of variables shaping the crisis situation but includes audience perception factors in the threat appraisal (Cameron et al., 2008; Jin & Cameron, 2007; Jin, Pang & Cameron, 2007; Pang, Jin & Cameron, 2004). Generally the approaches and results from SCCT and Contingency are compatible and easily integrated with one another (Holtzhausen & Roberts, in press). Research has also explored the effect of video versus print presentation of crisis stories on crisis perceptions (Coombs & Holladay, in press). Extant research has begun to map the audience perception factors.

Crisis Perceptions and Crisis Communication

It is important to expand on the relationship between audience perceptions and crisis communication. To explore the relationship it is helpful to quickly review the types of crisis response strategies and then the specific connection to audience perceptions.

Crisis communication is a very broad topic that covers a wide range of factors and disciplines (Coombs, 2007b). In this paper, we are concerned with crisis communication as the response to the crisis event. The crisis response is a strategic application of communication to the crisis event. Sturges (1994) identified three strategic foci for the crisis response: (1) instructing information which helps people cope physically with the crisis, (2) adjusting information which helps people cope psychologically with the crisis, and (3) reputation repair which attempts to “fix” the reputation damage inflicted by a crisis. Sturges believes instructing and adjusting information must be delivered before any reputation repair messages. SCCT uses Sturges’s typology to create a base response that should be used in any crisis situation. That base response is to provide instructing information (public safety as the number one priority) along

with an expression of sympathy (adjusting information) and corrective action (adjusting) when possible. Only after providing the base response should crisis managers turn their attention to reputation repair (Coombs, 2007c)

A significant concern in crisis communication is managing stakeholder reactions to the crisis, organization in crisis, and crisis response (Coombs, 2009). All three of Sturges' strategic foci are forms of stakeholder reaction management. However, reputation repair is the area of managing stakeholder reactions that has received the most attention in the literature (Coombs, 2009). Common crisis responses used for reputation repair include: denial, claim no responsibility for the crisis; scapegoat, blame others for the crisis; excuse, minimize responsibility for the crisis by emphasize lack of control over events or lack of intention to do harm; justification, emphasize minimal damage from the crisis; compensation, provide money and/or gifts to victims; apology, publicly accept responsibility for the crisis and ask for forgiveness; reminder, tell people about past good works; ingratiation, thank stakeholders for helping; and victimage, explain that the organization is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007b).

Managing stakeholder reactions does not mean controlling or manipulating. Rather, managing represents attempts at influence. However, effective stakeholder reaction management requires an understanding of those reactions. Crisis managers cannot expect to create any reaction they desire. Instead, how the stakeholders react is a constraint within which crisis managers must operate. For instance, if stakeholders are likely to strongly perceive the organization is responsible for the crisis, use of a denial or justification crisis response is unlikely to be effective. Instead, crisis managers should be using compensation and/or apology (Coombs, 2007c). Table 1 provides a sample of the way audience perceptions can affect the crisis response, especially reputation repair efforts.

Table 1:

Sample SCCT Crisis Communication Recommendations

1. The first step in the crisis response should be any instructing information, including recall information. This is one-half of the base response to a crisis.
2. The second step in the crisis response should be an expression of sympathy, any information about corrective actions, and trauma counseling when needed—the adjusting information. This is the second-half of the base response to a crisis.
3. For crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and no intensifying factors, instructing and adjusting information is sufficient.
4. For crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and an intensifying factor, add excuse and/or justification strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
5. For crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility, and no intensifying factors, add excuse and/or justification strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
6. For crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility and an intensifying factor, add compensation and/or apology strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
7. For crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility, add compensation and/or apology strategies to the instructing and adjusting information.
8. The compensation strategy should be used any time victims suffer serious harm.

9. The reminder and ingratiation strategies can be used to supplement any response.
10. Denial and attack the accuser strategies are best used only for combating rumors and/or challenges to the morality of an organization's behaviors.
11. Victimage can be used any time there is evidence that the organization is suffering greatly from the crisis.

The extant research confirms the value of understanding audience perceptions. By understanding how various elements in the crisis situation might affect people, we can anticipate how the audience (stakeholders) will react to a crisis. In turn, if we can anticipate audience perceptions, we can select a crisis response that should mesh most effectively with those perception. Thus, the situation helps to dictate the crisis response. The better we understand the audience perception factors, the more effective crisis managers will be at anticipating stakeholder reactions and selecting a crisis response to "fit" with those reactions.

News Report Visuals as an Audience Perception Factor

One unexplored aspect of audience perceptions is the visuals used with news stories. Given that news stories are an important source of information for stakeholders (Deephouse, 2000), factors related to news stories should be investigated as relevant audience perception factors. Dragga and Voss (2003) examined a large sample of accident reports and discovered the reports hid the human consequences of accidents. The reports were so objective that they did not contain any visuals showing or relating humans to the accident. Dragga and Voss (2003) claimed the presentation of reports "strips victims of their humanity" (p. 61). They developed a set of guidelines for the tasteful inclusion of the human element in accident reports. Dragga and Voss believe a failure to consider the human element reduces the urgency to address the factors that created the accident. In other words, policy makers are less likely to feel the need to take action. The belief is that visuals that include the human element will intensify perceptions about the danger of a crisis—alter how people perceive the crisis. The article was speculative, however, and did not offer evidence to support the ability of images to change perceptions of crises.

Other research has demonstrated the ability of images in news stories to shape how people interpret the story (Gibson & Zillman, 2000; Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999). Of the most relevance to crisis communication is the finding that photographs intensified risk perceptions. The study examined risk perceptions related to Appalachian tick disease. The experiment kept the story content consistent but altered the images (tick, tick plus victim, and no image). When people saw photographs that contained images related to the risk (the tick) or images of the risk and victim (tick and victim), the risk was perceived as significantly greater than when there was no image (Gibson & Zillman, 2000). In another study, an image of a victim from an amusement park ride created greater concern over ride safety and less confidence in ride safety than when there was no image or one of people enjoying the ride. Again, the content of the stories remained constant as only the image changed.

Considered together, these studies suggest that organizations should be concerned with the visual images that accompany reports of crises because they may increase readers' concerns and fears. Organizations have little to no control over the visual images included in reporting. However, in light of the potential for visual images to shape perceptions of the crisis situation, public relations practitioners should be interested in learning how these images impact

perceptions. For example, the inclusion of images featuring victims of a crisis could intensify attributions of crisis responsibility. As people consider the victims and sense greater danger, they could judge the organization as more responsible for the crisis. As demonstrated by the SCCT research, increased perceptions of crisis responsibility necessitate a more accommodative response. Practitioners would benefit from investigations of the impact of these visual images on stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis situation. This issue is especially important because the organization in crisis typically has no control over the visual images used in the reporting. Being able to anticipate the effects of victim images would help crisis communicators develop appropriate responses.

RQ1: Will perceptions of crisis responsibility be stronger in a victim image condition than in a neutral image and no image condition?

It is important to consider crisis responsibility because it impacts a number of other important variables in the crisis situation. Crisis responsibility has proven to be one of the factors that affect perceptions of organizational reputation, intentions to engage in negative word-of-mouth communication, and level of anger (Coombs, 2007c; Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Reputation is an important, intangible asset that management seeks to protect (Davies, Chun, da Silva & Roper 2003; Fombrun & van Riel 2004). Crises threaten reputations so it is an important variable to consider. Negative word-of-mouth is a dangerous outcome from a crisis as well. Managers want to prevent negative word-of-mouth because of the harm it can inflict on organizations. Because anger has been shown to motivate people to engage in negative word-of-mouth communication, it is an important consequence of a crisis as well (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). It follows that victim images in a story might affect these three important variables too. A second research question was posed related to the effects of a crisis on other audience perceptions, affect, and behavioral intentions.

RQ2: Will participants in the victim image condition report weaker perceptions of organizational reputation, stronger anger, and stronger negative word-of-mouth intentions than those in a neutral image and no image condition?

Methods

Participants

The research participants were 90 undergraduate students enrolled in a Midwestern university in the United States. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years ($M = 20.14$, $SD = 1.43$). The sample was 40 percent male ($n = 36$) and 60 percent female ($n = 54$).

Design and Materials

A news report describing an airliner crash associated with loss of life was used for the study. The TAM airliner crash was selected because most participants would be unfamiliar with TAM, the year-old story of the crash in Brazil, and the visual images that may have appeared in news reports of the accident.

Three experimental conditions were created for this study. All three used a news report that appeared in and was attributed to the *New York Times*. The news report described an actual airline crash in Brazil in 2007. The TAM airliner carrying 176 people skidded off a runway

while landing, crashed into an office building and gas station, and ignited an explosion and blaze that took over 6 hours to control. The news report described the accident and the firefighting efforts and included comments from the governor of the area who arrived on scene. The governor was quoted, saying there was no chance of survivors given the severity of the explosion.

The conditions varied according to the type of visual image that appeared with the news story. Two conditions included a photograph on the same page as the news story and the other condition included the news story and no visual image. One condition included a photo of the crash that showed the airliner's tail section and numerous fire fighters at the scene. Two firefighters carried a victim's body. The photo caption read: "Firefighters carry the body of a victim of the crash of a TAM airlines Airbus A320 at Conoghas airport in Sao Paulo on Wednesday morning." This condition represented the victim image condition. The second condition included a photo of a TAM airliner on the ground. The photo caption read "TAM Linhaus Aereas Airbus A340-541 PT-MSN is taxiing towards Terminal." This condition represented the neutral condition where the plane operated as expected. The third condition included only the news story and no visual image. The visual image conditions used color photos obtained from a TAM airlines website.

Measures

The measures used in this investigation have been used in other studies. Reputation was assessed using a five-item organizational reputation scale (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Crisis responsibility was assessed with five items, two from the personal control dimension of McAuley et al.s' (1992) attribution scale and three items adapted from Griffin et al.s' (1992) responsibility measure. Anger toward the organization (e.g., "Because of the incident, I feel angry at TAM airlines") and negative word-of-mouth intentions (e.g., "I would say negative things about TAM Airlines to other people") were each measured with three-item scales (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2005, 2007). The instrument included two manipulation check items assessing the visual images conditions: "The news story included a picture of the crash" and "The news story included a picture." Responses to all items were recorded on a 7-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Procedures

Participants were told the study involved perceptions of organizations and they would read a news story and report their perceptions of the organization in the news story. After signing the consent form, participants received the instrument. They were instructed to carefully read the story and answer the questions that followed. One page contained the stimulus news story and photo (in two conditions) and the following two pages contained the research instrument. Administration required about 15 minutes.

Results

Reliabilities

Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) were computed for the measures. Reliabilities were .83, .81, .82, and .75 for reputation, responsibility, anger, and word-of-mouth, respectively. All were reliabilities were within in the acceptable range (Stewart, 2002).

Manipulation checks

The visual image conditions were manipulated in this design. To check the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, one-way ANOVAs were used to compare responses on two items: “The news story included a picture of the crash” and “The news story included a picture.” The overall effect for the first manipulation check item was significant ($F(2, 87) = 143.92, p < .001$). The Scheffe procedure was used to examine pairwise comparisons. Participants in the victim image condition differed significantly ($M = 6.67$) from the neutral plane photo ($M = 1.53$) and the no photo ($M = 2.00$) conditions. As expected, there was no significant difference among the plane and no photo conditions ($p = .38$).

Table 2:
Manipulation Check Results

Manipulation Items	No Photo		Neutral		Victim Image		<i>F</i>	df	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
“The news story included a picture of the crash.”	2.00 ^a	1.46	1.53 ^a	1.48	6.67 ^b	.84	143.9	2, 87	< .001
“The news story included a picture.”	1.77 ^a	1.33	6.9 ^b	.31	6.83 ^b	.59	352.3	2, 87	< .001

Note. Means with different superscripts are significantly different using the Scheffe procedure, $p < .001$

The overall effect for the item “The news story included a picture” was significant ($F(2, 87) = 352.33, p < .001$). Posthoc comparisons revealed participants in the victim image photo ($M = 6.83$) and neutral plane photo ($M = 6.90$) conditions differed significantly from the no photo ($M = 1.77$) condition (for both, $p < .001$). As expected, the difference between the crash photo and plane photo conditions was not significant ($p = .96$). Overall, the manipulation check analyses demonstrated participants perceived differences between the conditions as intended (see Table 2).

Research Questions

The research questions were examined using one-way ANOVAs. Visual image condition served as the independent variable and reputation, crisis responsibility, anger toward the organization, and negative word-of-mouth intention were dependent variables. The results of the analyses are shown in Table 3. Research Question 1 asked if perceptions of crisis responsibility would be stronger in the victim image condition than in the neutral and no image condition. The results of the oneway ANOVA revealed no significant differences among perceptions of crisis responsibility for the three images [$F(2, 87) = 1.21, p = .30$]. These results indicate the victim image was not associated with stronger perceptions of crisis responsibility.

Table 3:

Means, Standard Deviations, and Statistics from One-Way ANOVA

	No Photo		Neutral		Victim Image		<i>F</i>	df	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Crisis Responsibility	3.38	(1.10)	3.29	(1.09)	2.96	(1.12)	1.21	2, 87	.30
Reputation	4.75	(1.11)	4.90	(.95)	4.92	(1.15)	.23	2, 87	.79
Anger	3.09	(1.10)	3.06	(1.11)	3.04	(1.45)	.99	2, 87	.99
Negative Word-of-Mouth Intentions	3.96	(1.23)	4.14	(1.09)	4.03	(1.49)	.85	2, 87	.85

Research Question 2 asked if participants in the victim image condition would report weaker perceptions of organizational reputation, stronger anger, and stronger negative word-of-mouth intentions than those in a neutral image and no image condition.

The oneway ANOVA revealed no significant differences between conditions for organizational reputation [$F(2, 87) = .23, p = .79$]; anger toward the organization [$F(2, 87) = .01, p = .99$]; and negative word-of-mouth intentions [$F(2, 87) = .16, p = .85$]. The results indicated no significant differences among the dependent variables. Thus, the inclusion of the victim image did not increase threats to the organization.

Discussion

This exploratory study has broken new ground by examining visual images that accompany crisis reports and has contributed to our understanding of potential influences on perceptions of crisis situations. Systematic research is required for the further development of our knowledge base in crisis communication. The television show “Eleventh Hour” aired an episode with a plot involving a boy being cured of cancer by drinking water from a recently appearing spring. Others came to be cured of their illnesses. However, a number died from the water. The scientist hero on the show demonstrated the cure was a result of heavy water contamination in the spring that was a proper treatment for the boy’s form of cancer but could be deadly when too much is consumed. The relevance to this piece is the use of science to establish cause and effect relationships rather than relying on speculation. People who learned of the spring water’s miraculous healing of the boy with cancer speculated that the spring water was a cure for all ailments. However, the scientist wanted to determine what exactly was in the water that helped the boy and warned others about abandoning their scientifically-derived treatments for speculation.

Crisis managers are offered a wide range of advice on crisis communication. Much advice has no stronger foundation than people thinking the spring will cure all ills. Just because some strategy was observed in a successful or unsuccessful crisis communication effort does not

mean that the observed strategy was *the cause* for success or failure. Speculation needs to be tested and proven before it is accepted or rejected. Although cases may suggest possible factors that shape audience perceptions during a crisis, we should remain skeptical until we systematically test those suggestions. The results of this study are further testament to the need for testing. Based upon similar research, it was proposed that photographs of victims with crisis stories should affect audience perceptions and reactions. The data from the experiment found this was not the case. Audience perceptions of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation were no different in the victim photograph, neutral photograph, or no photograph conditions. Nor were there any significant differences between the visual image conditions for the level of anger, or intended negative word-of-mouth. Speculation and assumptions are dangerous when they are the grounds for giving advice to crisis communicators. Like the spring water, speculative advice can endanger those involved in the crisis by failing to be effective.

We need to continue to systematically investigate factors associated with audience perceptions of the crisis situation. By supplying certain types of information, organizational spokespersons may attempt to influence how journalists frame crisis reports in the media. However, spokespersons have no control over what visual images the media include when they have access to victims or crisis sites. In light of news values emphasizing the importance of dramatic visuals to intensify audience interest in news stories, media outlets are likely to prefer pictures of crises that depict human suffering. It is important to explore how these visuals shape audience perceptions. We could assume from related research that victim images would intensify how people perceive and react to the crisis situation thus affecting the crisis communication necessary to address the crisis. This assumption did not hold true when tested. While this research project has begun this exploration, future research should continue this line of investigation by focusing on the impact of visuals in media stories. At this point in the research, however, it appears that visual images do not have a strong impact on perceptions of crisis responsibility, reputation, sympathy for the organization, anger toward the organization, and negative word-of-mouth intentions.

In contrast to images supplied in media reports, organizations can select what images they include at their own websites. What images should organizations supply? We really do not have an answer to this question at this time. At best we can offer speculations, not evidence-based advice. This clearly is a weakness in our knowledge base of crisis communication recommendations and additional research is needed. As organizations increasingly move to web-based information and other non-traditional media, they should consider the effects of visuals on perceptions of the organization. It is important to systematically investigate how visuals influence audience perceptions of the organization in crisis. We should study the impact of organization-supplied visuals at their websites to better understand how these visuals may help and hurt an organization's crisis communication efforts.

The crisis situation is a mosaic composed of many different variables. It is critical to understand what variables compose that mosaic so that we can anticipate more effectively how people will react to crises. In turn, understanding how people are likely to react to a crisis allows crisis managers to select more effective crisis response strategies for protecting stakeholder and the organization during a crisis. SCCT and Contingency Theory have begun to explore what variables comprise the crisis situation mosaic. This study examined the potential impact of victim images in photographs used with crisis stories. The results showed images of victims in photographs do not significantly affect perceptions and reactions to the crisis situation. The implication is that crisis managers do not need to worry if the news media use

victim images in their stories. The victim image will not alter how people will react to the crisis, which means it will have no effect on the selection of the crisis response. The value of this study is that it adds another piece to the mosaic that is the crisis situation. With each piece we add to the mosaic, crisis managers gain additional insights into how people will react to crises and the effect that can have on their crisis communication.

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