

# Final Stage Development of the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) Model in Crisis Communication: The Myth of Low Engagement in Crisis

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## Abstract

Extending current theories in crisis communication, the authors have developed a more systemic approach to understanding the role of emotions. The Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model is based on a public-based, emotion-driven perspective where different crises are mapped on two continua, the organization's engagement in the crisis and primary public's coping strategy. This final-stage testing, representing the sixth in the series, found that even though organizations need not be highly engaged in crises relating to human resource, transport failure and security issues, they were galvanized to engage in action-based stance by situational factors like external threats. The fact that the publics experience a diversity of emotions ranging from anxiety, sadness to anger could mean that organizations could not afford to be in a position of low engagement. Perhaps low organization engagement is a myth that needs to be dispelled. Where people's emotions are at stake, there is the constant need to be *seen* to engage and connect with them. The findings, while still very much exploratory, suggest theoretical rigor in the model, with room for further refinements to generate what Yin (2003) termed "analytic generalization" (p. 33) for the ICM model.

## Introduction

How to shape the appropriate strategies in response to a crisis is critical for any given organization and public relations practitioner working in the field of crisis communication. Given that the goals of crisis communication, defined as the "ongoing dialogue between the organization and its publics" prior to, during, and after the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 2) are to restore organizational normalcy, influence public perception, and regain and repair image and reputation, strategies used should be "designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization" (p. 2). Strategies, argued Massey (2001), are "message repertoires that are designed to repair the organization's image by influencing stakeholder perceptions" (p. 155). Ray (1999) argued that strategies establish and enact "control (at least in its appearance) in the

face of high uncertainty” (p. 19). Lukaszewski (1997) argued that the strategic management of message response in crisis communication is a “fundamental communication principle” (p. 8). Designing sound strategic communications has been described as “management at its zenith” (Stocker, 1997, p. 203).

While most of these strategies are often characterized as direct responses to the crisis (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Fink, 1986; Harrison, 1999; Massey, 2001; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seegar & Ulmer, 2002; Ulmer, 2001), Ray (1999) argued that strategies would either, (1) deny the crisis exists; (2) provide “partial, inaccurate, or delayed information”; or (3) maintain an open communication channels with constituents (p. 20).

### *Current Situation-Based Conceptualization of Crisis Response*

Arguably, the two dominant theories on crisis strategies, Benoit’s (e.g., 1994; 1995; 1997; 1999; 2004) image repair strategies, and Coombs’ (e.g., 1995; 1998) situational crisis communication strategies, are designed to understand what strategies are relevant to use under what circumstances. These often stem from a *situation-based* response to crisis. The image repair theory is appropriate to be used when the situation leads to a loss of face. When face is threatened, face works is used to repair image, argued Benoit & Brinson (1994). This usually occurs when the accused is believed to have committed an offensive act by its salient audience (Benoit, 2004). Face, image, and reputation are extremely important commodities, argued Benoit and Brinson (1994), because, as a society, we pride ourselves on, and value those who enact tolerance, and sensitivity, to the feelings and traditions of others (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). Coombs’ (1998) strategies are positioned according to the situation based on the types of crises and the organization’s locus of control. On one hand, when the organization is deemed to have strong personal control over the crisis, more accommodative strategies like full apology are recommended for use. On the other hand, when the organization has weak control over the crisis, more defensive strategies like attack and denial are recommended.

### *ICM Model: Conceptualizing Emotions in Crisis Responses*

While these situation-based crisis responses serve as vital roadmaps to understand the crisis situation, it is argued that a more universal and systemic approach would be to shape crisis responses from an *emotion-based* perspective: To understand what are the emotional upheavals that the publics involved in the crisis are likely to experience so that organizations can streamline their strategies to address their specific needs. Previous studies have found that the perception of a crisis, particularly from a given public, is not strictly a function of an environmental stimulus itself, but involves an interpretation of the stimulus (e.g., see Carver & Blaney, 1977). Emotion is argued to be a critical stimulus. Lazarus (1991) defined emotion as “organized cognitive-motivational-relational configurations whose status changes with changes in the person-environment relationship as this is perceived and evaluated (appraisal)” (p. 38). In a crisis, as the conflict between the publics and the organization escalates, emotions are one of the anchors in the publics’ interpretation of what is unfolding, changing, and shaping.

Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2007) have developed a new conceptualization called the Integrated Crisis Mapping model (ICM) aimed at understanding the diverse and varied emotions likely to be experienced by the key stakeholders in crises. Dominant emotions in the ICM model, developed from integrating works from psychology and crises literature, are extrapolated on two continua. On the X-axis is the publics’ coping strategy (from cognitive to conative coping), which consists of the primary public’s cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific

external or internal demands and on the Y-axis is the level of organizational engagement (from high to low).<sup>1</sup> Different types of crises, drawn from the crisis literature, are mapped into each of the four quadrants, with the dominant and secondary emotions posited.

### **Testing of the ICM model**

To validate the theoretical robustness and ecological validity of the ICM model, the authors have systematically tested it since 2007. Each stage consists of two tests, the first to identify the emotions and coping strategies of the publics while the second examined organizational strategies and their effectiveness as evaluated by the publics. The first test was on the five crises posited in the first quadrant (see Figure 1), i.e., crises we inferred as requiring the publics' conative coping and high organizational engagement, such as reputational damage, technological breakdown, industrial crisis, labor unrest/protest, and regulatory/legislative minefield, where the primary emotion identified is anger, followed by anxiety. Findings showed that the presence of anger and anxiety, as posited. Additionally, the emotion of sadness was also found to co-exist with anger and anxiety. The primary publics seemed to engage more in conative than cognitive coping (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007a). In conative coping, the publics tried to manage the situation so as to alter a troubled relationship or to sustain a desirable one by taking actions or at least showing their tendency to action. On the contrary, in cognitive coping, the publics tried to sort out a way of thinking or interpreting the meaning of the crisis with regard to their well being. In the second test, findings suggested that organizations embroiled in the crises identified in the first quadrant need not be highly engaged in reaching out to the publics. As counter-intuitive as this may appear, evidence showed that organizations embroiled in these crises need only to engage moderately, rather than intensely, in reaching out to the publics. This "strategic holding position", as Pang, Jin, and Cameron (2007) argued, affords a situation where organizations are able to assume a qualified rhetoric-mixed stance, utilizing a mixed bag of strategies simultaneously ranging from defensive strategies like excuse and justification as well as accommodative strategies like ingratiation and corrective action to engage their publics.

In the third test, the authors found further evidence that anxiety could be the default emotion that publics feel in crises. The subsequent emotions felt by the publics in crises involving hostile takeovers, accidents and natural disasters were variations of sadness, anger and fright, while the subsequent emotions felt by the publics involving CEO retirement, rumor and psychopathic acts were fright and anger. As far as coping strategies were concerned, conative rather than cognitive coping was evident. Organizations involved in crises pertaining to hostile takeovers, accidents and natural disasters do need to be highly involved while those involved in crises pertaining to CEO retirement, rumor and psychopathic acts need not be highly involved, as posited in the model (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2008). In the fourth test, the authors found the default response organizations embroiled in similar crises tend to adopt is qualified rhetoric-mix stance that is full of rhetoric while doing little to reassure the publics. Where possible, organizations should move from a qualified rhetoric-mix stance to action-based stance, peppered with messages that use what we call "emo-action language", language that acknowledges the emotional upheavals the publics experience with promises of concurrent action to alleviate their emotional turmoil (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2008). In the fifth test, further evidence suggests that

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Timothy S. Penning of Grand Valley State University for his suggestion to refine this term.

anxiety is the default emotion that publics feel in crises. The subsequent emotions felt by the publics in crises involving transport failure, security issues and human resource problems were variations of sadness and anger. As far as coping strategies were concerned, evidence suggests strong merit that conative coping is the external manifestation of the internal cognitive processing that has already taken place. Cognitive coping is thus the *antecedent* of conative coping.

Encouraged by the findings so far, the authors take the development of the model to the final-stage testing, the sixth in the series, in this study by examining the emotions in the fourth quadrant of the model. The three crises examined are the Amtrak crisis caused by power outage in 2006, an example of transport failure; the T.J. MAXX case in 2006 where customers and financial records were breached, an example of crisis relating to security issues; and the lawsuit against Wal-Mart by six former and current female employees for sex discrimination. The case, which began in 2001, culminated with the US 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco allowing it to be a class-action lawsuit, probably the largest sex discrimination case in US history. The central questions examined follow from the evidence that suggests anxiety is the default emotion that publics feel with variations of sadness, anger and fright (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2008), this paper examines first, what strategies can organizations take when they are in situations which require them to be lowly engaged; second, what stances should organizations assume that are consonant with the strategies used; and third, what factors influence stance.

Data to examine the three crises come from content analyses of the population of stories published in the largest circulating and widely influential U.S. national newspapers, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2006; Viguerie & Franke, 2004). To ensure that media coverage reflects organizational perspectives, the respective organizations' websites were accessed to analyze their official announcements through press releases. However, as such information was not available in all of the cases, the authors decided to analyze only media coverage for a more comparable analyses.

This study is significant on several fronts. First, this represents the authors' on-going commitment to test our Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model. This paper edges us to the end stage of our series of empirical studies and the authors are excited to see how the model is shaping up. Second, and more significantly, in the development of the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model, it is the authors' goal to advance current understanding in crisis communication and offers practical insights to scholars and practitioners on how they can understand, with greater preciseness, the emotional upheavals their primary publics are likely to experience so that they can shape the appropriate crisis response and tools to manage the crisis with optimal effectiveness. Organizational response in crises through the enactment of strategies has been, and arguably will continue to be, a recurring theme in the developments of crisis communication theories (Coombs, 1999; 2004). Last but not least, the authors aim to build a new theoretical framework by studying real life phenomenon. Saunders (2004) argued that applying theory to real life situations is "useful towards theory building" because such situations "provide observations grounded in actual organizational efforts aimed at solving actual organizational problems" (p. 140). Five cases of the same phenomenon were explored in order to construct a more robust study (Yin, 1993). These cases are studied for their instrumental value rather than intrinsic value. In instrumental case study methodology, Stake (1998) argued that the cases are examined to provide "insight into an issue or refinement of theory" (p. 88). The authors are excited to understand how well the hypotheses posited in our model hold up, and what

subsequent refinements need to be made to stand the scrutiny of scholarship as well as its relevance to the practitioners' world.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Public Responses Based on Key Emotions*

Publics are a "group of people who face a common issue" (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 84). In a crisis, the publics have been defined differently, according to their importance to resolving situation (Lukaszewski, 1997), their functional roles (Dougherty, 1992), and their long-term influences (Ulmer, 2001). Based on previous literature, we propose that in crisis situations the primary publics comprise the following characteristics: 1) They are most affected by the crisis; 2) They have shared common interests, and destiny, in seeing the crisis resolved; and 3) They have long-term interests, and influences, on the organization's reputation and operation.

Based on the appraisal model of emotion (Lazarus, 1991), Jin, Pang and Cameron (2007) developed a theoretical framework to understand the primary publics' crisis responses, as evidenced by the predominant emotion elicited by different types of crises. Four negative emotions (anger, fright, anxiety, and sadness) are identified as the dominant emotions that are mostly like to be experienced by the publics in crisis situations (Figure 1).

*Anger.* The core relational theme underlying anger is a demanding offense against "me" and "mine" (Lazarus, 1991). In crisis situation, the primary publics tend to experience anger when facing a demanding offense from certain organization against them or their well being. The ego-involvement of the public is engaged to preserve or enhance their identity or benefit in the situation. There is usually an issue of blaming that derives from the knowledge that the organization is accountable for the harmful actions and they could have been controlled or even prevented by the organization. The primary public might potentially favor attack as the strategy in facing the organization. At the stance and strategy level, though sometimes the public may appear cooperative, anger can be expressed indirectly in passively aggressive tactics.

*Fright.* The core relational theme underneath fright is facing uncertain and existential threat (Lazarus, 1991). The public is not certain about how to cope with the loss as well as how the engaged organization may handle this situation. Depending on their resource and power, they may choose avoidance or escape from the crisis as a viable recourse.

*Anxiety.* By definition, anxiety stems from the core relational theme as facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming danger (Lazarus, 1991). The public may feel overwhelmed by the crisis situation and look for the immediate solutions. Their ego-involvement is evidenced as the effort to protect their own ego-identity against the organization whom they perceive to be the direct source of existential threat. They might blame or not blame the organization depending on their environment assessment. Given the uncertainty of how to cope with the situation and what the organization might react, they tend to avoid and escape.

*Sadness.* Having experienced an irrevocable loss is the core relational theme of the emotion of sadness (Lazarus, 1991). In those cases, the public suffers from tangible or intangible loss or both. Their goal of survival is threatened and this loss of any type of ego-involvement (e.g., esteem, moral values, ideal, people and their well-being, etc.) caused by uncontrollable sources may lead them no one to blame and in desperate need for relief and comfort. If they perceive the loss can be restored or compensated for, their sadness may not occur or will be associated with hope. The action tendency of the public might well depend on what measures the organization may take.

Another key concept in appraisal model of emotion is the different levels of emotions felt at a given time toward a given stimulus. The primary level emotion is the one the public experiences at the first, or immediate, instance. The secondary level emotion is one the public experiences in subsequent instances, as time goes by, and contingent upon the organization's responses to the crisis. The secondary level emotion may be transferred from the dominant emotion or coexisting with the primary level. In this study, we focus on Quadrant 2 (sadness as the primary emotion and fright as the secondary emotion) and Quadrant 3 (fright as the primary emotion and sadness as the secondary emotion) as conjured by crises in CEO retirement; accidents, rumors, psychopathic acts, natural disasters, and economic/hostile takeovers.

### *Operationalization of the ICM Model*

As Figure 1 illustrates, the ICM model is indicated by a crisis matrix based on two axes: The analysis of the organizational engagement level in the crisis that can be examined through a scale of high engagement and low engagement, and the primary public's coping strategy from conative coping to cognitive coping. It is argued that for effective crisis management, the organization, at varied engagement level in different issues, must understand the primary public's emotional demands so as to communicate accordingly and align with the coping strategy needed by the primary public (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007).

On the **X-axis** is the public's coping strategy. Adapting the cognitive appraisal theory in emotion (Lazarus, 1991), there are two types of coping: 1) problem-focused coping – changing the actual relationship between the public and the organization via actual measures and steps, and 2) cognitive-focused coping – changing only the way in which the relationship is interpreted by the public. Therefore, coping strategy refers to the dominant choice of the publics in dealing with the crisis situation: Either 1) cognitive coping – the public try to sort out a way of thinking or interpreting the meaning of the crisis with regard to their well-being, or 2) conative coping – the public try to manage the situation so as to alter a troubled relationship or to sustain a desirable one by taking actions or at least show their tendency of action. Anchoring these two coping strategies to the axis, different primary publics in different crises may choose different coping strategy along this continuum. Therefore, this X-axis consists of cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as exceeding the resources of the public.

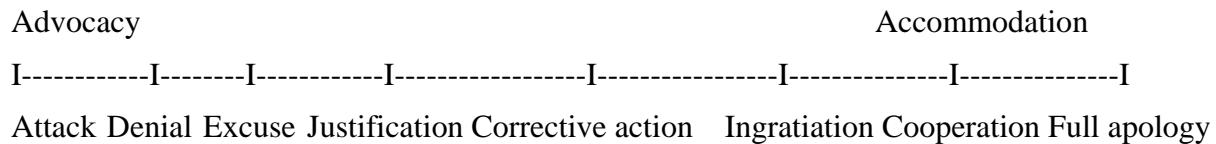
On the **Y-axis** is the level of organizational engagement, ranging from high to low. Jin, Pang and Cameron (2007) defined high organizational engagement as intense, consolidated, sustained, and high priority in allocation of resources to deal with the crisis; on the contrary, low organizational engagement does not mean cursory or no engagement, but that the organization devotes comparatively less resources, effort, and energy to deal with the crisis, either because the organization recognizes there is little it can do, or when the organization did not cause the crisis, it is depending on external help, like a regulatory agency, to help it resolve the crisis.

Emotions and publics' coping mechanism. The two axes further form four quadrants in the crisis matrix: Quadrant 1 (High engagement/Conative coping), Quadrant 2 (High engagement/Cognitive coping), Quadrant 3 (Low engagement/Cognitive coping), and Quadrant 4 (Low engagement/Conative coping). In each of the quadrants is the dominant emotions (primary and secondary), based on the confluence, interactions, and inter-relations of the publics' coping strategy as well as organizational engagement.

## *Organizational Stance and Strategies*

Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, and Mitrook (1997) first introduced the notion of organizational stance in the contingency theory of strategic conflict management. A theoretical perspective diametrically different from the excellence theory, which positioned two-way symmetrical model as normative theory (Grunig, 1996), the contingency theory argued that a more realistic description of how organizations engage its publics could be ascertained by the examination of one's stance towards the other. The stance adopted need not be static, and could change based on the influence of organizational factors (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). Stances were measured through a continuum, which has at one extreme, advocacy, which meant insisting exclusively on one's own interests; and at the other end, accommodation, which meant giving in entirely. Jin and Cameron (2006) further developed a scale measuring stance as degree of action-based accommodation and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation. Within an organization, the contingency theory had identified more than 80 variables, categorized into 11 themes (see Appendix 1), that could affect stance movement along the continuum (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999).

One's stance necessarily affects one's strategies (Pang, 2006). To study the full range of advocacy or accommodation undertaken by the organization towards its publics and vice versa, we have adapted and modified Coombs' (1998) crisis communication strategies into the contingency framework. Ihlen (2002) argued that Coombs has built a "better typology" (p. 190) than other sets of strategies. Coombs' (1998) typology consisted of seven strategies: Attack, denial, excuse, corrective action, justification, ingratiation, and full apology. To reflect the true spirit of the contingency theory, we modified this framework by reordering corrective action and justification, and by adding another strategy, cooperation, into the continuum.



Armed with these findings from three empirical tests so far, the authors extend this study to examine the crises in fourth and final quadrant (Low engagement/Conative Coping),

*RQ 1:* What stance (action-based versus qualified-rhetoric) did the organizations take towards its primary publics?

*RQ 2:* What contingent factor appears to influence this stance?

*RQ 3:* What is the strategy used?

*RQ 4:* How does the organization assess its strategy effectiveness?

*RQ 5:* How do the primary publics assess the organization's strategy effectiveness?

## **Method**

We attempted to continue understanding the veracity and rigor of the ICM model using content analyses of crisis cases in the fourth quadrant. Case studies allow the researcher to delve into and explain the uniqueness and complexity of organizational processes, and as Gummesson (2000) argued, to capture the essential processes of decision-making, implementation and change. The purpose of case studies is to empirically investigate a "contemporary phenomenon

within its real-life context” and address a “situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1993, p. 59). In this study, we adopt a multiple case study design within the same phenomenon, with the primary interest of understanding how the ICM model works. The cases are thus studied for their instrumental value rather than intrinsic value (Stake, 1998). Though the cases are analyzed in detail, contexts examined, and activities explored, these play supporting roles to the researchers’ objectives, which are to facilitate understanding of how relevant they are to the model. Consequently, by applying the method on five disparately managed cases, Yin (1993) argued, is an appropriate initial attempt at theory testing (p. 64), with the aim of building “analytic generalizations” (Yin, 2003, p. 33) from the conceptualization.

### *Sample*

Three crises are selected based on the opinions and suggestions of a group of public relations practitioners and educators. Shin, Cheng, Jin, and Cameron (2005) as well as Pang, Jin and Cameron (2007) found this to be a viable way of identifying the appropriate crises to analyze. The three cases are: T.J. MAXX customer credit card information leaking, an example of security issues; Wal-Mart employee relations crisis, an example of human resource; and Amtrak breakdown, an example of transportation failure. Data are taken from content analyses of the population of stories published in the largest circulating and widely influential national newspapers, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2006; Viguerie & Franke, 2004).

News stories in the five major newspapers (N= 69) were uploaded from Lexis-Nexis by typing in the key words of the organization and the crisis. News stories were excluded if 1) there was no comment made by a spokesperson from the respective organization or official from the organization or no mention of any official communication from the organization; or 2) the stories were in the same publication or there was no mention of the crisis. The cases are detailed in Appendix 2.

### *Coders and Training*

Two coders, both graduate students and familiar with the content analysis method, conducted the coding. With the help of a codebook, the coders were given detailed instruction and description of the various categories used. Two practice sessions were held using samples of stories to familiarize with the coding instruments. The coders worked independently and were not allowed to consult with each other about the coding. The inter-coder reliability achieved .83 using Scott’s Pi.

### *Coding Instrument*

The unit of analysis is defined as a news story. This includes stories by the staff of the newspaper and wire stories from the editors. The content analysis instrument is designed to evaluate the appraisal of crisis engagement and coping strategies from organizations’ and their primary publics’ perspectives. The 69 stories were coded for the following variables:

*Organizational stance:* Items from Jin and Cameron (2006)’s stance inventory were used to examine two clusters of stances as degree of accommodation, on a 7-point Likert-like scale, with 1 as “not evident” and 7 as “very evident”: 1) The organization takes Action-Based Stance toward the public (The organization seems willing to: yield to the public's demands; Or agree to



follow what the public proposed; Or accept the public's propositions; Or agree with the public on future action or procedure; Or agree to try the solutions suggested by the public; Or any combination of these.); and 2) The organization takes Qualified-Rhetoric-mixed Stance toward the public (The organization seems willing to: express regret or apologize to the public; Or collaborate with the public in order to solve the problem at hand; Or change my own position toward that of the public; Or make concessions with the public; Or admit wrongdoing; Or any combination of these.).

*Dominant contingent factor:* Dominant contingent factor that drives the organization's stance with regards to its public was identified, using the matrix of contingent factors as: External Threats, Industry Environment, General Political/Social Environment/External Culture, External Public, Issue Under Question, Organization's Characteristics, Influence of Public Relations Practitioners, Influence of Dominant Coalition, Internal Threats, Individual Characteristics, and Relationship Characteristics. If there was no evident contingent factor in the story, it was coded as "99. N/A".

*Primary crisis response strategy:* crisis response strategies by level of responsibility acceptance (Coombs, 1999): Attack, Denial, Excuse, Justification, Ingratiation, Corrective action, and Full apology, as well as 99 as N/A in case of stories with no crisis strategy evident.

*Organization's self-assessment of strategy effectiveness:* It was measured on a 7 point Likert-like scale, where 1 was "very ineffective," and 7 was "very effective", and 99 was used if this variable was not addressed in the story.

*Public's acceptance of the organization's crisis strategy:* It was measured on a 7 point Likert-like scale, where 1 was "very unacceptable," and 7 was "very acceptable", and 99 was used if this variable was not addressed in the story.

## Results

### *Organizational Stance*

RQ1 examined the stance taken by the organizations towards their primary publics. For Amtrak case, more action-based accommodation was taken ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 2.28$ ) than qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) ( $t = 2.600$ ,  $p < .05$ ). For TJ MAXX case, the organization took very advocating stance, while it was more advocating in terms of the qualified-rhetoric-mixed stance ( $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than its action-based stance ( $M = 1.77$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) ( $t = 1.848$ ,  $p < .10$ ). For Wal-Mart case, there was no significant difference in terms of the two types of stance. Across the three cases, more action-based accommodation was taken ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ) than qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 2.23$ ) ( $t = 2.798$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### *Dominant Contingent Factor*

RQ2 examined what contingent factors appeared to influence the stance movement. For Amtrak case, organization's characteristics (92.3%) and external threats (7.7%) were the only identified contingent factors (Chi-square = 62.303,  $p < .001$ ). For TJ MAXX case, external threats (100%) was the only contingent factor identified (Chi-square = 62.303,  $p < .001$ ). For Wal-Mart case, external threats (95.8%) and external public (4.2%) were the only contingent factors identified (Chi-square = 62.303,  $p < .001$ ).

### *Primary Crisis Strategy*

RQ3 examined what were the primary crisis response strategies used by the organizations, as well as what message attributes were evident for those strategies. For Amtrak case, excuse (33.3%), denial (22.2%), ingratiation (22.2%), and corrective action (22.2%) were the primary crisis strategies (Chi-square = 49.498,  $p < .001$ ). For TJ MAXX case, denial (67.9%), attack (21.4%), and corrective action (10.7%) were the primary crisis strategies (Chi-square = 49.498,  $p < .001$ ). For Wal-Mart case, corrective action (70.6%) was the primary strategy, while denial (5.9%), excuse (5.9%), justification (5.9%), ingratiation (5.9%), and full apology (5.9%) were also evident (Chi-square = 49.498,  $p < .001$ ).

### *Organization's Self-Assessment of Strategy Effectiveness and Publics' Acceptance*

RQ4 examined how the organization assessed its crisis strategy effectiveness, whereas RQ5 examines how acceptable the primary publics perceive the strategy was. For Amtrak case, the primary publics found the organization's crisis strategy was less acceptable ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) than the organization assessed its own strategy's effectiveness ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) ( $t = 3.474$ ,  $p < .05$ ). For TJ MAXX case, the primary publics found the organization's crisis strategy was less acceptable ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) than the organization assessed its own strategy's effectiveness ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) ( $t = 5.444$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similar patterns occurred to Wal-Mart case as well: the primary publics found the organization's crisis strategy was less acceptable ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) than the organization assessed its own strategy's effectiveness ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) ( $t = 5.651$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## **Discussion**

The findings are distilled into two categories: First, what the evidence suggests as strong merit; and second, evidence that suggests as some merit. Implications of the evidence are drawn, with suggestions to refine the ICM model (Figure 2).

### *Organizations' initial response: Emergence of a default stance?*

RQ 1 examined the stance taken by the organizations towards their primary publics. Consistently, evidence suggests strong merit that anxiety is the default emotion in most, if not all crises posited in the model. In the first quadrant, variations of anger and sadness were found with anxiety as the dominant emotion (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007a). In the second and third quadrants, variations of sadness, anger, and fright were found with anxiety as the dominant emotion (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2008). In this quadrant, our findings again showed anxiety as the dominant emotion, followed by different variations of anger, which was posited, and sadness, which was not posited. The emotion of fright, which was not posited, was not found to be present (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2009). As argued in Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2008), it is not surprising to argue that anxiety pervades human emotions in crises. Anxiety is caused by fear, and mankind constantly battles with fear (Ogrizek & Guillery, 1999). Fear rears its ugly head when uncertainty, caused by crises, reigns. It is fear for the worst possible outcomes or consequences.

This begets the question: If anxiety is the default emotion felt by publics, is there a default organizational response as well? The evidence thus far: In all of the three quadrants analyzed, evidence suggested that a qualified rhetoric-mixed stance could be the *default* stance adopted by organizations to its primary stakeholders (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2008). A qualified

rhetoric-mixed stance is one where the organization is willing to express regret and apologize to the public, to collaborate with the public, to make concessions or to admit wrongdoing. It contains more rhetoric or posturing by the organization, and may or may not lead to action that supports the rhetoric. Indeed, adopting a qualified rhetoric-mixed stance or a rhetorical posture appears to be the logical manner to engage the publics at the first instance. Coombs (1999) described such responses as “form recommendations”, the posture of responding quickly, being open and consistent (p. 126). Such responses, Coombs (1999) argued, are widely accepted and practiced by practitioners.

Findings in this quadrant, however, suggests otherwise. Evidence suggests some merit that an action-based stance appeared to be driving organizational response. As contrast to the qualified rhetoric-mixed stance, an action-based stance is one where the organization is willing to yield to the public’s demands, accept the public’s propositions, and agree to the public’s suggestion for solution. While the former is synonymous with saying what one *is willing to do*, the latter is tantamount to saying what one *will do*. This, however, appears to be counter-intuitive to our proposition that organizations need only to be lowly engaged in crises relating to security issues, human resource and transport failure.

Yet, at the same time, it would be too tempting – and simplistic – to conclude that even though qualified rhetoric mixed stance ought to be the default stance because three of the four quadrants found it to be so. What would be wiser would be to tease out what this piece of evidence is trying to tell us about responding in crises where organizations need only to be lowly engaged. The clue appears to lie in the need for organizations to show some action even though they need not be highly engaged. The moral of the story appears to be that low engagement does not mean, in industry parlance, all talk and no action.

#### *Strategies synonymous with low organizational engagement*

RQ 2 examined what contingent factors appeared to influence the stance movement while RQ 3 examined the primary crisis response strategies used by the organizations. These will be discussed conjointly. Evidence suggests strong merit that external threats appeared to be the driving factor in influencing the organizations’ action-based stances. Evidence also suggests strong merit that the consequent strategies used are attack, denial, and excuse, all strategies on the advocacy end of the contingency continuum. External threats are a situational variable in the contingency theory (Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2007), and these include threats of negative media coverage, government regulations and litigation. Cancel, Mitrook and Cameron (1999) argued that the greater the threat, the faster the organization would respond. The findings thus support the argument that organizational response would be in the form of action-based stance rather than qualified-rhetoric mixed stance because all posturing and no action would not be the expedient option in the face of looming threats emanating externally over which one has little or no control.

Interestingly, the action-based stances actualize into more advocating strategies than accommodating strategies. Coombs (1998) argued that one attacks by confronting the accuser that a crisis exists. One denies by explaining the crisis does not exist. Benoit (1997) argued that denial also involves shifting blame to another cause or party. One makes excuses by denying any intention to do harm. Collectively, these advocating strategies appear to be intentionally used to minimize the organizations’ involvement and responsibility in the crises or to defend that the organizations do not have control over the crisis.

What, then, does this all mean for practitioners? Confronted by external threats (factor) which the organization argues has little or no control, practitioners take concrete measures and actions (action-based stance) and adopt defensive strategies (attack, deny and excuse) to refute suggestions that the organization is responsible for the crisis. Such defensive strategies are often used when organizational responsibility is “weak” (Coombs, 1998, p. 189), or by extension, when organizations want to portray their responsibility to be weak in the crises. The moral of the story appears to be that when organizations are lowly engaged in crises, action would still need to be taken to protect the organization, as Coombs (2006) argued.

### *The Myth of Low Engagement*

RQ 4 examined how the organization assessed its crisis strategy effectiveness, whereas RQ 5 examined how acceptable the primary publics perceived the organizations’ strategy. These are examined conjointly. Evidence suggests strong merit that the organizations involved in all of the abovementioned crises regarded its strategies as acceptable and effective, i.e., by maintaining low engagement with their publics. They spring to action only when confronted by external threats, and their response would be one characterized by action-based stance with advocating strategies. While organizations feel that they are doing a fine job, mostly in inoculating themselves, evidence suggests strong merit that the publics do not think so. This is consistent with earlier findings regarding the third quadrant where low engagement was also posited in crises involving CEO retirement, rumor and psychopathic acts (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2008). It appears that the publics experience a diversity of emotions ranging from anxiety, fright to anger (in quadrant three) and anxiety, anger and sadness (in quadrant four) suggesting that organizations could not afford to be *seen* as being in a position of low engagement, disengagement, or even no engagement.

The moral of the story appears to be that when people’s emotions are at stake, there is the constant need to be *seen* to engage and connect with them in their hours of need. Collectively, these insights bear practical applications for practitioners: It is perfectly legitimate to protect organizations during crises and to rise above the cacophony of accusations that are regularly leveled at them, especially when organizations have to contend with circumstances beyond their control.

However, if the default stance has been one of qualified rhetoric-mix stance as found in previous studies (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2007; 2008), then the evidence in this study suggests that organizations should move beyond initial posturing to real action, i.e., from a qualified rhetoric-mix stance to action-based stance, with promises of concrete action to deal with the crises regardless of whether they were the cause or not. Therefore, it appears that even if organizations remain lowly engaged, there are three areas they still need to engage the publics in:

- ❑ Heart: Be proactive in understanding the publics’ emotional upheavals in their hour of need. This is precisely how the emotions-driven ICM model is a radical departure from current strategies-driven perspectives by raising the level of awareness of the critical role emotions play in crises.
- ❑ Mind: Employ persuasive strategies with the intention of reaching out to the publics instead of defending themselves. Respectfully, even though the strategies in Benoit’s image repair theory and Coombs’ situational crisis communication theory are comprehensive, their primary intentions remain that of rhetoric defense of the

organization. Perhaps there is scope for the authors here to develop a complementary set of strategies of rhetorical acceptance of the publics?

- Body: Be proactive in meeting the physical needs of publics during crises. As practiced as this has been (e.g., Pang, 2006), it remains a fundamental imperative that organizations should not underestimate.

If, indeed, such practical applications are pertinent, perhaps low engagement is just a myth that needs to be dispelled? Perhaps there is no such thing as high or low engagement in crisis? As the authors continue our journey of discovery, perhaps we should redefine engagement on different dimensions, probably along the lines of action-engagement in place of high engagement and emotional-engagement in place of low engagement? This insight is certainly instructive for further refinement of the ICM model.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

This present study represents the final-stage of testing to investigate the viability of the ICM model by integrating crisis perspectives with psychological analyses. This study, the sixth in the series of empirical tests, represents the continuing work of the authors to generate what Yin (2003) termed “analytic generalization” (p. 33) in the model. Analytic generalization is achieved when “two or more cases” (Bennett, 2004, p. 22) support the theoretical assertions (Yin, 2003, p. 33). Though much of what the authors have been studying is still exploratory, findings suggested theoretical rigor in the model, with room for further refinements. Admittedly, one limitation of this study is that the analyses are all based on media reports. First, given the small number of newspaper articles that were relevant to the crisis cases, the statistical power of detecting associations among the coding variables was limited. Given the exploratory nature of the research, we argue it is a limitation we have to accept. Second, this study excluded media releases and letters or opinion section of newspapers that might have provided valuable information on the organization’s crisis strategies as well as the publics’ expression of emotions. Further research should include examination of messages disseminated through media releases as well as interviews with practitioners and focus groups with publics involved in the respective crises. Third, our reliance on content analysis of media reports which could be filtered through the eyes of journalists who might have framed the issues according to their perceptions of what had happened. In this regard, we argue that due to the rapidity, abruptness, and volatility in each of the crises, and the exigency and imperativeness to respond to the crisis, both on the organizational as well as the publics’ side as rapidly as possible, analysis of news coverage would provide an expeditious and *fair* representation of what had happened as in all of the cases, our studies often centered on the height of the crisis, i.e., the first month(s) of the crisis. Indeed, previous works analyzing crises through media coverage through prestige newspapers (Krippendorff, 2004; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998) had proved insightful (for instance, see Kaid, 1996; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2006; Meng & Berger, 2008; Reber, Cropp & Cameron, 2003; Shin, Cheng, Jin, & Cameron, 2005). The inherent methodological limitations would not invalidate our findings.

A cursory survey of papers presented at major conferences like IPRRC, ICA and AEJMC showed that increasingly more studies are examining emotions in on crisis communication. It is our thesis that studies analyzing audience reception in crises should increasingly dominate crisis scholarship for the simple argument that organizational strategies would be ineffectual if these do not appeal to the hearts and minds of the publics. We are excited that our studies may form

the imprints of an initial trail that open up to a new vista of research with the potential of transforming the landscape of crisis communication. Our work has just begun.

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Figure 1. Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) Model (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007)

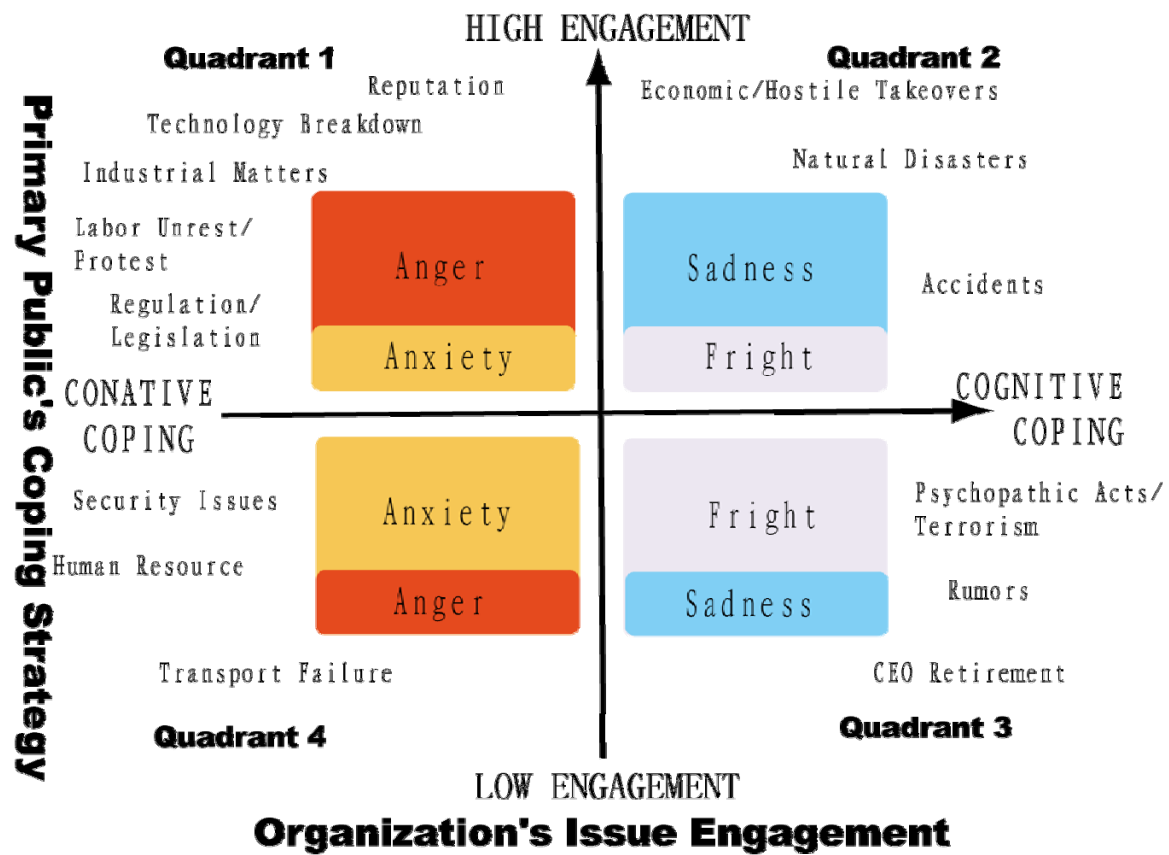
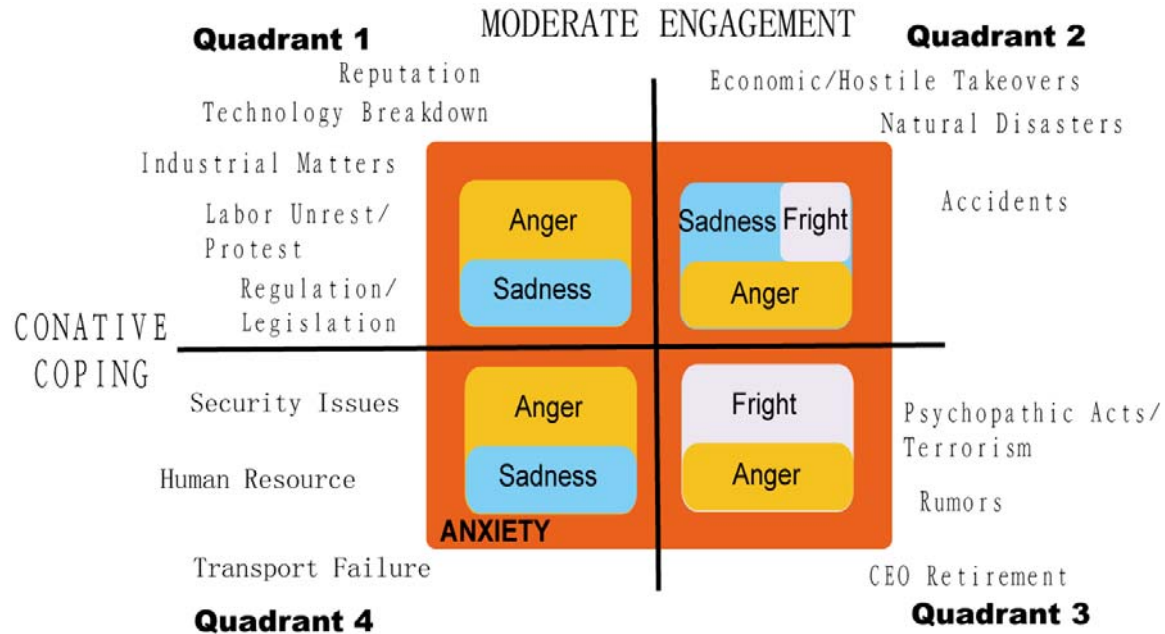


Figure 2. Revised ICM Model



Appendix 1: Analysis of contingent factor (adapted from the Contingency theory)

1. Threats: litigation, government regulation, potentially damaging publicity, scarring of organization's reputation in community, legitimizing activists' claims
2. Industry Environment: changing (dynamic) or static, number of competitors/level of competition, richness or leanness of resources in the environment
3. General Political/Social Environment / External Culture (level of constraint/uncertainty): degree of political support of business, degree of social support of business
4. The External Public (group, individual, etc.): size/number of members, degree of source credibility/powerful members or connections, past successes or failures of public to evoke change, amount of advocacy practiced by organization, level of communication/involvement of public/s members, whether the public has public relations counselors or not, community's perception of public: reasonable or radical level of media coverage the public has received in past, whether representatives of the public know or like representatives of the organization, whether representatives of the organization know or like representatives from the public, public's willingness to dilute its cause/request/claims moves and countermoves, relative power of organization, relative power of public
5. Issue Under Question: size, stakes, complexity

6. Organization's Characteristics: open or closed culture, dispersed widely geographically or centralized, level of technology the organization uses to produce its product or service, homogeneity or heterogeneity of employees, age of the organization/value placed on tradition, speed of growth in the knowledge level the organization uses, economic stability of the organization, existence or non-existence of issues management personnel or program, organization's past experiences with the public, distribution of decision-making power, formalization: number of rules or codes defining and limiting the job descriptions of employees, stratification/hierarchy of positions, existence or influence of legal department, business exposure (product mix and customer mix), corporate culture
7. Public Relations Department Characteristics: total number of practitioners and number with college degrees, type of past training of employees: trained in PR or ex-journalists, marketing, etc., location of PR department in hierarchy: independent or under marketing umbrella/ experiencing encroachment of marketing/ persuasive mentality, representation in the dominant coalition experience level of PR practitioners in dealing with conflict, general communication competency of department autonomy of department physical placement of department in building (near CEO and other top decision makers or not) staff trained in research methods, amount of funding available for dealing with external publics, amount of time allowed to use dealing with external publics, gender: percentage of female upper-level staff/ managers, potential of department to practice various models of public relations
8. Characteristics of Dominant Coalition (top management): political values (conservative or liberal), open or closed to change, management style (domineering or laid back), general altruism level, support and understanding of PR, frequency of external contact with publics, department perception of the organization's external environment, calculation of potential rewards or losses using different strategies with external publics, degree of line manager involvement in external affairs
9. Internal Threats (how much is at stake in the situation): economic loss or gain from implementing various stances, marring of employees' or stockholders' perception of the company, marring of the personal reputations of the company decision makers (image in employees' perceptions and general public's perception)
10. Individual Characteristics (public relations practitioner, dominant coalition and line managers): training in PR, marketing, journalism, engineering, etc., personal ethics, tolerance of ability to deal with uncertainty, comfort level with conflict or dissonance, comfort level with change, ability to recognize potential and existing problems, extent of openness to innovation, extent to which individual can grasp others' world-views, personality: dogmatic, authoritarian, communication competency, cognitive complexity: ability to handle complex problems, predisposition towards negotiation, predisposition towards altruism, how individuals receive, process and use information and influence, familiarity with external public or its representative, like external public or its representative, gender: female versus male
11. Relationship Characteristics: level of trust between organization and external public, dependency of parties involved, ideological barriers between organization and public
12. Others: None of the above

## Appendix 2: Details of the cases studied

T.J. MAXX Case: In Dec 18, 2006, apparel retailer discovered suspicious software on its computers and began investigation. Three days later, the company concluded that a breach had probably occurred and that the intruder was still on the system. The next day, it notified federal investigators. On Dec 27, the firm learned that customer data had been stolen, and it notified banks and check-processing companies. The extent of the intrusion was disclosed in March 2007. Hackers had swiped US\$45.7 million of its credit and debit card transaction records. Articles relating to this case were searched from January 2007 to September 2008. This yielded 26 stories. Stories that were relevant to the study were eventually filtered to 25.

Wal-Mart Case: The case dates back to June 2001, when six former and current female Wal-Mart employees accused the retail giant of denying women equal pay and opportunities for promotion. On June 21, 2004, a federal judge in San Francisco ruled that the case could proceed as a class action. On February 6, 2007, a federal appeals court in San Francisco ruled that the case should proceed as a class action. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. lost a bid to have an appeals court reconsider its decision to allow 2 million current and former female workers to sue as a group with sex-bias claims. Articles relating to this case were searched from June 2001 to September 2008. This yielded 40 stories. Stories that were relevant to the study were eventually filtered to 31.

Amtrak Case: An Amtrak power outage during the busy morning commute disrupted all rail traffic between Washington and New York on May 25, 2006, stranding commuters on Amtrak and MARC train lines and causing a ripple of cancellations and delays throughout the morning. The power outage, which originated at a substation in Pennsylvania, began shortly after 8 a.m. and ended about 10:15 a.m. Articles relating to this case were searched from May 26, 2006 to Dec 31, 2006. This yielded 13 stories, which were all relevant to the study.