Crisis history tells matter

The effects of crisis history and crisis information source on publics’ cognitive and affective responses to organizational crisis

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to explore crisis history further. The paper also examines the possible impact of information source on publics’ perceptions. The study seeks to expound on the tenets of the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), particularly the underutilized crisis history component.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used a 3 x 3 between-subjects experiment design to examine the effects of crisis history and information source on publics’ crisis emotions, perception of crisis responsibility, control, and organizational reputation. Participants were 174 undergraduate students from a large Southeastern university.

Findings – The study’s findings suggest that an organization’s crisis history by the media can increase publics’ perceived organizational control (referred to as personal control) in a crisis situation. However, negative crisis history told by the media can evoke more severe public anger in a crisis. A positive crisis history still could lead to negative perceptions.

Research limitations/implications – The study uses a fictional crisis scenario that may not evoke the same emotions or perceptions as an actual crisis.

Practical implications – Crisis communicators concerned with angry publics should focus less on traditional media relations and more on new media to reach other gatekeepers; or focus more heavily on media strategy since the media is more likely to elicit more anger among publics. Furthermore, a positive crisis history does not give organizations a pass in current crises.

Originality/value – Although the SCCT identifies crisis history as an intensifier of attribution of responsibility, few studies have examined crisis history.

Keywords Reputation, Crisis history, Control, Crisis emotion, Crisis history information source, Crisis responsibility

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is a formative theory in crisis communications. The SCCT, which has roots in the attribution theory, posits that publics attribute more or less crisis responsibility depending on the nature of the crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 1996, Coombs, 2007). Furthermore, the theory suggests that other factors such as performance history and crisis stability can intensify the attribution of responsibility (Coombs and Holladay, 1996). The SCCT prescribes crisis response strategies based on the crisis categorization and uses additional factors to help strengthen the response strategy.

Currently, there is a gap in the literature regarding the impact of crisis history. Crisis history refers to crises that organizations have experienced in the past (Coombs, 2004). Coombs’ (2004) study demonstrated that a history of similar crises was an intensifier of reputational threat during a current crisis even when the organization was a victim or the crisis resulted from an accident. The study also showed that the reputational threat was primarily direct through perceived crisis responsibility.
Therefore, this study extends Coombs’ (2004) findings by incorporating the source of the crisis history information and crisis history valence to show how publics’ perceptions and emotions may change based on these components. These results can help crisis managers identify the best outlets to relay crisis responses and develop strategies to target key sources that might help or hinder attempts to maintain organizational reputation or manage publics’ emotions toward the organization experiencing a crisis. The findings can also help crisis managers help their disparate internal publics cope with crises more effectively and demonstrate resilience in the face of such crises. In the case of the present study, insight is offered for addressing students’ needs after a crisis involving an active shooter.

Furthermore, much of crisis communication scholarship focuses on crisis response and its impact on corporate reputation more than non-profit organizations. However, non-profit organizations experience crises often and face similar challenges as corporations. A 2012 study examined student respondents’ attribution of responsibility for intentional and accident crises and confirmed that more responsibility was attributed to the intentional crisis as crisis communication research suggests (Sisco, 2012). The number of crises continues to rise; therefore, universities and colleges must be prepared to face this threat:

The present study, using an online experiment involving an active shooter crisis scenario, examined whether the presence and valence of crisis history might influence participants’ emotions toward the organization, perceptions of the organization’s responsibility, perceptions of the organization’s control, and perceptions of the organization’s reputation. The findings provide insight for identifying the changes in publics’ emotions and perceptions as a function of the crisis information source and valence of the crisis history reference.

Theoretical framework

Crisis history: how an organization’s past influences its present

Crisis communication is an important part of communication scholarship and has been defined in a variety of ways. According to Seeger et al. (2003), an organizational crisis is an unexpected, non-routine organizationally based event that results in uncertainty, threat, or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals (Seeger et al., 2003). The SCCT provides systematic recommendations to organizations that are experiencing crises based on the type of crisis that is occurring (Coombs, 2004).

Grounded in attribution theory, SCCT posits that people look for underlying explanations for occurring events so they can maintain control of their lives (Coombs, 1995, Dean, 2004). The basis of SCCT is receivers and their perceptions of crisis and attribution of responsibility to organizations that are experiencing crises. Additionally, the attribution theory suggests that if an organization has a history of crises, then that organization has problems that need to be addressed (Kelley and Michela, 1980). Kelley’s co-variation principle uses the concept of distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency. Crisis history is the operationalization of consistency (Coombs, 2007). This idea directly relates to the stability of crises, whether or not an organization has experienced a similar crisis previously. The SCCT suggests that stakeholders attribute less responsibility when organizations’ crises are unstable because those organizations are not seen as habitual offenders. On the contrary, when organizations’ crises appear to be stable, stakeholders are more likely to fault the organization because they assume that an underlying issue is causing the crisis to recur.

The theory also posits that organizations’ stability can be judged based on past crises and patterns in behavior (Coombs and Holladay, 1996). Events that occur frequently and in patterns are considered to be stable events. Instability refers to crises that happen
infrequently and are considered to be anomalies. The SCCT suggests that the public is more forgiving of unstable crises because the organizations are not seen as "repeat offenders," while stable crises are judged more harshly because they expose underlying issues that cause problems to persist.

According to Coombs and Holladay (2002), the severity of the crisis and performance history of the organization in crisis intensifies crises and increases the attribution of responsibility. Severity refers to the resulting damage of the crisis such as financial damage, environmental damage, and damage to human life. Performance history refers to organizations' responses during past crises, past actions, and the relationships the organization has had with stakeholders in the past.

As Coombs (2004) posited, “SCCT argues that information about past crises is a significant factor that can affect perceptions of a more recent crisis” (p. 266). However, few studies have examined the crisis history aspect of performance history in depth. Coombs (2004) conducted an experiment to test the SCCT proposition that having a history of similar crises increases the reputational threat posed by a current crisis resulting from or an accident, not just by organizational misdeeds. In Coombs’ (2004) study, crisis history was manipulated and incorporated in crisis scenarios that were based on real events regarding five organizations, which were presented to college students and community participants. One of the criteria for the organizations to be chosen was based on their crises occurring more than five years prior to the experiment, which helped ensure that participants would not have positive or negative feelings associated with them. The key findings were that crisis history increased the reputational threat even when the organization experiencing the crisis was the victim or the crisis resulted from an accident in addition to intentional acts. The results also showed that reputational threat was primarily through perceived crisis responsibility. Lastly, organizational crisis responsibility was negatively correlated with perceived reputational impact. Other scholars attest to the importance of crisis history and crisis reputation due to the impact they play in stakeholders' reception of messages (Ulmer et al., 2015).

Originally, the SCCT outlined the following crisis categorizations: natural disaster, rumors, workplace violence, product tampering/malevolence, challenges, technical error accidents, technical error recalls, human error accidents, human error recalls, and organizational misdeeds (Coombs and Holladay, 2002). In later studies, the scholars reduced the categories into three clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable crises. The victim cluster refers to crises in which organizations and stakeholders are victims; that is, neither group is responsible in any way for the crisis. The accident cluster includes unintentional crises where the organization experienced mechanical failure, technical breakdown, or produced a faulty product. The preventable cluster involves organizational misdeeds where organizations intentionally put stakeholders at risk through immoral or illegal activities. Crises that occur because of a human error are also considered to be preventable because the prevailing assumption is that the crisis could have been prevented with more appropriate training. Each category is differentiated based on the amount of control that the organization has over the crisis. Coombs and Holladay’s (1996) results suggested that the attribution of responsibility increased progressively from victim, accidental, to preventable. The amount of control that the organization had over the crisis is directly related to the amount of responsibility publics attribute to the organization.

According to Dean (2004), the discounting principle suggests that causal inferences will be discounted when plausible explanations exist. Coombs and Holladay (1996) suggested that:

The more publics attribute crisis responsibility to an organization, the stronger the likelihood is of publics developing and acting upon negative images of the organization (p. 282).

The attribution of responsibility and cause has also been shown as predictors of publics' evaluations of organization experiencing crises (Schwarz, 2012). The content
analysis of publics’ social media posts showed that stakeholders made attributional references often and also made evaluations over time in response to the Love Parade crisis in Germany. The tendency for stakeholders to make evaluations over time is an important illustration of how previous crises can impact current perceptions of organizations experiencing crises.

The crisis history reference, whether an organization experienced a similar crisis before, can be used as important information for publics to assess how much control an organization seems to have. While the extant literature has demonstrated that crisis history impacts the perceptions of organizational control, the research has not examined crisis history further for possible impacts. Furthermore, publics’ perceptions of whether a previous crisis was handled well could also impact current perceptions. Therefore, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ1.** How, if at all, does crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) affect publics’ perception of the organization’s control over the crisis?

**Effects of crisis history on reputation and crisis responsibility.** Coombs and Holladay (2010) expand on the work of Rindova and Fombrum (1999) and Wartick (1992), by defining reputations as “the aggregate evaluation constituents make about how well an organization is meeting constituent expectations based on its past behaviors.” Maintaining a good corporate reputation is integral to the success of an organization (Gray and Balmer, 1998). Organizations must consider maintaining their reputation especially in the face of crises that could potentially cause irreparable damage. Research suggests that companies with existing good reputations have more at stake than those that have bad reputations. When negative publicity aligns with consumers’ pre-existing views of organizations, the combination of the two determines the impact on brand and reputation (Pullig et al., 2006). This notion also applies to organizations with good reputations that receive negative publicity. There are some instances where these ideas may not hold true such as crises within organizations with good reputations that become repeating offenders.

The history of how an organization communicated with its stakeholders in prior crisis situations as well as existing relationship quality can both indicate the valence or nature of an organization’s crisis history in its stakeholders’ eyes. Research has shown that establishing strong communication and positive relationships with stakeholders before crises erupt is crucial to surviving crises with organizational reputation intact (Ulmer, 2001). This is sometimes referred to as a halo effect. There are two dynamics to the halo effect: halo acting as a shield during crisis; and halo creating benefit of the doubt during crisis. Although the halo effect can help protect organizational reputation, a favorable prior reputation has little difference than a neutral prior reputation, but there was harm from an unfavorable prior reputation. Coombs and Holladay (2002) referred to this phenomenon as the velcro effect. Coombs and Holladay (2006) also confirmed that the halo effect operated in limited capacity, primarily in the shield dynamic. This unpredictability and varying results are characteristic of communications in general, and especially inherent in crisis communications.

The results of Coombs’ (2004) study showed that the SCCT’s claim of a relationship between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation held true in both the victim and accidental crisis clusters. There was a negative relationship between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation for all of the SCCT clusters. The study also found that crisis history had an indirect and direct effect on organizational reputation. Thus, crises that are considered a mild threat to reputation can become moderate threats, and crises originally considered to be moderate threats can become severe threats when the organizations involved have crisis history. Crisis history has been shown to intensify reputational threats. Crisis communication literature would benefit from further exploration into the impact of
negative and positive crisis history references. With consideration of the current literature and the aforementioned gaps, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1a.** Publics will perceive the organization’s reputation negatively when there is a crisis history reference (positive or negative) rather than when no crisis history is referenced.

**H1b.** Publics will perceive more crisis responsibility when there is a crisis history reference (positive or negative) rather than when no crisis history is referenced.

**Effects of crisis history on crisis emotions.** Crisis researchers have recently studied and identified publics’ emotions in crisis situations. Jin et al. (2007) posit that anger, fright, anxiety, and sadness are dominant emotions that publics experience during crises while guilt and shame are secondary. Choi and Lin (2009) conducted a content analysis of consumer response to a Mattel product recall that were posted in online bulletin boards. The results showed that crisis responsibility was a significant predictor of anger, fear, surprise, worry, contempt, and relief. The study also found a significant negative relationship between alert, anger, and organizational reputation.

Kim and Cameron (2011) discovered that news frames could impact emotional responses to crises. Additionally, their study’s results showed that emotions induced by news frames impacted the processing of information and evaluation of the company. Studies have also shown that publics are more likely to experience more anger when a crisis is controllable and predictable (Jin and Liu, 2010). Based on the emerging body of work studying crisis emotions, there is much room to investigate the nuances of crisis situations such as crisis history and relationship history in relation to emotion. Given that the presence of crisis history and an organization’s prior crisis handling experience might reduce perceived controllability; the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1c.** Publics will report more emotion when there is a crisis history reference (positive or negative) rather than when there is no reference of crisis history.

**Effects of crisis information source: the role of crisis history tellers**

Often, publics learn of organizational crises via the media and other sources. Therefore, organizations experiencing crises must be concerned with media depictions. Much of crisis communications scholarship has focused on the impact of traditional media and offered insight for public relations practitioners to shape strategy and messaging based on them. Communication scholarship has also explored whether or not the message source impacts reputational and attitudinal change. Studies have shown that organizations experiencing crises may fare better when they are the first source of crisis information (Arpan and Pompper, 2003, Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Additionally, research demonstrates users’ intent to comply is stronger with food recall messages from organizations rather than user-generated messages (Freberg, 2012). Freberg’s (2012) study also showed age effects regarding the message source. Younger users made fewer distinctions between the message source than older users. A study of emotional stakeholders who support organizations in crises, referred to as “faith-holders,” showed that these individuals who maintain their own crisis response strategies act as crisis communicators and can potentially aid organizations in crisis (Johansen et al., 2016).

**Impact of telling crisis information first and fast.** The crisis communication literature suggests that organizations can benefit from telling their crisis information before other sources such as media outlets report the information. This strategy is called “stealing thunder” and originated in the legal profession (Arpan and Pompper, 2003; Dholik et al., 2003). Furthermore, Spence et al.’s (2014) study posited that organizations should inform
stakeholders first instead of another source such as the media or citizen journalists. Audiences had the highest perception of organizational reputation when they received the information directly from the organization. Additionally, the findings showed that audiences had a less positive opinion of the organization experiencing the crisis when they received the initial crisis information from the media source instead of the organization. Although the literature examines organizations that steal their own thunder, this phenomenon could also occur when third-party sources, other than the media, break crisis information.

*Media’s impact on publics’ perceptions.* Considering the various effects that research has shown media to have on publics’ perception, organizations must be aware and responsive to such reports because of the implications that they can have to the success or failure of the organization. According to Bond and Kirshenbaum (1998), the public generally assigns greater credibility to news reports and other publicity than with company-controlled communication. Company-controlled media (also referred to as paid media) include websites, advertising, news releases, commercials, brochures, and internal communication outlets. Uncontrolled media are generated by third parties and external organizations such as television, print, radio, or online publications (Owen, 1991). Consumers weigh negative reports from uncontrolled media more heavily than positive reports (Mizerski, 1982). Research shows that media outlets prefer to report negative information rather than positive (Dennis and Merrill, 1996). Therefore, organizations must consider the power of media and negative reports as they devise strategies to maintain their reputation amidst crises. Additionally, organizations must also face the permanence of negative publicity in an internet age (González-Herrero and Smith, 2008). Message source is one independent variable that scholars have used to help explain how publics process and perceive information and assess organizational reputation.

Research has also shown that publics’ emotions can impact their perceptions of crisis response strategies (Coombs and Holladay, 2005). The source of information is an important variable to examine because new media provides the environment for publics to learn about information from a variety of sources. Jin and Liu’s social mediated crisis communication model examines the interaction between organizations in crises and social media content generators who also consume information at all phases of the crises (Jin and Liu, 2010, Jin, 2010). The model also describes indirect and direct ways that social media relays information.

Audiences use social media during crises to check on family and friends as well as for insider information, while they use traditional media for educational purposes (Austin et al., 2012). Additionally, the study showed that third-party influencers are important for crisis communication, and both social and traditional media can be useful for crisis response. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that users’ perceptions of source credibility on social media like Twitter can depend upon the number of followers and the number of people the source is following (Westerman et al., 2012). Westerman et al.’s study showed a curvilinear relationship between source competence and trustworthiness and the number of people following the source. Additionally, Snoeijers et al.’s (2014) study results suggest that students are more likely to participate in two-way communication through Twitter than Facebook during university crises. The students were also more likely to share the crisis message with friends when they received it from a dean than the university.

Kim and Park’s (2017) study investigated the impact of source and crisis response strategy in the social media landscape, and found that organizational sources were perceived as more credible than non-organizational sources. Furthermore, the study showed that perceived source credibility explained the relationship between reputation and behavioral intentions, but was contingent upon the crisis response strategy used. Contrarily, Callison (2001) found that public relations spokespeople and their organizations were perceived with less credibility than spokespeople with unidentified titles and their employers.
The extant literature does not address peers as sources. However, as social media continues to pervade publics’ lives, there is increasing likelihood that crisis information could be relayed by peers via social media outlets. Furthermore, the literature does not consider the possible interplay of crisis information source and crisis history. Therefore, we propose the following set of research questions about the effects of crisis information source (not the medium), via which different valences of crisis history are relayed:

**RQ2a.** How, if at all, does crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) affect publics’ perception of the organization’s control over the crisis?

**RQ2b.** How, if at all, does crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) affect publics’ perception of the reputation of the organization experiencing the crisis?

**RQ2c.** How, if at all, does crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) affect publics’ perception of the organization’s crisis responsibility?

**RQ2d.** How, if at all, does crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) affect publics’ crisis emotions?

Lastly, we propose the following set of interaction effects of crisis history and crisis information source:

**RQ3a.** How, if at all, do crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) and crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) jointly affect publics’ perception of the organization’s control over the crisis?

**RQ3b.** How, if at all, do crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) and crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) jointly affect publics’ perception of the reputation of the organization experiencing the crisis?

**RQ3c.** How, if at all, do crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) and crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) jointly affect publics’ perception of the organization’s crisis responsibility?

**RQ3d.** How, if at all, do crisis information source (organization, media, or peer) and crisis history reference (positive, negative, or no reference) jointly affect publics’ crisis emotions?

**Method**

**Design**

The present study used a 3 (crisis history reference: positive vs negative vs no reference) × 3 (information source: peer vs media vs organization) between-participants experiment design to examine the effects of crisis history and information source on publics’ crisis emotions, their perceptions of crisis responsibility, crisis control, and organizational reputation. Following the reading of the crisis scenario, participants completed dependent measures assessing crisis emotion, perceptions of crisis responsibility, crisis control, and organizational reputation.

**Sample**

The 174 participants for this study were undergraduate students from the Southeastern USA. Majority of participants were Caucasian and between the ages of 18 and 20. The undergraduate students were enrolled in communication courses and recruited from a university research pool. Each participant received a 1-hour research credit toward a course research requirement for participating in the experiment.
Stimulus materials
The stimulus materials consisted of nine versions of a crisis scenario involving the university where the study was conducted (see Appendix for crisis scenarios). The crisis scenario was developed based on the type of crisis that was of utmost concern for college students, which was determined via a poll of a large communications course. The organization was the university, which was held consistent across all scenarios. Each scenario used the same storyline, but altered the source of crisis information (including crisis history information) as well as the actual mention and valence of crisis history. It should be emphasized that source of crisis history referred to the person or organization relaying crisis information and not the medium the information was communicated through. Social media channels were not compared to traditional media outlets.

Independent variables
Crisis history. In this study, crisis history was operationalized as the reference of crisis history, whether the organization, affected by a current crisis event, experienced a similar crisis before or not. The positive crisis history condition included reference to a similar past crisis that the organization has experienced with a positive response or outcome. The negative crisis history condition included a reference to a similar past crisis the organization experienced with a negative response or outcome. The no-mention condition did not refer to any past crises.

Information source. The peer source condition identified a peer as the source of the crisis information. The news media source condition included a sportscaster as the source of the crisis information. The organizational source condition included a text message from the university as the source of the crisis information. The medium that the message was relayed through was not a part of the study.

Dependent measures
Crisis emotions. Four crisis emotions were measured according to Jin’s (2010) study, after each participant read the assigned crisis scenario. The questionnaire asked participants to rate how likely what happened in the story made them feel. The selections were: angry, irritated, annoyed; sad, downhearted, unhappy; scared, fearful, afraid; and nervous, anxious, worried. The scale items ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely).

Crisis control. Coombs and Holladay’s (2002) personal control scale, based on McAuley et al.’s (1992) causal dimension scale, was used to measure the degree to that participants believed the university was in control of the crisis. The question asked participants to rate their level of agreement with statements such as: “The cause of the crisis was something {the university} could control,” “The cause of the crisis is something over which {the university} had no power,” “The cause of the crisis is something that was manageable by {the university},” and “The cause of the crisis is something over which {the university} had power.” The scale items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The personal control scale in the present study had a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of 0.744.

Crisis responsibility. Crisis responsibility was measured using the scale from Coombs and Holladay’s (2002) study. The measure asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: “Circumstances, not {the university}, are responsible for the crisis,” “The blame for the crisis lies with {the university},” “The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstances, not {the university}.” The scale items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The crisis responsibility scale in the present study had a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of 0.766.

Organizational reputation. Organizational reputation was measured using Turk et al.’s (2012) scale. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following
statements: “{The university} puts student care as the top priority,” “{The university} looks like a university with strong prospects for future growth,” “{The university} is well-managed,” “{The university} is socially responsible,” and “{The university} is financially sound.” The scale items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Participants completed this measure before and after reading the crisis scenario. The organizational reputation scale in the present study had a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of 0.821.

Coombs and Holladay’s (2002) organizational reputation measure was also used. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements: “{The university} is concerned with the well-being of its publics (students, fans, and community),” “{The university} is basically DISHONEST,” “I do NOT trust {The university} to tell the truth about the incident,” “Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what the {The university} says,” and “{The university} is NOT concerned with the well-being of its publics (students, fans, and community).” The scale items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The organizational reputation scale in the present study had a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ of 0.750.

Results

Main effects of crisis history reference

RQ1 investigated the main effects of crisis history valence (i.e. no crisis history, positive crisis history, and negative crisis history) on participants’ perception of the organization’s control over the crisis. $H1a$-$H1c$ hypothesized that a crisis history mention would affect publics’ perception of organizational reputation, crisis responsibility, and their crisis emotions more than if no crisis history was mentioned. Significant main effects of crisis history on participants’ perceived organizational control over the crisis were evident ($F(2,164) = 3.203, p < 0.05, par.\eta^2 = 0.038$): participants were more likely to perceive the organization as having more control over the crisis if there was a positive crisis history mention ($M = 14.535, SE = 0.309$) vs no crisis history mention ($M = 13.523, SE = 0.310$).

Main Effects of Crisis Information Source

RQ2a-$2d$ investigated the main effects of crisis information source (i.e. no organization, media, and peer) on participants’ perception of the organization’s control over the crisis, reputation, crisis responsibility, and their crisis emotions, respectively. First, significant effects of the source of crisis information on participants’ perceptions of the organization’s control over crisis were found ($F(2,164) = 3.420, p < 0.05, par.\eta^2 = 0.040$): participants were more likely to perceive the organization as having more control over the crisis if the source was the media ($M = 14.731, SE = 0.312$) or peer ($M = 14.146, SE = 0.306$) vs organization ($M = 13.593, SE = 0.304$).

Second, significant effects of the source of crisis information on anger were found ($F(2,173) = 9.947, p < 0.001$): when the media ($M = 6.33, SE = 0.266$) was the source of the information ($F(2,165) = 3.255, p < 0.05, par.\eta^2 = 0.038$), participants felt more anger than when the source was the organization ($M = 4.691, SE = 0.261$) or a peer ($M = 5.327, SE = 0.263$).

Interaction effects

RQ3a-$3d$ examined any interaction effects of crisis history and crisis information source on dependent measures. First, significant interaction effects of crisis history and source were evident in participants’ perceptions of organizational control over crisis ($F(8,164) = 2.014, p < 0.05, par.\eta^2 = 0.089$): a negative mention of the university’s crisis history ($M = 15.3$,
SE = 0.521) by the media led to the highest perceived organizational control among participants (see Figure 1).

Second, significant interaction effects of crisis history and source were evident in respondents’ self-reported anger ($F = 3.461, p < 0.01, \text{par}.\eta^2 = 0.144$): participants tended to feel the most anger if there was a negative crisis history reference from the media ($M = 7.250, SE = 0.448$) (see Figure 2).

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**Figure 1.** Interaction effects of crisis history and source on personal/organizational control

**Figure 2.** Interaction effects of crisis history and source on anger
Discussion
This study examined the effects of crisis history source and crisis history valence on crisis emotion, perceived organizational crisis control, crisis responsibility, and organizational reputation. The results of this study illuminate publics’ perspectives when receiving crisis history information (or not) from different information sources.

Crisis history impacts
The inclusion of crisis history information clearly impacts publics’ perceptions of the organization’s control over the crisis. This finding partially supports Coombs’ (2004) results suggesting that crisis history increased reputational threat in all crisis types. However, Coombs’ (2004) study suggested that the reputational threat was primarily through perceived crisis responsibility, while the results of the current study suggest that the significant difference was through organizational crisis control as perceived by publics. Perhaps this difference is attributed to the victim crisis type used in the study’s scenario. Publics are probably less likely to attribute responsibility to an organization that experiences an act of terrorism, but still acknowledge that the organization had control over the act occurring.

Crisis history information source
The source of crisis history information was shown to significantly impact the perceived organizational control and participants’ anger. Participants perceived higher organizational control when the source was the media or the organization versus a peer. Additionally, participants felt more anger when the media was the source of the crisis history information versus the organization or a peer. These findings support the idea of “stealing thunder” by demonstrating the organization fares better when the crisis information is attributed to it (Arpan and Pompper, 2003). Additionally, the results show that peers can also “steal thunder” and inadvertently help the organization in crisis.

Implications
University crisis communicators can use these results to inform their crisis strategies. The unfortunate reality is that school shootings are becoming more prevalent each day with the threat of active shooting crises being more imminent in the twenty-first century. According to the Everytown for Gun Safety, there have been at least 201 school shootings in the USA since 2013 (2015). This number represents an average of nearly one school shooting per week. Therefore, this study’s results are timely and needed to help university crisis managers prepare for active shooter crises.

Crisis history valence and crisis history information source have been underutilized in the crisis communication literature. The current study demonstrates the continued impact that crisis history valence has despite the ever-changing media landscape. With this consideration, the source has been shown to impact participants’ perceived organizational crisis control and anger. These findings provide useful information for crisis communication strategies. Taking an evidenced-based crisis communication research approach, this study not only contributes to refining the conceptualization of crisis history, grounded in the SCCT, but also, for the first time, provides research findings that demonstrate the effects of crisis history on crisis communication outcomes. In addition, this study extends the SCCT framework to the temporal domain, that is, an organization’s effective crisis response strategies need to be determined not only based on crisis attribution and assessment of current situation and resources, but also according to the organization’s crisis history. When it comes to crisis information dissemination, whether an organization has a crisis history, and if so, how such history and its valence are referred to in communicating with publics
can influence how they perceive the organization and have further impact on the organization’s crisis response decision making. Organizations in crisis that have experienced similar crises in the past must be prepared to employ crisis response strategies that relate to organizational control regardless of the crisis history valence. Counter-intuitively, organizations with a positive crisis history do not necessarily benefit from a halo effect, but must also be prepared to respond to higher perceptions of organizational control in spite of handling similar past crises well.

Crisis communicators who are concerned with publics’ anger toward their organizations are posed with two options: focus heavily on the media strategy since they are most likely to illicit anger among publics and focus less on traditional media relations and more on new media to reach other gatekeepers who can relay information. These findings are helpful to crisis communicators who are trying to help their publics endure stressful situations and exhibit resilience in the face of crises.

Limitations and future directions
The current study focused on a university crisis and how college students, one of the primary university stakeholders, respond to different crisis information embedded with crisis history information (or not) via different information sources. Future studies should look into how the nature of crisis history and who tells an organization’s crisis history impact publics’ crisis perceptions and responses in other industries and sectors.

Furthermore, the study focused on non-victim publics and used crisis scenarios as the stimuli. The results would be strengthened by examining the responses of real victims. Future research can keep track of real-time organizational crises with different types of crisis history (an organization’s crisis history as well as an industry or sector’s collective crisis history due to the nature of the industry and common issues) and gauge publics’ perceptions, emotions, and response tendencies to different crisis situations, using survey, interviews, or focus groups. Content analyses on whether and how crisis history has been used in framing crisis stories will also provide insight on how crisis history and crisis history tellers are portrayed in crisis coverage, as well as on possible associations of crisis history references and publics’ crisis responses, as evidenced in the media content.

While the current study focused on a university that had not experienced a similar crisis previously, future studies should use cross-campus comparisons to see if having a previous similar crisis impacts the findings. Additionally, future studies could examine differences between a more transient population (students) and more stable population (residents) in a campus crisis situation. Furthermore, there could be mediating variables such as the salience of crisis history information that could impact the relationships.

Research suggests the medium may have a greater role in crisis communication than the messages (Schultz et al., 2011). Now publics have numerous ways to receive crisis information and can learn about the crisis from a variety of sources. This availability of information presents a unique challenge for crisis communicators who must make tough decisions on resource allocation and on strategic messaging following crises. Therefore, future studies should examine the possible impact of the medium that crisis information is relayed through.

Last but not least, for future experimental design exploring crisis history and other key crisis variables, several crisis types can be used in the scenarios to see whether or not the type of crisis has an impact on participants’ anger and perception of control. It would also be beneficial to gauge participants’ information seeking intentions in response to the crisis history valence and crisis history source to further assist in crisis communications strategy development and refinement.
References


Appendix 1 – Stimuli

No mention – peer
Imagine the following:

One Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Next, there is a knock at the door. You wonder who could it possibly be since everyone is at the game. You are surprised to see your friend who looks terribly distraught. She starts to tell a story […]

Just as (insert university) was about to score, an armed person rushed onto the field and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter as the crowd ran for cover. Your friend was terrified and left the stadium as quickly as possible.

Positive mention – peer
Imagine the following:

One Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Next, there is a knock at the door. You wonder who could it possibly be since everyone is at the game. You are surprised to see your friend who looks terribly distraught. She starts to tell a story […]

Just as [INSERT UNIVERSITY] was about to score, an armed person rushed onto the field and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter as the crowd ran for cover. Your friend was terrified and left the stadium as quickly as possible. Your friend also mentions that nothing like this has happened before because the security guards normally stop anyone from entering the field without credentials.

Negative mention – peer
Imagine the following:

One Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Next, there is a knock at the door. You wonder who could it possibly be since everyone is at the game. You are surprised to see your friend who looks terribly distraught. She starts to tell a story […]

Just as (insert university) was about to score, an armed person rushed onto the field and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter as the crowd ran for cover. Your friend was terrified and left the stadium as quickly as possible. Your friend also mentions that sometimes the security guards allow non-credentialed people on the field.

No mention – media
Imagine the following:

You attend (insert university), and one Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Later that evening, you turn on the TV to see highlights from the game. Once you turn the TV to the sports network, you hear the sports commentator tell this story […]

Just as (insert university) is about to score, an armed person rushed onto the field and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter. No further information is available at this time.

Positive mention – media
Imagine the following:

You attend (insert university), and one Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish
your assignment. Later that evening, you turn on the TV to see highlights from the game. Once you turn the TV to the sports network, you hear the news anchor tell this story [...].

Just as (insert university) was about to score, an armed person rushed onto the field and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter. The commentator also says that security guards at the games normally stop anyone from entering the football field without credentials.

**Negative mention – media**
Imagine the following:
You attend (insert university), and one Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Later that evening, you turn on the TV to see highlights from the game. Once you turn the TV to the sports network, you hear the news anchor tell this story [...].

Just as (insert university) was about to score, an armed person rushed onto the field and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter. The commentator also says that sometimes security guards allow non-credentialed people on the football field.

**No mention – organization**
Imagine the following:
You attend (insert university), and one Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Later that afternoon you receive the following text alert [...].

At approximately 4:06 p.m., an armed person rushed onto the (insert stadium) and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter. Please avoid traveling to this area of campus until further notice. No further information is available at this time.

**Positive mention – organization**
Imagine the following:
You attend (insert university), and one Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Later that afternoon you receive the following text alert [...].

At approximately 4:06 p.m., an armed person rushed onto the (insert stadium) and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel continued to provide excellent security and detained the shooter. Please avoid traveling to this area of campus until further notice. No further information is available at this time.

**Negative mention – organization**
Imagine the following:
You attend (insert university), and one Saturday afternoon you are home working on a term paper. Normally, you would be cheering on the (insert football team) at the game, but you had to finish your assignment. Later that afternoon you receive the following text alert [...].

At approximately 4:06 p.m., an armed person rushed onto the (insert stadium) and opened fire on the crowd. Security personnel detained the shooter. In the past, there have been similar breeches during games, and the incident is under investigation. Please avoid traveling to this area of campus until further notice. No further information is available at this time.

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