

**The Effectiveness of Situational Crisis Communication Theory in Assessing
Personal Political Apologies: A Case Study Approach**

By:

Lena Mallory Basha

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Abstract

Crafting an effective apology when responding to a crisis is not a one size fits all process. Thus, understanding the type of apology and the context that comes with it is critical to building and implementing crisis response strategies. The various considerations required in this process are demonstrated in Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007). This study examines the usefulness of SCCT as a framework for examining personal political apologies; a type of apology with little representation in the sphere of crisis communications research. Through a case study approach, 42 news articles covering an apology from a politician addressing impaired driving charges, were coded and analyzed through the guidelines proposed by the SCCT framework. Findings demonstrated that there is some usefulness in SCCT on personal political apologies. However, there were gaps apparent in the theory, and the broader literature available, that warrant further exploration to better accommodate personal political apologies in the realm of crisis communications.

Keywords: Political Apology, Situational Crisis Communications Theory, Crisis Communications, Public Apology

Introduction

As trust becomes a central determinant in building reputation and public perception, apologies have been becoming more common (Edelman, 2022). Apologies are a common form of retribution and aim to restore relationships and reputations. The decision to apologize should be informed and include considerations that account for the crisis, the organizations, victims and stakeholders. Furthermore, apologizing and expectations around an apology have grown beyond the words "I'm sorry". Much of the work and research available for mass/corporate/political apologies focuses primarily on apologies which are delivered on behalf of an organization, company and/or separate entity rather than the individual speaker. As the demand for trust and accountability grows, current research and the types of apologies must grow to incorporate those apologies where one apologizes for their own wrongdoing. This research

aims to understand and identify how situational crisis communications theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007) can inform our knowledge of personal political apologies. Further, this thesis aims to provide an answer as to whether Coombs's SCCT framework is an appropriate tool for analyzing personal political apologies. In the next section, I will begin by reviewing the current literature that exists surrounding the history of apologies, trust, reputation and the categories into which apologies have been defined. Following, I conduct an in-depth review of the SCCT framework, how it's been used and the critiques that have been identified by other scholars. The sections that follow outline the methodology for this study, the inclusion criteria, the analysis and the findings of the case study. Finally, I close by identifying the contributions this research poses for the greater body of research as well as the potential opportunities for future research.

Literature Review

Apologia

Apology comes from the root word apologia, "...a Greek term meaning 'speech in defense', whereas in modern times, apology is a much more recent term meaning an expression of regret and a request for forgiveness for one's actions" (Sellnow, 2021, p.215). Apologia has presented itself as an interesting topic of study, intriguing and perplexing scholars for over 30 years (Edwards, 2010). However, in order to have an apology, there needs to be an event or circumstance to warrant this 'defense'.

Apologia often finds itself partnered with its antonymous Greek partner kategoria (Ellwanger, 2012, p. 308). The pair, kategoria and apologia, represent an accusation and a defense. At its root, apology has been established as a retroactive response. Something that is done once an accusation has been made or an issue/change in the relationship has been identified. Thus, the nature of an apology, the response to such an act, "focuses on the response strategies available to individuals and organizations when their actions 'violate commonly held public values'" (Sellnow, 2021, p.215). In the field of communications, each conversation can be looked at as a transaction. In its most basic sense, transactional communication theory describes a conversation as providing information to receive a response of some sort in return.

Scholars like Coombs have regarded apologizing as incorporating and, to some degree, exchanging social and reputational capital (Coombs, 2007).

Apologies are often observed as a metaphorical Band-Aid, implemented in hopes of serving to catalyze the process of healing wounds that were inflicted on the relationship between people and/or parties. At its core “...an apology is an effort to restore the relationship(s)” (Tarusarira, 2019, p. 212). With this goal in mind, an effective apology is meant “... to make moral and/or material amends” (Tarusarira, 2019, p. 212).

The structure of an apology has grown beyond the phrase “I am sorry”. Given what an apology represents at its core, a form of defense, there are many components that go into an effective apology. Primarily, if one is looking to apologize effectively, one should first and foremost communicate an acceptance of responsibility. Moreover, this acceptance should be greater than or equal to the level of accountability attributed to the apologizer. The speaker should “...admit wrongdoing, acknowledge harm done, promise forbearance, self-castigate and offer repair” (Blatz et al., 2013, p. 337). On top of this, apologies “... have ancillary components such as accepting responsibility, expressing remorse, saying sorry and assuring that the behavior will not be repeated” (Guilfoyle, 2019, et al., p. 72). Along with accepting responsibility, “... different conceptualizations of apology include other components, such as expressions of sympathy, compensation and a promise of corrective actions. In this regard, an apology can contain various sets of components that determine its different definitions” (Chung & Lee, 2021, p. 128).

While an apology is a common response to accusations or moments of crisis, there are alternative responses one can take than direct defense. In the realm of apologia, this alternative is called a nonapology. “Nonapologies can include responses such as victim blaming and justifying, excusing minimizing or denying the transgression all of which can increase transgressors’ feelings of power, control and self-esteem” (Guilfoyle et al., 2019, p. 73). When engaging in the transaction of an apology, transgressors may not see the value or merit in engaging in the exchange and metaphorically letting go of something. In the case of apologizing, Chaudhry & Loewenstein (2019) identify that the perceived loss,

or currency in the exchange, on the end of the apologizer is competence. Acknowledging and identifying the wrongdoing at hand communicates a level of guilt to an audience when apologizing, and thus associates you with that act. For acts where the level of competence is seen as a relevant factor, by apologizing, the speaker assumes that risk. Thus, the choice to use a nonapology approach may be rooted in an attempt to salvage perceived competence and dominance in the situation. This strategy, however, is not sustainable or effective in sustaining a relationship with the victim(s) since "...nonapologetic responses are dysfunctional for long-term relationship maintenance because they impede forgiveness and reconciliation" (Guilfoyle et al., 2019, p. 73).

Trust

Apologies are used during times when trust is paramount. When providing a statement of defense/apology, the sender is aiming to either disprove, justify or otherwise explain the situation or accusation at hand. Thus, the sender may have to rely on trust if there are any discrepancies or conflicting narratives that present themselves.

In past crisis communications literature, as mentioned previously, apologies have been referenced as being analogous to a transaction, trust is the currency we are working with. Much like a checking account, there must be funds previously deposited for a withdrawal to be successful. A good apology requires some established trust between sender and receiver in order for retribution and restoration to be attained.

MacLachlan (2015) explores the essential role trust plays in the effectiveness of an apology. MacLachlan suggests trust and apology are closely related in that "...the relationships between apology and trust becomes a question of measuring trustworthiness; a successful apology persuades the recipient that the speaker is now more trustworthy than she once was or is at least sincerely trying to become more trustworthy. A good apology gives the victim new reasons to trust the apologizer" (p. 442).

Evidence of the degree to which trust plays an important role can be found in Brink and Adam's (2015) case study. Reed Hastings, Netflix CEO, delivered an apology for mishandling the company's change in differentiating Netflix the streaming service and Qwikster the DVD service, causing a substantial spike in

users' rates. The apology itself, in terms of the contents and text, included core elements of a successful apology. Hastings even utters the words "I am sorry". However, "...the apology, however, seemed perfunctory at best. As he said, 'I'm sorry', Hastings smiled broadly." (p. 1). The apology was met with hesitancy and uncertainty from recipients. The incongruences between the nonverbal behaviour and the words being spoken were interpreted by audiences as being insincere and thus trust was lost (Brink & Adams, 2015).

In the realm of trust and apology construction, the individual delivering the apology is just as important of a consideration as the contents of the apology itself. MacLachlan (2015) notes that "...much of the merit of the apology stands in, as a kind of proxy, for the merit of the apologizer." (p. 442). Moreover, "valuable apologies are trustworthy apologies, and trustworthy apologies reveal trustworthy apologizers" (p. 442).

Reputation

If one is in a situation where an apology is warranted, then one's reputation will be affected to some degree. The work by Brammer and Pavelin (2004) states that, from an organizational standpoint, "...reputation has been defined as, 'a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describe the firm's overall appeal to all its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals.'" (p. 704)

The accusation or even the apology is serving to address represents something that will inherently alter how the audience/recipient perceives the company's past actions and prospects, thus interfering with the reputation.

From a reputational standpoint, there are two established domains where apologies fall; reformative and transformative (Ware and Linkugel, 1973). Reformative strategies fall into two smaller categories which are denial and bolstering. These two techniques do not attempt to change the public's perception of the incident or what happened. Rather, it simply changes or redirects the "offender's" or speaker's

involvement. Denial is a strategy where the sender denies either their involvement or, more commonly, their intent (Ware and Linkugel, 1973). Thus, communication is less concerned with the perception of the event and more concerned with distancing themselves from the narrative completely. Conversely, bolstering involves reinforcing the positive features of the accused. These two reformative strategies involve tactics that redirect attention toward the organization itself more than the incident in question. This route aims to sustain any of the credibility possessed by the apologizer without changing or distorting the cognitive elements involved.

Transformative strategies involve changing the perception of the incident and/or brand of the organization. This route requires more involvement and careful communication as the goal is to override or influence preexisting narratives or perceptions held by the audience. The apology in this strategy aims to alter the image of the brand in contexts of the crisis/accusation and beyond. Differentiation techniques involve the division of past contexts and forming new, alternative realities. The sender aims to cast doubt on the situation at hand, how it is portrayed, and provides an alternative explanation of events. The transcendence approach, however, provides alternative explanations or framing of the situation that alter one's perception of the events. In both cases, the speaker attempts to change themselves as well as their reputation by influencing their perceived involvement with the crisis. Moreover, reformative practices focus on salvaging and continuing one's current brand by denying or bolstering events. Whereas, in transformative practices, a sense of metamorphosis is implied. The speaker may condemn past actions to move forward as a new brand shedding the metaphorical cocoons and trying to leave the crisis with it.

When deciding which strategy to use when responding to a crisis, reputation is a critical element to consider. When treating an apology as a transaction, one's reputation is analogous to a credit score. With a great credit score, at times of financial distress, seeking leniency from banks is much easier than when one has had a troubled credit history. Similarly, organizations or individuals who have built a great rapport with audiences whether crises are better than those who have weak relationships with the public. Evidence of this is seen in Kelley and Michaela's (1980) work on Attribution theory.

Attribution theory helps to explain why “...valuable apologies are trustworthy apologies, and trustworthy apologies reveal trustworthy apologizers” (MacLauchlan, 2015, p. 442). When an individual is informed of an event in which they were not present, one immediately begins evaluating the event, filling in plot holes, generating suppositions and manifesting expectations in some part subconsciously (Kelley & Michela, 1980, p. 468). Thus, one’s preconstructed idea of one’s reputation would heavily influence how well or poorly a brand will fare in a crisis. The theory explains that one would use their predetermined attitude(s) towards a person/brand and begin filling in any questions or apparent gaps in the information given. Kelley and Michela (1980) explain that “... behaviour consistent with what is expected should be attributed to a stable property of the actor, and behaviour that departs from what is expected, to a temporary causal factor...” (p. 469). In a situation of an apology, if the actions in the crisis seem to align with the brand persona or reputation the public has, the more likely they are to see the crisis as your fault and potentially avoidable. Whereas, in an instance where the crisis in question seems out of character for the organization, the public will be more likely to view the event as an anomaly and be more willing to trust that it will not happen again.

Reputations span beyond that of a single person or single company. In the field of politics there are political parties involved and with that comes a different facet in which reputation plays a role. Marland and DeCillia (2020) look at the reputation of a political party as synonymous with that of a brand. Their work defines a party’s brand as “...the sum of all tangible and intangible communications” (p. 344). They articulate the connections by stating that “Reputation is quite similar to a brand given that it is ‘of perceptions and beliefs, both past and present, which reside in the consciousness of an organization’s stakeholders’” (p. 345). While a corporation may have this, the difference between a politician versus a worker with a company is the adherence to the brand and the public’s expectations from both the brand and those affiliates. Moreover, it isn’t just audiences expecting the party’s cohesion, Marland and DeCillia (2020) explain “when a partisan’s identity, lifestyle and livelihood are wrapped in the brand, party soldiers are the ones who apply social pressure to ensure that all brand ambassadors stay on

message” (p. 345). Thus, the reputation and/or brand associated with politics has a stronger interrelation with one another than other fields.

Public Apology

Just as a one-on-one conversation is different from someone delivering a public speech, a public apology differs from an apology from one individual to another. Like other public speaking endeavours, a public apology incorporates a performative aspect. “The performative act of public apology has recently taken on a more central role in addressing the need for reconciliation in our time, and the way that these discursive spectacles unfold is growing more standardized routine” (Ellwanger, 2012, p. 308).

Expectations from a one-on-one conversation for aspects like body language, nonverbal cues, the language used, the setting of the apology, the desired medium to deliver the message and others vary from an interpersonal apology to a public apology.

Koehn’s (2021) research divides the realm of apologia into three categories: interpersonal, collective and corporate. Interpersonal represents the one-on-one apologies where an individual apologizes directly to the victim or accuser directly. Corporate represents a CEO or C-Suite executive apologizing on behalf of an organization. Finally, collective relates to political figures apologizing on behalf of the political party or government as a whole for an incident or wrongdoing. Both corporate and collective apologies fall under the umbrella of public apologies.

Across all categories, some similarities hold true for any apology. What is more essential for consideration are the qualities or characteristics that differentiate the categories. One of the first distinct differences falls between interpersonal and both collective and corporate apologies. This difference relates to the degree of control on the part of the apologizer. In an interpersonal apology, the apologizer has much more control and either they did the wrongdoing involved in the conflict or they did not. With regards to corporate and collective, these approaches involve more variables for consideration when crafting the message and anticipating how it will be received. In the case of corporate, a CEO may still have to show a degree of negligence in that a crisis occurred under their leadership, but the CEO may not

have directly been at fault for the crisis in question. As well, with collective, the individual apologizing on behalf of the government falls in a similar situation where they are apologizing on behalf of an organization and targeting their wrongdoings as a leader and less of the specific details of the event. These elements of context will affect the contents as well as the delivery and how that apology is evaluated.

Another difference is regarding the timelines of apologies. Interpersonal apologies, generally follow a shorter timeline, given that those involved are typically limited to two individuals and the ability to communicate the accusation or need for apology may be simpler or easier to determine than in corporate or collective circumstances. “In contrast to most private apologies, public apologies are responsive statements – they answer demands for some gesture of reconciliation” (Ellwanger, 2012, p. 308) Thus, for multiple reasons, public apologies may have longer timelines in getting from the transgressor to the appropriate audience. Politicians or CEOs may be apologizing for actions/events that happened a long time ago. In the case of politicians, there have been instances where political leaders apologize for events that occurred prior to their taking office.

The third and final key difference between interpersonal (private) and corporate and collective (public) apologies is the dynamic between the sender and receiver. In an interpersonal apology, the apology typically follows the same conventional techniques and cues as a typical conversation. The sender and recipient will cater responses and words based on verbal and nonverbal cues received. In an interpersonal context, there is more opportunity for two-way communication, with further input from the receiver and the ability to provide feedback and for the sender to immediately gauge reception. Public apologies, however, are lacking in these areas. Firstly, public apologies occur when one speaker sends a message to multiple receivers. In this instance, the verbal and nonverbal actions will be different from that of an interpersonal conversation. These factors are crucial when considering how an apology will be received and balancing the expectations and nuances of delivering a public message and delivering an apology. Moreover, there is limited ability for the audience to voice a direct message, or communicate their

approval or disapproval, to the sender and achieve two-way communication among them. This element in particular affects the image restoration post-apology.

Further, when referencing the relationship maintenance between sender and receiver, reputation plays an integral role in the consideration that goes into a public apology. “The impression a person tries to convey depends on the type of audience, the situation, the goals of the actor and the values or self-identification of the actor. Whom the audience affects the type of image a person tries to project” (Chaudhry & Loewenstein, 2019, p. 319). In an interpersonal apology, the potential this impression will impact one relationship. Whereas in public apologies, the breadth can be much greater, this magnitude of impact is greater, and so is the importance of the impression that is left.

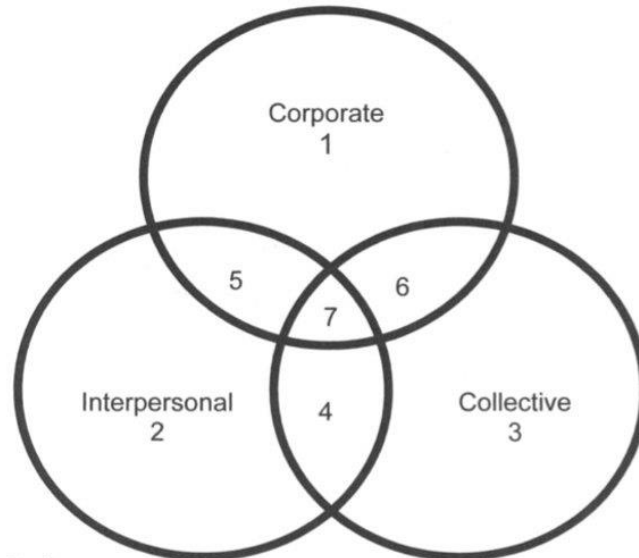
Given the innate social qualities of people and their tendency to form communities and create group affiliations, apologizing on behalf of a large group is not a new phenomenon. Public apology has been studied for decades and many useful theories and best practices have emerged to guide the process of public apology to accommodate for the above nuances associated with it.

Image repair theory (IRT) operates based on two key assumptions: “(a) communication is goal-oriented activity and (b) a fundamental goal of communication is maintaining a positive reputation” (Benoit, 2018, p. 13). Furthermore, in crisis communications, IRT serves to respond to threats that consist of “...(a) an offensive act that is (b) attributed to the target” (Benoit, 2018, p. 13). In total, IRT provides 15 separate strategies for responding to crises. For public apologies, many represent or align with those proposed by Ware and Linkugel (1973).

Political Apology

In reference to the Venn diagram featured in image 1, used by Koehn (2021), Political apology warrants a fourth circle of its own overlapping the other three categories. Political apology shares similarities with collective and corporate apologies while also presenting unique characteristics of its own that distinguish it as its own subset of apologia.

Image 1



(Koehn, 2021, p. 243)

For the purpose of this research, personal political apologies will represent a politician apologizing for their own wrongdoings. Apologies made by politicians on behalf of the governmental group, party, country or group, in general, will be referred to as collective apologies, as noted by Kelley and Michela (1980).

When it comes to a politician apologizing for their own personal transgressions there comes a metaphorical spotlight on the apologizer(s) themselves. Moreover, given that their actions may or may not be related to their position in office, the act of apologizing will seemingly separate them from their group affiliation with the government, thus placing greater importance on the speaker's reputation as an individual. According to Kampf (2009), "apologies can undermine the public figure's desired face, and project an image of a person who is lacking professional capabilities" (p. 2257). In a corporate apology, unless the CEO or apologizer themselves are well known to broader audiences, their reputation is heavily connected with their profession and/or the brand and organization they represent. Further, attaining the professional role they did was a result of previous work experience, education and actively applying and

interviewing for the position. For a politician, trust and personal reputation weigh more heavily in their pursuit of attaining the position they have within office, i.e., the election process. Thus, for personal political apologies, balancing one's personal reputation, professional image, and maintaining the "desired face" as mentioned by Kampf (2009), distinguishes itself from the other categories within apologia.

In the realm of public apology research, political apologies present a gap. While there are decades of research devoted to mass apologies, collective apologies, interpersonal apologies and effective crisis communications, there is little available that incorporates and considers the different factors involved in a political apology.

A gap remains for research. Much of the current literature is focused on apologizing for past mistakes of the government at large versus individual indictments/transgressions where the individual is directly to blame. With this perceived gap, when looking back to the definition of apologia, in its essence, an apology is reactive. Thus, when aiming to conclusively define a political apology, it seems fitting to establish what events a politician or political entity/group would undergo to constitute an apology to then define that response in a broader, inclusive context.

Situational Crisis Communications Theory

Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT) is a crisis communications framework created by Timothy Coombs in 2004. The framework was derived from several studies that explored how the nature of a crisis might influence the response strategy and the impact on the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2004). Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as "...a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (p.164). Coombs also identifies that crises damage organizational reputations and can impact how stakeholders engage with or view the organization. The framework crafted by Coombs is intersectional and features a series of different key factors that will impact which strategy is recommended with arrows connecting components with one another. The key factors that shape the reputational threat involved with a crisis are crisis responsibility, crisis history, prior relationship reputations, organizational reputation, emotions, crisis

response strategy, and behavioural intentions (Coombs, 2007). These factors, primarily attribution of blame, will help a crisis manager identify the crisis cluster their event falls under. There are three crisis clusters identified by Coombs: victim cluster, accidental cluster, and preventable cluster. The victim cluster represents crises in which there is little to no attribution of blame present, for instance, a natural disaster. The accidental cluster represents an event where there was low to moderate attribution of blame, like a technical error. Finally, the preventable cluster represents crises where there is a moderate to high level of blame involved, for instance, malpractice or human error. Once the crisis cluster has been identified, Coombs provides a series of crisis response strategies that a crisis manager can implement. The 10 strategies provided by Coombs are divided into two categories. First is the Deny strategy category featuring attack the accuser, denial, scapegoat, excuse, justification, compensation, and apology. Also, there is the bolstering category comprised of reminder, ingratiation, and victimage. These strategies “...have three objectives relative to protecting reputations: shape attributions of the crisis, change perceptions of the organization and reduce the negative affects generated by the crisis” (Coombs, 2007 p. 171).

The deny strategy aims to deliver and shape the crisis frame in instances where the messaging surrounding a crisis deviates from the frame the speaker wants to be delivered. An example where this strategy is recommended is in a rumor crisis. Deny strategies “... attempt to remove any connection between the organization and the crisis. If the organization is not involved in a crisis, it will not suffer any damage from the event” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

Diminish strategies aim to lessen the audience’s perception of the crisis and/or its impact(s). Rather than changing the perceived crisis frame that exists with the audience, it seeks to alter the perception around the severity of the event and the consequences that may have come as a part of it. From a crisis management perspective, if choosing to take the diminish approach, solid evidence is critical for success. Moreover, “... failure occurs when the news media or, in the case of online-oriented crises, people posting messages reject the crisis manager’s frame and continue using a different frame” (Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

Rebuild strategies aim to seek a path forward as an organization with audiences and stakeholders despite the incident. Responses that serve to satisfy the rebuild approach acknowledge the crisis and all its impacts, address their responsibility and gain focus on actions to move forward out of the crisis. “Rebuild strategies attempt to improve the organization’s reputation by offering material and/or symbolic forms of aid to victims”. (Coombs, 2007, p.172). Rebuild strategies are most effective for incidents with medium to high levels of blame for the organization and the goal of the response is to produce new reputational assets for the organization.

Excuse strategies aim to shift the perception of which cluster the crisis incident falls, primarily this shift is from the preventable cluster to the accidental cluster. This shift is primarily done by highlighting the intent, or lack thereof, leading to the event. “The value in reinforcing such a frame is that an accidental crisis is much easier and less expensive to manage than an intentional crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p. 172).

Finally, bolstering strategies aim to place significance on and draw primary focus to good deeds, traits or accolades held by the apologizer. This approach leaves little to no opportunity to generate reputational assets (Coombs, 2007). Crisis managers, in a bolstering approach, will draw up instances of goodwill and past positive efforts by the organization with stakeholders as tools to derive sympathy for the apologizer. Crisis history and organizational reputation are essential considerations for this strategy.

Two theories were fundamental in the development and bolstering of SCCT. These theories are attribution theory, first proposed by Fritz Heider and further developed by Weiner and Benoit’s image repair theory from Benoit. As referenced earlier, the core of Attribution Theory is how one rationalizes events and, more importantly, the cause(s) of events with their own explanations, particularly when details or critical pieces of information are missing. There are various factors that influence which cause, or explanation of the event, one will gravitate towards when applying attributions to an event. This influential factor is the locus or location to the actor. Other causal dimensions identified by Weiner (2010) are controllability, and globality, or the degree to which the cause stands across situations. Attribution theory is fundamental to SCCT in that identifying how one perceives and identifies the cause of an event

will impact how they receive any communication from the organization as well as their overall perception of the organization and its reputation. Moreover, crises are prime examples of the kind of event that would trigger attributions; crises are unexpected and negative (Coombs, 2004). When it comes to the factors that influence reputational threat, attribution theory helps strengthen the importance and consideration of crisis history, crisis responsibility, behavioural intentions and organizational reputation. One's perception of the organization, interpretation of the crisis and its cause(s), opinion on the intentions and consideration of the attribution of blame, would all influence how one's view of the organization can change during a crisis.

Image repair theory is a theory that is built on "...two key assumptions: (a) communication is goal-oriented activity and (b) a fundamental goal of communication is maintaining a positive reputation," (Benoit, 2018, p. 13). This theory played a fundamental role in placing an emphasis on reputation and focusing on the future while attribution theory served to inform how past actions and the current crisis should influence crafting a response strategy. The fundamental goal in crisis communications through the SCCT framework is to repair and/or sustain the trust of stakeholders. To do so, much like SCCT, image repair theory, also referred during its earlier stages as imager repair discourse, there are 13 strategies provided to use for image restoration. Benoit (1997) notes that this theory is more exhaustive than its predecessors in including the number of strategies that it did. Benoit's theory included suggestions. In a similar, but less prescriptive manner, to SCCT, image repair theory includes suggestions of actions that should be taken by a crisis manager as well as illustrations of crisis examples that coincide with the crisis response strategies provided.

A common theme throughout SCCT and the theories that comprise it is the dynamic between responsibility and reputation. As mentioned, at its root, SCCT is meant to help crisis managers preserve their organizational reputation in times of crisis. Lange & Lee (2011) sought to define organizational reputation but discovered that there was yet to be a conclusive definition available. From their research, they identified three conceptualizations for reputation. Those are; being known, being known for something and generalized favorability (Lange & Lee, 2011). Using attribution theory, one's reputation

typically involves an attributed trait or value to the perceiver. Thus, if/when a crisis occurs and deviates from that attribution, cognitive dissonance is present and leaves one to alter or diminish the attribution itself. Reputation is critical during a crisis because, as Lange and Lee (2011) explain, “An organization’s reputation, and changes in its reputation, influence the organization’s relationships with its stakeholders” (p. 154).

While the perceptions of the general public during times of crisis are important, the perceptions that are of critical importance for SCCT are those of stakeholders. Coombs identifies that when ascertaining the attribution of blame, crisis responsibility is regarded as “...the degree to which stakeholders attribute responsibility for a crisis to an organization” and refers to this component as “...the centerpiece of SCCT” (Coombs, 2004). Stakeholders are a key indicator of an organization’s likelihood of coming out of a crisis and garnering a future without long-term repercussions. Without sustained trust from stakeholders, an organization can’t thrive. Influencing this trust for stakeholders with regard to the factors threatening organizational crisis, are the attribution of blame and crisis history. Thus, these factors are paramount for crisis managers’ consideration when deciphering which strategy to implement.

How it is Used

SCCT has been used in a variety of different ways in the realm of crisis communications research. Most commonly, the framework is used to evaluate crisis response(s) against a tangible metric that serves to represent and/or measure audience perception (i.e., Stock prices, online discussion, a survey of stakeholders' perception, etc.). Another common use of the framework in academic studies is using an existing crisis or fabricating one based on similar crises available and asking a sample of respondents to react to response techniques derived from those identified in SCCT to gain insight into which response an audience would most resonate with and confirm if their findings align with that of Coombs’. The method chosen for each study aims to complement the component of the framework the study aims to analyze. The two elements of SCCT explored commonly are blame attribution and the impact of crisis history.

Factorial approach

Given that the framework incorporates a variety of different types of crises as well as a myriad of response strategies to implement, a multifactorial approach allows researchers to analyze different crisis types against different strategies or company crisis history. Coombs (2004) used this approach in one of his first articles featuring SCCT in 2004. This article focused on analyzing the impact of crisis history on crisis communications. The study conducted included 321 undergraduate students responding to crises chosen from the victim and accidental clusters. A design of 4 (crisis types) x 3 (history of crisis) was used, requiring 12 scenarios. Participants read fake newspaper reports outlining the crisis and mentioned any relevant crisis history in the articles and following a questionnaire was provided. This approach provided data to compare participant responses with one another against the different crisis types and the different crisis histories attributed to each of the other fictional organizations. Results demonstrated a strong link between crisis history and organizational reputation. Conversely, there was a "...weak link between crisis history and perceptions of crisis responsibility" (p. 282). With regards to the degree to which crisis history affects, there seemed to be no benefit to having no crisis history. However, there was evidence of the presence of a crisis history harming organizational reputation. Finally, results found that the relationship between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation still holds in this study as it has previously. This study bolsters the SCCT framework and its emphasis on crisis history's impact on crisis response and choosing a response strategy.

Claeys et al. (2010) used this method in their study to provide empirical evidence for the SCCT framework as well as explore the effects surrounding locus of control. In this study, however, they explored crisis types and the crisis response strategy implemented. Their study involved 316 consumers and used a 3 (crisis type) x 3 (crisis response) factorial experiment design using the three identified crisis clusters and strategies from each of the corresponding clusters those being, diminish, rebuild and deny. Each crisis incorporated in the study was based on each crisis type and its ability to be described realistically to participants. The organizations and crises were fictitious but heavily based on existing, well-known organizations. Their research found that matching crisis types to crisis responses did not lead to a more positive perception, going against the findings of SCCT. Claeys et al. (2010) explain that this

could be attributed to the variance in methodology as well as the limitations around the approach in providing subjects information at once to build perceptions and responses to a crisis and its associated communications. Moreover, it was found that corporate reputation is at the most risk of threat for crises in the preventable cluster with no variance for the accidental and victim clusters. As well, the crisis strategy that received the most positive reception was the rebuild approach. With regards to the locus of control, diminish strategies received a negative perception from those with an internal locus of control as opposed to a more positive reception for externally focused observers. Finally, for both internally and externally focused participants, there was a consensus that the more severe the crisis was perceived to be, the more negative the impact on the organization's reputation. While the findings for response strategy and crisis perception deviated from the findings of Coombs, this study demonstrates the importance locus of control plays in influencing the perception of a crisis, attribution of blame, and as a byproduct, the reputational threat. Given the identified limitations of the experiment, many of the fundamentals of SCCT hold true. Moreover, SCCT is able to demonstrate the importance of attribution of blame serves in crisis communications perception and reception.

The examples above are both studies that used the same factorial design format for their studies but shifted the variables to examine different components of SCCT. Conversely, Sisco (2012) used a 3x2 approach, but the focus of the study was to examine the usefulness of the SCCT framework when applied to crises in the nonprofit sector. Sisco's approach involved six treatment groups comprised of a total of 305 undergraduate students from five different mass communications classes. Each crisis proposed to the students was paired with the most appropriate and second most appropriate. This study deliberately decided not to use the 3x3 formatting as previously used by Coombs as the author did not see the benefit of garnering the participant's reactions to a response that was clearly inappropriate for the crises type. The experiment focused on crisis responsibility and gauging whether or not the recommended crisis response succeeded in mitigating reputational risk and demonstrating a perceived equivalent for responsibility taken versus responsibility attributed to the crisis. the examples for the crises featured in this study were all fictitious organizations, there was no crisis history present or any prior knowledge of

these organizations coming to play for participants when reacting to the crises and their corresponding responses. Results from the experiment were consistent with those of SCCT. Rebuild strategies were preferred for preventable crisis examples and deny strategies landed the best for participants. The finding that was most interesting was that of the diminish approach. Diminish is put forward by Coombs for both accidental and victim crisis clusters. This study shows that for crises in the victim cluster, participants reacted negatively to diminish responses in comparison to the deny strategy. For accidental crises, respondents showed no discernable differences between the reception of the diminish versus rebuild strategies. Sisco (2012) suggests that this is due to the ambiguity of the accident in question and the organization's perceived responsibility. For the victim crisis, the explanation was that if an organization has no blame, the diminish strategy, leaves more room for implied responsibility by focusing on the good of the organization while the deny strategy clearly negates any blame or responsibility for the crisis. This research proves that "SCCT is an effective theory across organizational sectors of public relations" (Sisco, 2012, p. 15). Research also bolsters SCCT's notion regarding the critical nature of ensuring a crisis is met with the appropriate response.

As crisis communications research continues to progress, the importance of expanding research beyond the corporate sector continues to grow. Research by Brown et al. (2020) echoes this perceived need. Brown et al. (2020) examined the impact of crisis response strategy utilization on athlete reputation crises (ARC). This study also examines the nuances involved in sports-centred crises and the impacts on the reputation of both the athlete and the team(s) they are associated with. Moreover, the article explored the considerations regarding the application of SCCT for crises during games or sporting events where the athlete is representing their team and personal wrongdoings outside of the athlete's work. Brown et al.'s (2020) study had 426 participants and used a 2 (ARC type) x 2 (crisis history) x 3 (team response strategy) factorial design. The inclusion of the third metric, rather than two as featured in the other studies included above, includes all of the features examined rather than highlighting strategy over crisis history or vice versa. Participants read false blogs from a sports-related outlet and then answered 12 randomly assigned questionnaires. The results found that teams suffered greater from internal crises, rather than sole

athlete crises. Moreover, the fundamental element of SCCT that states that the higher the level of blame indicates a larger reputational risk is supported in the findings. One finding that contradicted SCCT regarded crisis history. Crisis history did not have a significant impact on perceived crisis responsibility. A proposed reason behind this is that crises could have been seen more as an individual issue rather than an organizational one. With regards to response strategies, apologies/rebuild strategies performed best. Finally, the findings support that sports and/or communications managers should monitor a crisis to understand the situation thoroughly before deciding on a response strategy. Brown et al. (2020) do identify limitations in the research including that crisis history and a thorough understanding of crisis history is harder to garner in a group that is not the primary stakeholders of the sports teams in question. Moreover, it is identified that future research should study the stakeholder component in ARC more directly than found in this study.

Metanalysis

The factorial approach is a common approach in studying and using SCCT to examine crisis communications. However, there are other research models available that allow scholars to explore other implications and functionality of the SCCT framework. Ma & Zhan (2016) used a metanalysis approach to explore the impact of attribution of blame as well as the response strategy implemented on organizational reputation. The research questions of the study surround the relationship of reputation and responsibility, matching appropriate responses to the type of crisis, variables for consideration when using SCCT and influencers that may moderate the relationship between reputation and response strategy chosen. The method used in this article is a meta-analysis of 35 investigations out of 24 studies. Cases used in this study were published between 1900 and 2015 using key search terms including: “situational crisis communications theory, SCCT, responsibility + crisis and crisis response strategy” (Ma & Zhan, 2016, p.105). Once the cases were compiled, an analysis was conducted following a three-step procedure. Following, “a chi-square test of homogeneity was used to examine the mean weighted correlations” (Ma & Zhan, 2016, p.107). Data sets were then separated according to categories of each moderator followed by a meta-analysis to determine average weighted correlation of each group. Data collected from the

meta-analysis revealed that there was a strong correlation between the attribution of blame and reputation. Conversely, for the crisis response technique, the correlation was weak in its effect on reputation. The research in this article suggests that while a crisis poses a real threat to an organization, however, and most importantly for SCCT, there is not a strong enough correlation to suggest that an appropriate crisis response would suffice to outweigh or protect from the threat.

Content Analysis

Similar to a metanalysis, researchers have chosen a content analysis approach in utilizing the SCCT framework. A content analysis provides the researcher with a broader, less structured data set, in comparison to the aforementioned factorial approach. This structure allows for a more focused scope on the apology itself and the strategy chosen when implementing the SCCT framework. Zhao et al. (2020) conducted a content analysis using SCCT and discourse of renewal (DOR) theory as a framework to examine how public sentiments were influenced and/or affected by the crisis response strategy chosen (Zhao et al., 2020). This study was performed by collecting an organization's official communications via Twitter from six different crises each representing one of the three crisis clusters put forward by Coombs (2007). The crises chosen all varied in attribution of blame. A content analysis was conducted on each organization's tweets during the crisis. Following, tweets were collected from the public in response to the organization's communications of the crises. A sentiment analysis was then conducted on the public's tweets pertaining to the crisis response. With all tweets respectively examined and archived, the SCCT theory was then applied to identify the attribution of blame. Following this, it was identified in the article that it was necessary to include an extra category to the crisis types in cases where the level of responsibility attributed to the organization was ambiguous. A total of 4,340 tweets were compiled and parsed into data frames using Python. Any tweets that were flagging in the sentiment analysis as unclear, PR professionals were used to complete the coding of the tweets for tweets from the public. The results of the analyses demonstrated that the, according to the tweets, the public responded positively to crisis responses that "... included instructing information, sympathy, systemic organizational learning and effective organizational rhetoric" (Zhao et al., 2020, p. 8). Additionally, the study demonstrated that the

public responded more positively to ambiguous and accidental crisis types than those that feel in the preventable cluster. With regards to crisis types, results showed that systemic learning and effective organizational rhetoric, two renewal response types, performed best with regard to organizational reputation preservation in this study. Both of the above findings aligned with the fundamentals of SCCT. Furthermore, the SCCT framework served to explore and validate crisis responses from a variety of crisis types and study how this framework translates onto social media communications rather than traditional media where it was historically been used.

Deciphering the perception of a crisis response strategy can be measured in a variety of different ways. Zhao et al. (2020) used tweets to garner the general sentiment surrounding a crisis. Alternatively, Racine et al. (2020) used stocks as their metric of interest in their content analysis. Similar to previous approaches mentioned, Racine et al. (2020) applied the SCCT framework to analyze the crisis, determine the crisis type, and examine the response strategy implemented. Once it is established where the strategy chosen deviates or satisfies the recommendation proposed by Coombs (2007), their study looks to stock performance before, during, and post crisis to discern the perception of the reputation restoration efforts. The study itself uses empirical evidence to study reactions in the stock market to crises and the responses that followed. Racine et al. (2020) identified 341 different crises for a 30-year period ending in 2013 and these examples were determined through three sources. The sources were prior peer-reviewed articles, the institute for crisis management's annual crisis report over the years, and government safety bodies (Racine et al., 2020). The sample varied in crisis type and industry but focused on the apology response method. Their research found that investors reacted negatively to the organizational crisis, this being consistent with the findings of Coombs (2007). Moreover, negative reactions were greater as blame attribution increased. Also, the market reacted positively to apologies for preventable crises. Conversely, apologies for accidental crises exacerbated the negative reaction. This finding in particular is important, as previous research for SCCT demonstrated that there was little to no difference in organizational reputational threat with regards to crisis type and pairing the proper crisis response, referencing the work of Claeys, et al. (2010). A key factor in this approach is that the metric being studied to garner perception are stock prices.

Stocks require an individual to buy and/or sell shares which involves a greater level of commitment and action from someone versus studies that analyze sentiments from only communication. Therefore, this is an important factor to consider when evaluating the findings. This study demonstrates that, from a stock market perspective, there is value in appropriately pairing the crisis response to the crisis type.

Multimethod

Given that cases of crisis and public perception can be varied and involve different considerations and stakeholders, scholars like Leung et al. (2022) used a multimethod approach when using SCCT to study crisis communications. The research performed by Leung et al. (2022) explores secondary response strategies used by airlines during low-responsibility crises. This article points out that crisis communications research focused on the tourism and hospitality industry has only just seen a rise in interest. Further, in the areas garnering attention for research, airlines seem to be overlooked (Leung et al., 2022). Here, researchers conducted three separate studies to explore crisis response strategies used by airlines during Covid-19. In their first study, they explored the implication of crisis communications response strategy and its effect on likes. To examine this, 1,179 tweets were collected from four major commercial U.S. airlines. From here the content of the tweet was coded to decipher which response technique was being used. From there, likes were noted and examined to discern if there was any correlation between the response technique implemented and likes generated on the tweet. The second study conducted used a 1x2 factorial approach to compare bolstering versus enhancing strategies on individual perception. For this study, participants were supplied with the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the scenario was placed at the beginning of the pandemic when regulations and guidelines were approaching their peak. Participants were then provided with tweets that heavily replicated those from common commercial U.S. airlines. Tweets implemented a bolstering or enhancing strategy. The third and final study mirrored that of the second study, however, the context of the scenario was placed at the tail end of the pandemic when vaccines were available, and restrictions were in the process of lifting. The rationale for conducting all three experiments was to "...improve the validity and strengthen causal inferences of the study results" (Leung et al., 2022, p.9). The results of the first study demonstrated that

people reacted more positively (i.e. more likes/engagement) to tweets using an enhancing strategy. Whereas there was no significant correlation for tweets using rebuilding or diminishing techniques. The bolstering technique saw a negative response from Twitter users. Furthermore, "...the results of study 2 confirmed that airline reputation mediates the relationship between the secondary crisis response strategies and travelers' booking intentions" (Leung et al., 2022, p. 10). The third study found much of the same finding with some deviations. These differences were summed up in the article by explaining that the circumstances in the second study had higher stress levels incorporated. The stress, uncertainty, and atmosphere differences in each of the studies would have played a role in how communications would be perceived. This further emphasizes the importance of SCCT and matching the appropriate strategy to the crisis at hand.

Background on Applied SCCT

The SCCT framework is designed to provide the most appropriate response strategy based on both the organization and the crisis at hand. Depending on the crisis and the scale of the organization and those impacted, multiple approaches may be warranted. The case explored by Cooley & Cooley (2011) is when General Motors (GM) filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy following the 2008 financial crisis that particularly struck the United States. Using both SCCT framework as well as the Deal Cluster strategy, this study analyzes the GM's communications and response to the crisis to explore whether their approach aligned with the frameworks chosen. The Deal response options are similar to those proposed by Coombs. They are "...ingratiating, concern, compassion, regret and apology" (Cooley & Cooley, 2011, p. 205). The article references the prevalence of both frameworks chosen to validate its use but also acknowledges that both theories are typically applied to cases involving a physical crisis, like an oil spill or natural disaster rather than examining financial crises (Cooley & Cooley, 2011). GM found itself in a financial crisis in October 2008 when the North American economy began to see a substantial economic downturn, shortly after the organization filed for bankruptcy. Six months later, GM had the plan to make significant changes to both the brand, people and operations of the company that involved heavy financial support from the federal government. Given the degree of ownership the government acquired from their significant

financial aid, in July of 2009 the company then received approval from a judge to remove their most critical assets from governmental ownership and shortly following completely emerged from a 40-day bankruptcy. During all of this, there was a significant number of public communications from Gm. These came in a variety of different mediums including press releases, broadcast messages, press conferences, internet messages, blogs, YouTube videos that featured GM executive(s), and finally a speech delivered by Barack Obama addressing the crisis (The article outlined that the inclusion of this speech was chosen because of the government's involvement with both the company and the case at hand, thus warranting the inclusion). In total, there were 37 message sources among those mediums and a total of 133 crisis communications responses were derived from those sources. These responses were coded to determine which crisis strategies were used. The diminish cluster was used most frequently (64 times), making up 48% of the responses. The deny strategy was used the least, appearing in only 8 of the responses. Interestingly, there seemed to be a correlation between the messaging used and the medium released. For instance, in press releases, justification was most frequently used. Whereas the excuse response was found most prominently in press conferences. While, overall, the strategy implemented for the majority of the responses fell into the diminish category, what SCCT would have recommended, using multiple strategies is not recommended by this framework. If anything, it's frowned upon. Coming out of the crisis the organization essentially rebranded while still keeping the same name. They implemented new leadership and continually emphasized that the GM moving forward was starkly different from the one that entered bankruptcy. The change in both the organizational and leadership flagged a potential gap in SCCT in that the new CEO introduced during the crises decided to change messaging from that of the previous leader. This was because this new CEO did not have a hand in what happened during the crisis and thus would not accept accountability for it. Cooley & Cooley (2011) acknowledge that this change in leadership during a crisis is not accommodated in the literature outlining SCCT and doesn't validate whether this approach would align with SCCT or not. While this article thoroughly examines the approach chosen by Gm, it does not examine the perception of these communications. Thus, the

effectiveness of the responses is not demonstrated and therefore we cannot truly evaluate the effectiveness of SCCT in this particular situation.

Systematic Analysis

Another approach to analyzing the perceived success of a crisis response strategy is to examine news articles and determine journalists' thoughts on the crisis and associated communications. Sisco et al (2010) used this approach to study the reputation restoration efforts of nonprofit organizations (NPO) in a crisis. Sisco et al. (2010) used the Red Cross as an example NPO to study their approach to crisis response in articles published from June to August of 2008. There were 1585 qualifying articles after various criteria were implemented to gather the most relevant articles. From here, the articles were coded for sentiment, crisis response strategy used, as well as coding for mention of crisis history and/or if the article included a comment from the Red Cross. Of the original data set, 207 articles mentioned an organizational crisis or criticism. It was found that of those that mentioned a crisis and/or criticism, 171 articles included a response from the Red Cross. Out of the remaining articles, 14 had no response and four articles identified that they had reached out to the organization and received a "no comment" response. Of those including a response, 94 of those responses included messaging that aligned with the diminish strategy, 42 implemented a rebuild strategy and the deny strategy was found in 31 articles. (Sisco et al., 2010). Results demonstrated that in the majority of instances where the Red Cross responded, the strategy implemented matched that which SCCT would have recommended for the crisis being addressed. However, Sisco et al. (2010) acknowledge that the diminish strategy was used the most, even in instances where a different strategy would have been deemed more appropriate according to SCCT. Moreover, the results showed that there was a sentiment correlation between the mention of crisis history and the tone of the article. Articles that mentioned previous crises associated with the Red Cross had on average, an increasingly negative tone than those that did not. This moreover validates Coombs' (2007) SCCT framework. The framework itself was effective in this approach.

Critique of SCCT

Given the prevalence of the SCCT framework, there has been praise and criticism shared regarding the framework, its use and other components. SCCT has been recognized as “...the primary theoretical framework used to research crisis communications (Ma & Zhan, 2016, p.102). From the commentary provided by scholars in their work to justify the implementation of this theory in their studies, three primary points of praise became apparent. The first trait of SCCT that lends itself to being so well used for crisis communications research is the framework's implementation of Attribution theory to make the theory one that can be predictive. Many theories are typically implemented in a post hoc approach to reflect and dissect crises once they have occurred. While SCCT can be used in this manner, SCCT also allows crisis managers to use SCCT and follow its recommendation to craft a crisis response catered to the organization and the crisis at hand. Sisco, et al. (2010) states that “while some researchers have discussed nonprofit organizations and crisis communication, few have developed predictive measures of crisis response for practical use” (p. 23). This feature gives the theory an extra layer of functionality that spans beyond academia and into real-world implementation. This duality between academic application and fieldwork application creates more opportunities where the theory would be able to be used as well as great recognition from scholars like Sisco. The ability of SCCT to have this predictive nature is because it goes hand in hand with the second component of the theory that receives recognition and its prescriptive nature.

The SCCT framework by Coombs (2007) features a diagram (shown in Appendix B) somewhat representing that of a flow chart to represent the many components of SCCT and the intersectionality within those elements. This chart along with the crisis types, responses and recommendations that Coombs provides allows managers and scholars alike to logically see which response is best suited for a crisis as well as how one would get to that recommendation. Brown, K., et al. (2020) highlights this element when stating “SCCT has used attribution theory to successfully provide a framework to explain how people can use information about an organization’s previous history of crises and information about an organization’s previous relationships with stakeholders to predict the degree of attribution of responsibility for their actions during a crisis” (p. 206). The predictive element allows managers to gauge

which response would be best received by audiences. It also places considerable emphasis on stakeholder involvement and their responsibility to them. The prescriptive element of SCCT incorporates IRT and attribution theory to walk through the process of considering the various elements that affect the reception of a crisis response to choose a strategy that best complements and addresses the situation at hand. The ability to effectively incorporate these two factors into the theory is the third facet of the theory that garners recognition by scholars.

In being a theory aimed to assess and/or benefit fieldwork, the ability to have incorporated both empirical and theoretical components has been influential in its adoption. When reflecting on this, Brown et al. (2020) stated that

“The major contribution that SCCT gives to crisis communications research is in its empirical nature. SCCT uses experimental design and research rather than the classic case study approach that crisis communication literature has used for many years. Applying empirical research to crisis communication has helped the field develop knowledge based on statistical findings, not just expert evaluations and critique of crisis case studies” (p. 207).

There are considerations that come with both working in crisis communications and studying crisis communications, thus creating a framework that accommodates these through a field and theoretical lens builds for an effective framework for a variety of different uses.

While the framework has been recognized for being functional and versatile, there has also been some criticism and identified shortcomings of the framework that have been identified in the literature that currently exists. The most prominent comment regarding the framework’s limitations is regarding the apparent emphasis and focus on corporate crises more than any other industry. Scholars studying crises in nonprofit organizations, sports and tourism mentioned this limitation in their research. For instance, Leung et al. (2022) state “...in the tourism field, the SCCT has been applied to examine hotel crisis responses to bed bugs and COVID-19...previous studies have largely ignored the role of bolstering strategies as a secondary crisis response strategy” (p. 3). For the sports industry, Brown et al (2020)

mention that “...a weakness of the theory; however, is its limitation to corporate crises. The theory is designed to accommodate the characteristics of corporate crises, and only takes into account organizations that would face the 10 crisis types suggested” (p. 207). Coombs does, however, recognize that in outlining the theory, he makes the distinction in calling crises “organizational crises” in hopes to avoid isolating the theory and its use to corporate crises (Coombs, 2007). Despite this, some critique remains. Some of this criticism may come as a result of another shortcoming. This perceived disproportionate focus on corporate crises in the framework’s creation and implementation leaves an opportunity for consideration and factors that are unique to other sectors experiencing a crisis to be omitted and thus under-researched as a result.

As referenced previously, Zhao et al. (2020) highlight a limitation with the three crisis clusters. They note that the three clusters, victim, accidental and preventable, did not account for crises where the attribution of blame is ambiguous. In this instance, Zhao et al. (2020) was referencing circumstances like a data breach. Based on SCCT this instance may be argued as falling into the accidental cluster where one could argue that the company could have had harsher security measures in place to stop the breach thus attributing a low level of blame to the company. However, Zhao et al. (2020) argue that “...oftentimes the entity who is responsible for a crisis is not clear-cut, such as in the case of a data breach where the attribution of responsibility can be quite ambiguous...We decided to include ambiguous crises in the study because this inclusion can extend the theory-building regarding the effectiveness of response strategies in relation to a new cluster of crises” (p. 2). This comment opens the door to expanding the theory to be more inclusive and specific with each crisis group by either redefining the current clusters to be clearer and more inclusive should the research warrant or, conversely, the inception of a new crisis cluster to accommodate these ambiguous cases.

Finally, a critical component of SCCT centers around the relationship between organizational reputation as well as the degree of responsibility relating to the crisis. Ma & Zhan (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of the use of SCCT in crisis communications study. In their research, it was identified that empirical research demonstrates that while the organizational reputation going into a crisis may affect how the crisis

response is perceived, there appears to be a stronger correlation between response success and responsibility for the crisis. While Coombs (2007) acknowledges the importance of both reputation and responsibility, it is noted that there should be a distinction in the discrepancy in the weight each of these appears to hold. Ma & Zhan (2016) note that "...both empirical evidence and theoretical arguments cast doubts on the magnitude of the responsibility-reputation relationship" (Ma & Zhan, 2016, p. 23). Moreover, they continued, noting that "...strategies addressing only the issues of responsibility cannot completely mitigate the threat by attributed responsibility to organizational reputation, even when the strategies match with the amount of attributed responsibility" (Ma & Zhan, 2016, p. 113).

Despite the criticism, SCCT remains a useful and credible framework for evaluating crisis responses and crafting one. Considerations for these critiques primarily concern those cases which involve a crisis where the attribution of blame is deemed as being ambiguous, cases that are in sectors other than corporate and/or instances where the reputation-relationship dynamic is the primary metric being studied. If any or all of these are involved, that is not to say SCCT is not useful, it simply serves as a reminder that the past uses involve similar cases and for the person using SCCT to be considerate of all variables that would influence the criteria being measured/coded.

Methodology

For this research, a case study approach has been adopted. Using SCCT as the core framework to guide the analysis of the case, this study examines the apology delivered by Nova Scotia's then Premier, Iain Rankin, on July 5, 2021, regarding past impaired driving charges. Given the benefits outlined along with the format, content and visibility of the case chosen this framework is appropriate for analyzing the response strategy and perception of the apology. Moreover, the limitations outlined for this theory, at large, do not pertain to this type of apology. For instance, the limitation regarding the ambiguity surrounding attribution of blame and discerning the crisis type does not pertain to this case as this case falls unequivocally in the preventable cluster. Further, there are some previously identified gaps and perceived oversights for the theory as it translates into apologies that fall outside of the corporate sector,

however, there has yet to be research demonstrating whether these gaps are directly relevant to personal political apologies. The works of those by Brown et al. (2020) and Sisco et al. (2012) demonstrate sufficient evidence to suggest that the framework can translate to the case being examined in hosting potential to effectively evaluate a personal political apology.

The first step in conducting the research for this case study was to identify and understand the apology itself. The apology was delivered to Nova Scotians via the daily COVID-19 briefings that we broadcast online and disseminated on the provincial government's social media accounts. The footage of the provincial COVID-19 briefing is available online, thus the apology was able to be viewed and transcribed for its inclusion in the study. The content, context, nonverbal cues and length of apology were all noted in the transcription of the apology. The SCCT framework was then applied to the case to ascertain which strategy(ies) were implemented in the crisis response.

From here a preliminary search was conducted for news articles containing content referring to the apology. To gather material for the case study a keyword search was performed. This first search was done through Google and using one or more of the following keywords: Rankin, drunk, driving, DUI, drunk-driving, and apology. This search resulted in 18 articles being accumulated. With these 18 articles, an introductory read-through was performed to aid in introducing a general sentiment, identifying possible future keywords, and to begin discerning codes in the articles. Any repeating words, phrases, events or comments were noted and then coded. This built the first list of themes and codes for review. With this list, a more formalized read of the articles was performed. While reading, evidence of these codes being present was physically identified on the articles to track. The five codes identified in this preliminary read were: mention of the election, lack of action from the premier, the 2005 drunk driving case, Rankin disclosing these charges to the previous Premier and Liberal party leader, and the comparison of this case to a previous case in Saskatoon. Following this process, a collection of 4 of the 18 articles was sent to a separate coder to ensure intercoder reliability.

Following the initial round of coding, a longer, more robust keyword list was generated, and a Boolean search was conducted incorporating other, more targeted search engines. The new list of keywords included the following: drunk, driving, drunk-driving, apology, mistake, response, apology, 2005, incident, Premier, Iain, Rankin, impaired, apology, driving under the influence, DUI, drunk-driving, revelation, mistake, innocent. The search was performed using the ProQuest database, Canadian New Stream (a news-specific subsidiary of ProQuest that hosts current, Canadian news articles), Mass Media Complete and Google News. Articles that qualified in the search would have had to contain one or multiple of the above keywords in the title, body copy or both. The search was specifically set for articles that were published on or after July 5, 2021, the date of the apology. This comprehensive search garnered 44 articles, including the previous 18 from the first search. These articles were then printed and read together with previous codes being marked and new codes/themes being noted on the side and tracked for frequency through the read. Upon finishing the comprehensive read-through, notes were compiled, and the themes and codes were distinguished and identified.

Finally, consideration of the SCCT framework was applied to the next review of the articles. Specifically, instances where attribution of blame, response strategy or perceived response were identified in the article, were noted for future analysis when implementing the SCCT framework. Elements of the framework that were used in consideration for this step were the three crisis clusters and their descriptions (Table 1, Coombs, 2007), the crisis response strategies as well as the crisis response strategy guidelines found in table 3 as well as the guidelines used in the theoretical framework (Coombs, 2007). From here any considerations and/or flags are tracked to serve in the analysis phase.

Table 1

Table 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters

Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.

(Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)

Natural disaster: Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.

Rumor: False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.

Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.

Product tampering/Malevolence: External agent causes damage to an organization.

Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.

(Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)

Challenges: Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.

Technical-error accidents: A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.

Technical-error product harm: A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.

Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation.

(Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)

Human-error accidents: Human error causes an industrial accident.

Human-error product harm: Human error causes a product to be recalled.

Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Stakeholders are deceived without injury.

Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Laws or regulations are violated by management.

Organizational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

(Coombs, 2007, p.166)

Inclusion Criteria

The data included in this study will be the apology itself delivered at the Nova Scotian Covid briefing on July 5th, 2022, along with articles from news sources covering, referencing and/or discussing the apology being analyzed. Formats being considered are news reports, op-eds and news articles. News reports are the short-form pieces released by news media that cover strictly the relevant and objective components of the story. Op-eds were included to provide further opinions and subjective perspectives to contribute to the coding. Finally, news articles were longer form news pieces that expanded on the critical facts to reach beyond to provide broader contexts to the issue being covered. Further, the articles gathered are those that were published between July 5th, the day of the apology, and August 31, the month of the provincial election. These dates were chosen to include the Nova Scotian Provincial Election results and its associated discussion as well as the articles speculating on the apology's relation and effect on the results. Also being considered for review are the results of the 2021 Nova Scotian Provincial Election.

News media was the primary and sole form of media gathered and analyzed for this data due to the significant weight placed by Coombs (2007) on the influence and significance of news articles and crisis communications. Given that this case study will be centred around the SCCT framework, the focus on news articles as the sole medium of analysis best appeases the framework and will best illustrate the degree to which the framework applies to this type of apology as well as highlighting potential areas of further development.

Considering the above reasons, social media content will not be included in the content being analyzed for this case study. As mentioned, mainstream news media is currently the forum in which public opinion is debated. These long forms sources open for a larger, more in-depth look into the perceptions and opinions of Nova Scotians on the issue. Moreover, the long-form format of these articles can better capture overall sentiment and perceptions by being able to reference specific quotes and thus proves more effective for analysis as a case study framework using Situational Crisis Communications Theory.

Moreover, in social media's use as a metric of garnering audience reception of a crisis response using SCCT, the content collected is historically coded solely for positive, neutral or negative sentiment. Where this study will be exploring the use of SCCT with personal political apologies, being able to use new media content allows for a broader range of coding, a deeper grasp on sentiment and provides a greater opportunity to establish SCCT's value with this case.

Analysis

Inductive coding of the 44 documents surfaces eight codes. Below, in table 2, is a demonstration of the saturation of these eight codes within the 44 articles examined. Articles collected for this case study can be found in appendices A.

Table 2

Code	Articles that included this code
Mention of the election	27
Lack of accountability	31

2005 case	30
Disclosed DUI to McNeil	18
Copy Saskatchewan	11
Using a covid Briefing	12
“Half a lifetime ago”	8
Misled voters	11

The most common code present was instances where Rankin’s accountability was referenced and/or questioned. Instances that would fall under this code included references to avoiding questions, omitting details and/or not providing ownership. Examples of these moments include “We may never get all the answers” (Article 03) and one political figure for the province stating outright that Rankin was “Allergic to accountability...” (Article 06). Allusions to the then-premier’s lack of accountability made appearances in the headlines as well. One CBC News headline read Premier Rankin dodges drunk driving questions, court records detail 2005 crash. This motif followed in articles that spanned beyond the first 48 hours of the event. One journalist pinpointed that “It’s the premier’s inability or unwillingness to speak openly about the circumstances around the second charge that’s haunted him all week” (Article 34).

One of the most frequent instances of this code was moments that referenced when the premier appeared to lack ownership of the event. Moreover, the timing of the apology flagged concerns as this occurred in 2021, over 15 years since the latter of the two events mentioned in the apology. This was because there was an alleged tip to the premier, which he disclosed, that a journalist had caught wind of the convictions. Rankin then made the decision to come forward and address the issue and referred to the details surrounding how the story broke internally as “immaterial” (Article 08). Given the nature of the charges and the setting of the apology, there were many questions for Iain Rankin. The handling of the inquiries also brought into question his accountability for the apology, with some headlines stating he was outright “deflecting” or “dodging” questions (Articles 15 & 17).

The Second DUI Charge:

The next most significant code in the data set was references to the 2005 case. The apology being examined references two convictions, one in 2003 and one in 2005. The 2005 conviction is of more significance due presumably to Rankin's description of the case. Rankin states "that he was 'eventually found to be innocent'" (Article 08) when referencing the latter of the two charges. This particular choice of words and chosen approach, after further questioning from the media, was referenced in 75 per cent of the news stories that covered this case. One article clarified that "there is no 'innocent' in Canadian courts" (Article 05). This article continues by highlighting that this was a mischaracterization of the charge itself and questions why he would choose that wording at all. Another highlighted the premier's tendency to distinguish the two events, noting "... he apologized for his actions and mentioned the 2003 conviction. He briefly referred to the second case" (Article 12). Other articles were more direct in outlining their issue with the word choice, explaining "...it's the use of the word 'innocent' that has some questioning if the premier is truly taking responsibility for his past actions" (Article 11). Another added that "a reporter asked Rankin how being acquitted on appeal on a technicality can be the same as being 'found innocent'" (Article 16). This word choice proved to be a central component of the apology and its portrayal through news stories.

Election:

The apology took place on July 5, 2021. Rankin had been premier for five months up until this point after being brought into leadership after Stephen McNeil, Rankin's predecessor, decided to step down. At this point, a provincial election was a possibility and the proximity of an anticipated election to the apology itself was another code in this analysis. One article mentioned, "There has been widespread speculation an election call is looming, as the Liberals continue to roll out spending announcements" (Article 07). Rankin's apology had not been the only announcement during that time, thus fueling speculation that an election was imminent.

The apology's role in the election was also considered in the articles outlining the Premier's actions. One noted that "These are things that will matter when Nova Scotians go to the polls. And Rankin won't be able to simply declare himself innocent, regardless of technicalities" (Article 05). The mention of the election often provided readers with another context as well as added speculation to the apology from the opposition, other journalists, and provincial political figures.

In the articles reviewed that were released following the election, the apology was never attributed as being the pitfall of Rankin's campaign. Any reference to the apology was either used as a signpost of Rankin's journey during the election or as a potential contributor to influencing the province's shift from Liberal to Progressive Conservative.

Copy Saskatchewan:

Iain Rankin was not the first premier in the country to have a DUI conviction and later have said information released after getting into office. The current Saskatchewan Premier, Scott Moe, found himself in a remarkably similar circumstance to Rankin in October 2020. The similarities between their circumstances were notable to the point of being directly referenced in 8 of the 44 articles. Specifically, individuals were calling on Rankin to follow the actions of Premier Moe. "Andrew Murie, CEO of MADD Canada, said Rankin should follow the examples of Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe and former BC premier Gordon Campbell, both of whom responded to revelations about drunk driving charges by taking a leadership role on the file" (Article 03). The differences in the approach following the apology between Rankin, Moe and other Canadian premiers who have apologized for previous wrongdoings promoted some speculations in the articles covering Rankin's apology.

Disclosure to McNeil:

A portion of Rankin's apology that garnered attention in the articles gathered was Rankin's mention that he had previously disclosed his convictions to prior Premier McNeil before he ran as an MLA and again when he ran for leadership of the party. "Rankin said Monday that when he first ran for office, he disclosed the incidents to former premier Stephen McNeil and that he informed the Liberal party about

them when he ran for leader and won in February” (Article 03). As further explanation surrounding his being open about his past, Rankin added ““All parties have a process to vet candidates and our party is no different”” (challenged on found innocent). The mention of Rankin disclosing this information to McNeil was referenced in 16 articles.

“Rankin said he disclosed the charges to then-premier Stephen McNeil, and the Nova Scotia Liberal party when he first ran in the riding of Timberlea-Prospect in 2013 and again when he decided last fall to run for the Liberal leadership” (Article 16). The reference to this disclosure was framed as a supposed sign of being forthcoming or gaining credibility on the part of Rankin.

Setting of the Apology: COVID-19 Briefing:

Nova scotia began delivering COVID-19 briefings in March of 2020 when the pandemic was first coming into progression. These briefings were started when Stephen McNeil was premier and would cover guidelines, COVID stats and any other pertinent information that could affect the people in the province or those travelling in and out of Nova Scotia. The impaired driving apology being studied took place at the beginning of a recurring COVID-19 briefing. The setting of the apology was referenced in articles mainly due to the large discrepancy between the content of the apology and the original context of the briefing. One journalist stated, “He used a forum intended solely to keep Nova Scotians informed about COVID to try and put a potential political problem in his rearview mirror” (Article 26).

Misled votes:

In over a quarter of the articles included in this study, it was either directly stated or referenced to Rankin misleading audiences, specifically voters. Reference to this code included any allusions to Rankin’s disclosure to McNeil and his description of this disclosure as him bringing this issue to his boss. One article state “But he didn’t disclose it to his current boss – that would be you and all other Nova Scotians – until he was pretty sure it was going to surface anyway” (Article 26). Another instance is when then-opposition leader Tim Houston was noted as “...repeatedly saying Rankin misled Nova Scotians by downplaying the 2005 incident” (Article 19). This quote by Houston and portrayal by reporters centred

primarily around the code of disclosing the event to his predecessor and provides a potential response to the approach Rankin chose for the apology.

Themes

Following the application of the SCCT framework to the case, along with a review of the codes, clear themes emerged. The themes found in the articles analyzed emerged from coding along with the guidelines provided by Coombs (2007) (Table 3) when applying the framework to the case. A second round of analysis using deductive coding surfaced themes related to the SCCT framework itself. Each guideline highlights different recommendations based on crisis type and the associated response strategy. As discussed in the theoretical framework section of this paper, SCCT indicates multiple strategies around crisis apologies. After the process of analyzing the articles and applying the framework using the guidelines below, the response taken by Rankin partnered with its reception from the news media and presented the following themes. I looked for patterns in the coded analysis and identified themes in coverage or Rankin's response.

Table 3

Table 3: SCCT crisis response strategy guidelines

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1. Informing and adjusting information alone can be enough when crises have minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises), no history of similar crises and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
 2. Victimage can be used as part of the response for workplace violence, product tampering, natural disasters and rumors.
 3. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises) coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
 4. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), which have no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
 5. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
 6. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility (preventable crises) regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation.
 7. The deny posture crisis response strategies should be used for rumor and challenge crises, when possible.
 8. Maintain consistency in crisis response strategies. Mixing deny crisis response strategies with either the diminish or rebuild strategies will erode the effectiveness of the overall response.
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(Coombs, 2007, p.173)

Rebuild

As referenced in the theory section, the approach that would have been recommended according to the type of crisis in this instance would be the rebuild approach. More specifically, an apology would have been warranted given the attribution of blame in this case. Rankin opened his apology by firstly stating that he wanted to address the issue and acknowledge that he was "...very, very sorry..." for his actions. Moreover, the rebuild approach emphasizes taking accountability and recognizing the events for which one would be apologizing for. In the apology itself, there is evidence of clear remorse for his actions as well as the situation at large. Rankin does this through remarks like "I make no excuses for my behaviour. I was wrong..." (Article 08), "I regret that alcohol was a big part of my life in my early 20s" (Article 15) and "...it's behaviour I am not proud of" (Article 27). Further, Rankin continued to reinforce the path forward by stating he has "...moved on and I've lived a more safe lifestyle since in my 30s" (Article 15). Each of these quotes satisfies the rebuild guideline as well as many of the suggestions posited by previously mentioned crisis research by addressing the issue, recognizing the wrongdoing and reemphasizing the current reputation that this situation wouldn't happen again. Moreover, the then-Premier continued to reiterate that he regretted his decisions at that age and wanted to be clear and upfront about the incident.

Deny

The 2005 code, particularly the use of the word 'innocent' is evidence of the deny strategy at play. Stressing the distinction and using the word innocent aim to establish the frame that he was wrongly convicted. Additionally, it was found that Rankin was not innocent. He was found "not guilty", and this course was overturned on a technicality and not a lack of evidence. When questioned on the event further, Rankin "...refused to answer questions about whether he had been drinking or was drunk on July 25, 2005, the date of his second impaired driving charge." (Article 21). By avoiding questions, Rankin is

avoiding providing any validation to the claims that deviate from the frame provided earlier in wanting to dismiss the incident as “later found innocent”.

Diminish

The other codes fall away from the deny strategy in that they address and accept the charges in question. However, the degree of acceptance varies. For instance, the lack of accountability code falls underneath the fourth guideline following the diminish strategy. For instance, when being questioned on the events of his convictions, Rankin states that “Rehashing some of those facts is not going to change anything” (Article 44). This approach to shutting down questions, avoiding any further inquiries and leaving the events where they were in an attempt to keep the crisis framing where it was, falls under the diminish strategy. However, when using this approach Coombs states that “... Managers need solid evidence to support these claims...” (p. 171). Moreover, when reporters continued to ask questions, Rankin delivered a firm response of “I’ve laid out the facts...But I’m moving forward as I have over the last 18 years” (Article 11). In this instance, particularly surrounding the details of the court cases and how they played out are incongruent with some of Iain’s claims. Thus, while avoidance of answering questions and attempts to control the frame would fall under diminish, the accessibility of the court case along with the lack of evidence to support his claims would indicate a failure in this approach.

Another example of the diminish strategy being used is found in Rankin’s original apology. Rankin stated that he was “...very, very sorry for my actions half a lifetime ago” (Article 04). While apologizing wouldn’t constitute as the diminish strategy, it is the immediate distinction of time that has passed within the same sentence that would classify as a diminish approach. Having this quantifier so close to the apology itself takes away a degree of accountability by deflecting from the apology portion of the sentence. Coombs (2007) states that “The diminish strategy crisis response strategies argue that a crisis is not as bad as people think or that the organization lacked control over the crisis” (p. 171). Thus, emphasizing that the incident was “half a lifetime ago” is aimed at highlighting the time that’s passed

rather than focusing on taking ownership and accountability by letting the apology stand alone in its own address.

Another instance of the diminish strategy being implemented in this case is the reference to the impending election. When talking about the election in discussions surrounding his drunk driving convictions Rankin said "... that Nova Scotians he meets are more interested in talking about the future." (Article 29). This approach embodies the diminish strategy by speaking for Nova Scotians and their wants rather than addressing his intentions or meaningfully answering the questions being asked. This approach refocuses the frame away from the crisis and toward what he claims people care about or other's priorities, a bolstering approach that aims to thus influence audiences to match suit in terms of navigating their focus from the crisis and thus aiming to dilute the perceived severity.

Bolstering

One of the codes from content was the frequent mention of Rankin disclosing these run-ins with the law to his predecessor Stephen McNeil and the liberal party as well as emphasizing the vetting process in place by the party that he would have had to pass in order to get in his position as leader of the party. Stating "All parties have a process to vet candidates and our party is no different...If there are questions about candidates, that are disclosed to the party, and they have that choice whether or not to accept the candidate's disclosure...The Liberal Party accepted me" (Article 16). This reference would qualify as a bolstering technique, relying on the high opinions of the liberal party and their vetting processes to serve as a sort of blanket indicator of his current character.

Moreover, Rankin references that his community and family know about these incidents and continue to support him. Coombs (2007) states that "Reminder, another bolstering strategy, uses past good works to counterbalance the current negatives from the crisis" (p. 172). Stating that these incidents are "'well-known among his family, friends, and community'" (Article 04) points away from the apology and frames the crisis as something people have already looked past, thus aiming to lessen the perceived severity of the incident.

The code of the apology being delivered at a COVID-19 briefing is another example of the bolstering strategy being implemented. These briefings had been ongoing since the start of the pandemic and they typically featured whoever was Premier at that time as well as Dr. Strang, the Chief Medical Officer for the Department of Health in Nova Scotia. By the time of the apology, Dr. Strang was a well-known and respected figure among Nova Scotians. Thus, Dr. Strang's presence and proximity are notable to this apology. Moreover, choosing to make this apology at an event that, due to its nature and attendees, garners a degree of authority and a moderate viewership, would constitute an instance of the bolster technique. Coombs (2007) references that in bolstering strategies "managers who have had positive relationships with stakeholders can draw upon goodwill to help protect the organizational reputation" (p. 172). Moreover, the circumstance of the briefing is speculated to have been a factor in Rankin choosing this setting for the apology. "Rankin staged his apology at a COVID-19 briefing to limit the number of questions he would need to answer" (Article 12). Limiting the questions from reporters to this question and/or influencing the crisis frame is also an instance of bolstering.

The Eighth Guideline

The eighth guideline proposed by Coombs (2007) recommends that crisis managers identify which crisis strategy best suits their crisis, given the other guidelines and suggestions within SCCT, and the manager should hold consistent with this approach. Moreover, this guideline advises against using more than one tactic in a crisis response. This is an overarching theme for the entire work of the articles gathered and coded. The apology itself begins with a rebuild strategy and within the first sentence integrates the diminish strategy by referencing the proximity of the event to the time of the apology, nothing it was half a lifetime ago. Moreover, as the apology continued and the response spanned further, other strategies were implemented rather than sticking with one consistent line of messaging, as recommended by Coombs. Moreover, even the details of the event contained inconsistencies. In the initial messaging, the 2005 incident involved Rankin being "found innocent" and Rankin pivoted to claiming the details were irrelevant rather than addressing the mischaracterization when brought forward by the media. Further, when opening the Covid briefing, Rankin emphasized that this was something that he wanted to address,

however, when questioned further, diminish and bolster strategies were implemented to redirect the conversation away from addressing the issue and/or focus on reframing the event. Overall inconsistency and the neglect of Coombs' (2007) eighth guideline was a common theme throughout a compilation of all of the articles covering the event.

Findings

After the rounds of both inductive and deductive coding using the SCCT framework, there were a list of items which were found in this study as well as a culmination of questions left unanswered through the case study. The following two sections outline assertions, supposition and recommendations put forward by SCCT that were satisfied and the associated implications. Also discussed are the areas where SCCT provides partial or no explanation behind the unfolding of the crisis response and its perception in the articles.

What was found were instances of positive perception, specifically regarding moments where the rebuild strategy was implemented. This ultimately satisfies SCCT's recommendation matching for the crisis found in the case study. Also, this case study bolsters the importance of reputation in crisis response, as explained in SCCT, found in the election results. Finally, this case study also demonstrates the negative impacts outlined by Coombs (2007) should an apologizer fail to frame a case effectively.

Missing from SCCT were explanations, guidance or considerations for a few of the codes or observations from the case study. For instance, the literature review highlighted a heightened expectation for politicians to adhere to political party values, this consideration is not noted in SCCT. Moreover, the prevalence of the Scott Moe instance in the articles is not explained or referenced as a potential concern in SCCT since this crisis history is for a separate politician in another province and different political party. SCCT does not provide an explanation as to why this case was referenced by journalists so frequently.

Things like the timing of the incident, context and the lack of definition for this type of apology in the current literature are also outlined in this discussion sections as items that we not addressed by the SCCT framework.

Trust and Reputation

There are findings from the research that demonstrate the usefulness of SCCT on personal political apologies. Aside from the reasons mentioned previously in proving SCCT's recommendations and predicting news media's reception, another indication of applicability is the election results. While Rankin was not successful in the race for leader of the province, he did garner the majority of the votes in his home riding. These results would satisfy Coombs' (2007) emphasis on reputation going into a crisis and the previously built trust. Rankin would have been able to build a stronger, more personal reputation within his community and the broader Timberly-Prospect region both growing up and when he first ran as an MLA. Thus, his winning his riding again would indicate that there was not a significant enough loss of trust coming out of the crisis to alter stakeholder interactions to the point of switching votes.

Moreover, Rankin sustaining votes within his riding satisfies the assertion put forward by Coombs that the longer and more developed relationships are with stakeholders, granted that they are positive ones, the greater chance of experiencing a crisis and sustaining a degree of a favourable reputation coming out the other end. Moreover, the greater the reputation going into a crisis, the higher degree of trust that can be sustained in experiencing a crisis scenario.

Moreover, other articles speculated whether the apology and the drunk driving incidents would have any reputational damage, particularly as it relates to the impending election. "Any effect on Rankin on the campaign trail 'is completely manageable and will not show up in the votes'" (Article 16). Moreover, others referenced that, in the framework of an election, for Rankin's campaign, the significance of this would only pose any impact on those who would not be voting for Rankin. "The people who support Iain Rankin, this will not be a thing for them, the people who oppose Iain Rankin weren't going to vote for him anyway and the people who are undecided will vote on the basis of something else" (Article 27). The presence of these signs of perceived effectiveness directly supports the third objective of reducing the reputational effect that the crisis would have caused. The election would be a significant and tangible indication available to Rankin in gauging perceived reputational trust or buy-in, so for there to be

speculation that this apology and event, given its proximity to the election, would have little to no influence, is a fair indication that the messaging would have been effective.

Attribution of blame and response strategy

According to Coombs the appropriate strategy for this crisis would be the rebuild approach, which as mentioned, was implemented by Rankin. From the articles reviewed, the portions of the apology that garnered any positive perception were those that adhered to the rebuild approach. Some articles stated that individuals, whether that be the media or the public, were focusing too heavily on the apology. Whether the degree of the speculation seemed unjustified, there were instances where there was debate of whether the apology warranted any media. One article mentioned “He’s paid his debt to society and has moved on.” (Article 43), and another quoted “It is now old news and Rankin has learned his lesson; his judgement now, as premier, is not by what he did as a teenage” (Article 37). These instances satisfy the recommendation from SCCT to implement the rebuild approach to response to the crisis and avoid negative effects on perceived reputation, a key goal of the framework.

Impact of crisis history on crisis management

Crisis history plays a critical role in SCCT and is a core consideration when crafting a crisis response. Coombs (2007) states that “...an organization that experienced a similar crisis in the past is attributed greater crisis responsibility and suffers more direct and indirect reputational damage than an organization with no history of crisis” (p. 169). In the case study itself, Iain Rankin did not have any crisis history leading up to his apology. However, in response to the apology, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Article 03) called on Rankin to follow the actions of the Saskatchewan premier as well as work with the nonprofit organization to help work towards the reduction and, ideally, the elimination of drunk driving. Rankin mentioned that he will “do whatever I can do to work with MADD to ensure that we prevent those kind of things from happening in this province,” (Article 12). Despite Rankin having no crisis record, the previous record of other Canadian premiers who were in similar situations were referenced in the media coverage of his apology.

Further, Coombs (2007) highlights the importance of corrective action in navigating a crisis. “Corrective actions reassure stakeholders that they are safe thereby reducing their efforts by using communication to address the physical and psychological concerns of the victims” (p. 165). Rankin does mention that alcohol was no longer a large part of his life, in what is assumed to be an effort to elude similar effects of reducing stress for stakeholders and reassure them that it will not happen again. In this instance the crisis had happened sometime in the past, thus Rankin’s abstaining from any other run ins with the law or any other alcohol related crisis could have served as a sort of retroactive corrective action and thus would satisfy this recommendation put forward by Coombs (2007).

In response to the apology, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (Article 03) called on Rankin to follow the actions of the Saskatchewan premier as well as work with the nonprofit organization to help work towards the reduction and, ideally, the elimination of drunk driving. Rankin mentioned that he will “do whatever I can do to work with MADD to ensure that we prevent those kind of things from happening in this province,” (Article 12). However, there is no other mention of the partnership or if Rankin ever did follow up on this commitment. The SCCT framework highlights the importance of corrective actions but does not address the implications, or lack thereof, should the crisis manager promise corrective actions but fail to follow through.

Influence of Framing and Context

The first of Coombs’ (2007) objectives for effective crisis communications provides that the speaker would shape the frame of the crisis effectively for the audience. Instances of the framing effect were used in this case. The framing effect is when a communicator is purposefully selective in the information that is disclosed and/or emphasized surrounding an event in hopes to influence the perception of said event and thus focus an audience’s attention on certain factors of the event (Coombs, 2007) In many of the articles collected for this study, many reference the use of the word innocent. Moreover, others feature details of the 2005 incident as gathered from records of the event including witness testimony as well as statements from the police officer that responded to the call. There was a record of the offence stating

Rankin “...was thick tonged and ...he was slurring his words” (Article 17). Another article states the bind Rankin put himself in by focusing on the fact that the 2005 case was dismissed and the mischaracterization of it as ‘innocent’ by saying “He can’t get into a discussion of the second charge because, other than the outcome, all available evidence is damning” (Article 34). The 2005 incident was also noted as a pivotal moment for potential loss of trust. One article notes that “...Rankin misled Nova Scotians by downplaying the 2005 incident...” (Article 29). With regards to the 2005 incident, the approach of classifying it as ‘innocent’ and later backtracking by changing to classification to ‘dismissed in court’ was ineffective at shaping the frame of the crisis and thus losing trust and even classifying this decision as misleading voters. The framework highlights the importance of framing; however, it does not address instances like the one featured in this case where a crisis event has occurred in the past and the details of the event are publicly available giving the media a separate set of frames to begin building off of.

Rankin mentioned in his apology after he was asked, what prompted his apology. He mentioned that it had been brought to his attention that there had been questions to his constituency office regarding the charges and he wanted to get in front of it. The revelation that the apology came following a tip to his office did not go over without notice. One article noted “It is not forthright of Iain Rankin to say he’s being direct with people the of Nova Scotia when in fact he only spoke to this issue because the media was asking questions about it” (Rankin challenged). Another journalist takes in further in stating that Rankin “...had no intention of voluntarily disclosing the premier's past DUI conviction or charge, but decided to do so only after it became the subject of the somewhat mysterious ‘questions’. Secondly, he used the platform for which Nova Scotians expect and deserve COVID and COVID-related news for purely political purposes” (Article 27). The framework states that “...crisis managers must begin their efforts by using communication to address the physical and psychological concerns of victims” (p. 165). Rankin immediately addresses concerns when they are brought to his attention. However, they are not successful in satisfying the psychological safety of stakeholders in that they raise further questions and doubt. The framework, however, does not address any added considerations that would be incorporated

for crises that occurred in the past and are then brought to attention and how this difference would impact the response.

Rankin's choice to not answer further questions regarding the 2005 incident after being questioned on his use of the word innocent could be argued to have been another implementation of a framing effect. In one of the articles reviewed, it's noted that Rankin addresses these questions by answering with "...this is all I'll be saying about this" (Article 34). Coombs (2007) notes that "the framing effect occurs when a communicator selects certain factors to emphasize" (p. 167). The choice not to divulge this case could have been a strategic move that may have been deliberate, however, given that the questions regarding the case were coming from the news media this decision wasn't successful. Coombs identifies that the news media and their frames are critical and, depending on the crisis, the most influential (2007). Moreover, the presence of questions, particularly those highlighting a lack of available information, demonstrates a failure to follow the other recommendation posed by Coombs. Coombs (2007) states that the top priority when initially addressing a crisis is to ensure the physical safety of all those involved. This did not pertain to the case used in this study, so the next immediate concern is, as Coombs states, the psychological safety of stakeholders. Coombs (2007) states "a crisis creates a need for information. The uncertainty of a crisis produces stress for stakeholders." (p. 165). Rankin's apology was not successful at reducing and/or eliminating the psychological stress produced by addressing the DUIs during his apology. Expansion on the framing effect in SCCT, its use and potential consequence would help provide any apparent discrepancies in identifying whether this response was from a misuse of the framing effect, or this finding falls against suppositions proposed by Coombs (2007).

Evaluation Process

One tool within SCCT for evaluating a crisis response is the guidelines provided. Coombs (2007) provides eight guidelines for crisis managers to follow in order to ensure their strategy is as effective as possible given the findings contributing to SCCT. In the eighth guideline, it states that a crisis manager, when choosing their strategy should "maintain consistency in crisis response strategies. Mixing deny crisis response strategies with diminish or rebuild strategies will erode the effectiveness of the overall

response”. (p. 172). Rankin did not adhere to this guideline. Moreover, it is clear that this guideline has been ignored because it was not only one other strategy, but Rankin also had evidence of four strategies spanning across all three strategy groups. Particularly, there were specifically rebuild and deny strategies present in the strategies used. The importance of consistency is to bolster any communications with cohesion among all touch points. Any cognitive dissonance in what listeners would be expecting versus any new or deviant messaging or details from what has previously been delivered has the potential to tamper with their perceived trust.

Coombs (2007) also identifies that the objectives for crisis communications are “(1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis and (3) reduce the negative effect generated by the crisis” (p. 171). As mentioned in the theory section, the proposed means of accomplishing those objectives is to properly match the crisis type to the crisis response while also abiding by the guidelines used for the themes in this study.

When evaluating the overall apology through the SCCT framework and using the above objectives, the result is mixed. Reasons for this are highlighted in some perceived gaps or room for expansion as addressed above. It is also mixed given that there are many ways to measure performance. While Coombs’ (2007) does not provide a clear metric to use when evaluating a response’s success, two key metrics seem most prominent in this case.

In regard to the election, votes demonstrate a mixed response. While Rankin was unable to hold the leadership position, which could allude to a loss in trust that could be attributed to the crisis, he did sustain his votes in his own riding. While there are many reasons that could have influence on the elections results, if using them as a metric to measure Rankin’s apology, Coombs’ (2007) supposition regarding the impact of trust and level of reputation is satisfied by these results. Rankin was able to sustain a better reputation and thus garner votes in the riding in which he had the highest social capital meaning this area witnessed the smallest shift in reputation change.

If evaluating the apology based on media coverage in sentiment, the codes and common themes would demonstrate that this apology was not a successful one. The trust and authenticity of Rankin was called into question, a sign of failing the objectives set by the framework. For instance, one journalist noted that people make mistakes, however, when there are inconsistencies and plot holes present surrounding the authenticity behind the intent of the apology, understanding past transgressions becomes a little more difficult. “The lesson here is that Nova Scotians forgive politicians for the mistakes of their youth when they’re candid about them and they mistrust politicians when they aren’t” (Article 05). There are elements of SCCT that could explain the reception of the apology. Rankin used a mixed messaging approach which is advised against by Coombs (2007). Moreover, some of the approaches implemented are not recommended by the framework to be used with the crisis type that this case falls under.

While there are many instances, as mentioned, where the framework provides potential explanation behind parts of the apology and its reception by media, there are gaps that remain for some of the coverage received and comparisons made by media they remain unaddressed by SCCT and where it currently sits.

Discussion

Lack of definition

It is difficult to assess the applicability of crisis communications models, like SCCT when in the current literature and research available, this type of apology has yet to be defined. As discussed, there has yet to be a definition available in crisis communications research that encompasses a politician apologizing for their own wrongdoings. This gap in the research plays a role in the room in which the SCCT theory can grow. Coombs (2007) remarks that SCCT aims to serve “organizations” in a crisis since “The term ‘organization’ is used here instead of corporation because SCCT is applicable to variety of organizational forms and the term ‘corporation’ implies a specific type of for-profit organization” (p.164). A political party can be deemed as an organization, however, a politician could, in theory, serve as a separate organization with a set of different considerations.

Dual Reputation

The two reputations at play in a personal political crisis is a primary aspect in which SCCT can grow to better incorporate and consider personal political crisis communications. As referenced in the literature review, the work by Marland and Decillia (2020) highlights the idiosyncratic dynamic found with reputations in politics and the intersectionality of personal and political identities. “People on the frontlines are encouraged to adopt a homogenous identity as they embrace the brand’s vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationship and presentation as part of their lifestyle” (p. 344). The importance of brand cohesion across all the associated members working in a political party is stronger than would be found in a corporate equivalent. This degree of brand association would lead one to believe that politicians building a reputation would serve some benefit in aligning their personal reputation along with their professional reputation as closely to that of the political party. However, the article continues to state that conversely, branding also serves to differentiate the party from its competitors (2020). Thus, for individuals running as an individual for the party, there is some benefit to highlighting elements of oneself that deviate from their peers/competition while still holding to the values of the party itself.

During the election process, a candidate is sharing much more of themselves with the public than would a prospective candidate for a C-suite position with a corporation. The reason for this is that it would be warranted, if not obvious, to share personal and professional information to build a perceived relationship among people as they would be the key stakeholders who would determine whether to vote a candidate into office or not. Many public figures, whether they be celebrities, executive members of boards or organizations, whether profit or nonprofit, often begin their reputation building with the broader public through a less formalized manner than direct campaigning that happens during an election. Moreover, during a campaign, there are often promises, goals or commitments to the public that would also deviate from those in other roles.

The work done by Burgoon (2016) demonstrates the importance of expectations and their impact on human behavior. “Expectations are enduring cognitions about the behavior anticipated of others”

(Burgoon, 2016, p. 2). Burgoon (2016) continues to outline that expectations are influenced by social norms as well as information previously available to an audience. Coombs (2007) even identifies that “a reputation is an aggregate evaluation stakeholders make about how well an organization is meeting stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviors” (p. 164). Adding further emphasis to the role expectations play. The work in exploring expectancy violations theory (EVT) demonstrates that a response that deviates from one’s expectations can have positive impacts. Moreover, EVT bolsters the importance of expectations regarding perception and reputation. Therefore, for politicians, when there are two reputations at play, there is an added layer of consideration when communicating in that there are two reputations involved on the end of the receiver and thus added opportunity to falter when meeting those expectations.

Crisis history is a primary component of SCCT. Coombs (2007) states that “Crisis history and prior relational reputation have both a direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat posed by the crisis. Either a history of crisis or an unfavourable prior relational reputation intensifies attributions of crisis responsibility thereby indirectly affecting the reputational threat” (p. 167). For a politician, this is an important consideration, not only for their own past but also for the past of the party. In this case study, a critical component of the media backlash was the reference to a second instance of driving under the influence as well as the handling of it, which satisfies the relevance of crisis history. Moreover, there was a considerable reference to the Saskatchewan Premier, and other leaders, who were in similar situations. While Scott Moe, the Saskatchewan premier referenced, is not of the same political party as Rankin, this comparative nature found in the articles is an important consideration when thinking about crisis history and its influence on crisis communications. For a CEO apologizing on behalf of a company, their scope for crisis history would be centralized to the organization of which they represent. Whereas Rankin found himself being compared to and affected by the crisis history of premiers at large. Thus, when Coombs states that “...an organization that experienced a similar crisis in the past is attributed greater crisis responsibility and suffers more direct and indirect reputational damage than an organization with no history of crises” (p.169), things get more complicated for a politician. Rankin did face perceived damage

from other premier's situations to a degree, in that there was a separate expectation set for his course of action, however, this potentially could have been mitigated should Rankin have chosen to follow suit. However, the reference to other premiers indicates that there is a broader consideration for politicians to be aware of any politician, from any political stripe, in the country that could have experienced a similar crisis when crafting a crisis communications strategy.

Coombs (2007) states that "because reputations are evaluative, some point of comparison is required" (p. 164). The media's tendency to mention and compare Rankin's situation to that of the Saskatchewan Premier also holds influence on stakeholders. The organization MADD Canada reached out to Rankin, as mentioned, to work with the organization to help their mission to raise awareness to the dangers of drinking and driving. In their messaging to Rankin, Moe is mentioned as a sort of proxy as a role model in this scenario. The direct comparison that continues to be drawn between the two Premiers and the seemed parallels for expectations in crisis response and, in this case, corrective actions is not addressed in SCCT. The framework does not elaborate on how another individual in the same role, who experienced a similar crisis, would influence or impact considerations when crafting a response.

These considerations together are pivotal in establishing that the reputation of a politician contains nuances that warrant further exploration in order to properly determine how theories like SCCT can better accommodate them.

Harsher Criticism

This dynamic between personal and political reputations has also appeared to have impacts on the portrayal of the apologizer in news media. When running for office, and for some inviting the public to get to know them better, there can be barriers crosses that may not otherwise be ventured for a CEO whose only substantial relationship with the media and/or public is a strictly professional one.

For Iain Rankin, in his communications regarding the convictions, Rankin mentions that his case was well known in his riding as well as among his family and friends. Moreover, the news media in some articles covering the apology has mentioned Rankin's father and his history with alcohol. While it cannot be

concluded that the mention of personal information like this was directly a result of Rankin being a politician, the mention of such information in a news article covering an apology does not seem to be of concern for corporate apologies. If this was of concern, it would be reasonable to deduce that this would be referenced as a consideration in theories like SCCT for individuals to be aware of familial ties that could influence the apology and its perception.

The Public's Role

As identified by Coombs (2007), “the first priority in any crisis is to protect stakeholders from harm, not to protect the reputation” (p. 165). A critical consideration for personal political apologies is that the public, more specifically those individuals who are eligible to vote, are the stakeholders. They are the individuals with a vested interest in the organization as well as those who have the power to influence the candidates who will sit in those positions of power. Moreover, the differentiation by Coombs (2007) between stakeholders and the public is clear for all other industries, however for the political landscape, it becomes less clear from warranting the distinction given the role the public has in the government in places that practice democracy.

In the case study, it was questioned in multiple articles the accuracy of Rankin’s statement in which he informed his boss of the charges. That is because, While Stephen McNeil was his predecessor and the leader who made the ultimate decision to pass the position to Rankin, Rankin would not have been in the position without the people in his riding voting him into office. This dynamic made the line unclear as to who his true “boss” was.

The role which the public plays is inherently different in the area of politics. By being in one sense a “boss”, in another a stakeholder and in others an audience, it makes communications more complicated as who the audience is in has a significant impact on crafting an apology. Their impact is shown in the work of Chaudhry and Loewenstein (2019), where a mass apology will be catered to the attendees and how those receiving the apology will influence the verbal and nonverbal components of the apology.

Context's Role in Apologies

As referenced in the works Brinks and Adams (2015), the context and nonverbal cues matter just as much as the verbal content of the apology. These components are little referenced in SCCT however, they have shown to be important considerations, and this holds true for personal political apologies. In this case study the use of a covid briefing was criticized and questioned. There could be more to be done to expand on the considerations and recommendations that can play into planning a crisis communication strategy. Particularly, for a politician, there are scrums, press conferences, and events like the covid briefing that could be used to deliver an apology. All of these events are places in which the apology would be delivered in person/over video however the context of the changes and proves to impact the reception of an apology. Given the variety available to a politician, further insight and research into the role the setting has on crisis communications would be beneficial in bolstering the theory, particularly for personal political communications.

The context also involved the timing of the apology. The timing of an apology is critical in forming the purpose of it. As referenced in Koehn's (2021) Venn diagram, timing is a key differentiator, particularly when it came to collective and corporate apologies. In this instance, specifically for personal political apologies, the timing is also a consideration when looking into what the speaker is apologizing for. When apologizing retroactively for a past wrongdoing, as featured in this case, part of the apology addresses that component of not being forthcoming and thus being at risk of a loss of trust. This circumstance of not only apologizing for the incident but also apologizing for the delay in the disseminating of this news to the public (i.e.. The stakeholder) represents two apologies, or items to defend, under one strategy or message. Thus, timing could potentially reshape an apology by also integrating another item that warrants its own strategy and/or messaging.

Goals for Crisis Communications

Further opportunity for clarity when using SCCT to apply to a personal political apology pertains to the goal of an apology. As outlined in the literature review, an apology, at its base, is a defense to an accusation. Moreover, as Tarusarira (2019) explained, apologies focus on repairing relationships. And

thus, reputations as well. Further, Coombs (2007) explains that a goal in repairing these relationships is to also reap the benefits that come with them to sustain organizational well-being. He explains, “reputational assets can attract customers, generate investment interest, improve financial performance, attract top-employee talent, increase the return on assets, create a competitive advantage and garner positive comments from financial analysts” (p. 164).

These goals would vary for that of the politician. The goals for their organization would be more focused on building trust with the public, engaging voters, garnering policy buy-in and others. While there may be overlap, these subtleties would influence how one would communicate. For example, while a political ad and a product commercial could, at its core, be similar, there are differences present because asking someone to buy something versus asking someone to vote for a political party is inherently different since the stakes are different.

Bank Account Analogy

As referenced in the literature review, there is an opportunity to expand on the analogy first proposed by Coombs (2007). The analogy comparing social capital to that of financial capital and expanding on that to compare trust as currency and reputation to a credit score. If we keep this same mentality, we can look at the dynamic between Stephen McNeil and Iain Rankin as similar to the concept of a cosign. McNeil vouched for Rankin and attempted to transfer that reputation to Rankin given that he had not had the time to build up his metaphorical credit score with voters yet.

The “Victims” in Personal Political Apology

In personal political apology, the primary purpose of the apology, or at least a portion of it, will be addressing and mending any breach of trust. In this instance political leaders are typically chosen to lead and with that comes an element of trustworthiness. Moreover, as mentioned, politicians are typically expected to act in accordance with their political party’s reputation and values. In circumstances like those the case study examines, when looking back to the dynamic of *kategoria* and *apologia*, the accusation would arguably have been the reporter that questioned the convictions in a phone call prior to

the covid briefing. Otherwise, there was no real accusation to have accounted for. A key component of an effective apology as outlined by Coombs and other scholars is that the responsibility taken in the apology itself must adequately match or surpass the attribution of blame found in the incident. In personal political apologies, particularly those that occurred in the past, addressing the attribution of blame on a large scale is difficult. For example, in the case study itself, both convictions occurred prior to Rankin's involvement in politics, so when the events happened it was solely an issue with himself and the law rather than one with the public. Thus, the distinction could be made in SCCT to be focused on what you are apologizing for. More specifically, Rankin's apology could, hypothetically, have been improved or, at least, more targeted by specifying the remorse for not being more forthcoming with this information and avoiding a potential loss of trust rather than simply blanketing the apology for the DUI in general.

Another distinction that differentiates a personal political apology from other forms is in addressing the public. As mentioned, the goal of an apology is to rebuild the reputation and relationship. However, in a general sense, there were two key audiences Rankin had to address with one apology. Those two audiences would have been the segment of voters who did vote for him/the liberal party and those who did not. The relationship between the two is critically different in that there was a higher level of trust attributed and a greater opportunity for reputation shift. Those who did not vote for the liberal party may have already had a potentially negative opinion or at least an opinion that was not positive enough to incite them to vote. The stake they had in this apology was that they were residents of the province and were given the news they may not have had about Rankin that would potentially contribute to how they felt about him. This group, however, is still quite critical since, as discussed, they are potential voters as well as stakeholders in this situation.

The more critical of the two groups would be those who did vote for the liberal party. This group is responsible for Rankin being in this position of leadership and trusting that the party was sufficient to lead. Given the fact that Rankin found himself in this position through Stephen McNeil stepping down, the level of trust some of those voters may have had in Rankin specifically could have varied, however, the proof of their voting identifies some degree of positive perception of the party and presents the

greatest risk of reputational change at times of a crisis. The point of primary concern for politicians would be the loss of votes. Coombs (2007) states that “If a reputation shifts from favorable to unfavorable, stakeholders can change how they interact with an organization” (p. 164).

What is most critical here for applicability to SCCT is that it is difficult to address and differentiate the audiences from voters and nonvoters. Especially in this instance where, as mentioned, some of these liberal voters voted for McNeil rather than Rankin. While a leader can address and apologize for losing the trust of all the residents, there is a more significant loss that could be addressed among those who voted for the party. Not separating them could affect the perception of matching the responsibility to the attribution of blame, mentioned previously. Looking back to the purpose of an apology, it is speech in defense. With this case, the issue at hand is not the DUI charge itself but the choice to not disclose this information publicly and how it became publicly available. This potential breach of trust is what would be addressed in the apology. According to Coombs’ (2007) framework, the apologizer would want to match the attribution of blame. Thus, since there would be a larger discrepancy in trust among those who are active, voting liberals, those who do not vote and those who actively vote for opposing parties, it is more difficult to accurately adjust the acceptance of responsibility to varying levels of perceived trust.

Future research

The research conducted in this study presents gaps in the current research and suggests potential expansion of current frameworks. Firstly, in the beginning stages when conducting the literature review, there was no definition for the circumstance or genre of apology being examined in the featured case. Thus, when aiming to assess a framework’s usefulness on a specific classification of apology, it presents some difficulties to research a type of apology if it is not defined in the literature. The lack of definition and scarcity in the available literature represents a clear underrepresentation of personal political apologies and suggest that there is room for future research to begin defining and exploring these apologies and their place in crisis communications research. While research surrounding government apologies did exist in other research, the definition and cases used outlined a politician apologizing on

behalf of a government and/or group. As mentioned in works like Koehn, while there are many similarities between a collective apology and the proposed personal political apology, when components of the apology like attribution of blame are different from one another it will affect the use of frameworks and thus obstruct one's ability to assess its usefulness. This research would call for further research of personal political apologies and its associated components like the consideration of two reputations at play and potential confirmation regarding the perceived blurring of professional and personal lines when portrayed in the media as referenced in the discussion session. Moreover, while the SCCT frameworks serves as a great starting framework for crisis managers, including those addressing a personal political crisis, this research calls for an expansion of the theory to consider nuances of crisis communications research that are unique to this genre of apology. This case study, like the research of Brown et al. (2020) and Leung et al. (2022), highlights areas for expansion of the framework to better accommodate those beyond the corporate sector.

Conclusion

Findings of this study suggest the applicability of SCCT to understanding personal political apologies. The fundamental components of SCCT theory, including the framework and strategies themselves, provide useful insights into this type of apology and may offer insights into appropriate approaches to crisis response. However, findings indicate that there is potential for further expansion of the framework to better accommodate personal political apologies specifically within the genre of apologia.

When reviewing the above research, it is important to identify some limitations of the study. Beyond standard limitations of qualitative research (i.e., lack of generalizability and breadth of sample), it is important to note that this research uses a case-study methodology which may be impacted by larger societal effects. Firstly, all of the contents used in this case study are from English outlets, meaning any coverage in any other language regarding the case were not included for this study. Further, the case study took place in Nova Scotia, Canada and results could differ in other areas and past political and social climates. Cultural parameters and other time effects may have also influenced the outcome of events in

this case. For example, the event occurred during the height of the 2020-22 COVID-19 pandemic as well as during other significant events that could have influenced results should this study have been conducted during a different period of time.

This study has identified some unique aspects of personal political apology that may not be addressed by current theory. The contribution of this thesis is, therefore, twofold. First, it identifies the underrepresentation of personal political apology research as an area of study in the current literature. In doing so, it highlights considerations associated with personal political apologies and their suggested influence on crisis response. Secondly, this study proposes the need for expansion of the existing SCCT framework to accommodate these considerations and potentially improve the applicability of the framework and its usefulness in this area. Thus, this research surfaces to the lack of a clearly defined definition for personal political apology and demonstrates a gap for future research on this realm of crisis communications.

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Appendix A

	Date Published (M/D/YYYY)	Headline	News Outlet
1	8/18/2021	Bad campaign, leader who didn't connect with voters led to N.S. Liberal loss: experts	Global News
2	7/22/2021	Formal N.S. Liberal candidate says she was dropped because of 'boudoir photos'	CTV News
3	7/6/2021	Head of MADD Canada calls of Nova Scotian Premier to take action against drunk driving	Midland Today
4	7/5/2021	I was selfish': Premier Rankin apologizes for 2003 DUI	Halifax Today
5	7/7/2021	N.S premier's Mea culpa over impaired driving more about damage control than real contribution	CBC
6	8/6/2021	N.S. election: Iain Rankin complains of 'U.S.-style attack ads' as opposition stands by them	Global News
7	7/7/2021	N.S. Premier Iain Rankin discloses two past drunk driving charges amid election speculation	Global News
8	7/5/2021	N.S. Premier Iain Rankin addresses impaired driving charged 2003,2005	CBC News
9	7/17/2021	Nova Scotia Premier Iain Rankin calls summer election with vote set for Aug. 17	CTV Atlantic

10	7/6/2021	Nova Scotia Premier Iain Rankin's drunk driving admission prompts MADD Canada response	The Globe and Mail
11	7/8/2021	Nova Scotia premier on defensive over drunk driving charges he faced years ago	Global News
12	7/7/2021	Nova Scotia premier responds to new questions about drunk driving charge in 2005	Global News
13	7/7/2021	Nova Scotia Premier responds to new questions about drunk driving charge in 2005	CTV News Atlantic
14	7/5/2021	Nova Scotian premier Ian Rankin says he was convicted for drunk driving in 2003	CTV News Atlantic
15	7/8/2021	NS premier deflects questions on drunk driving charges he faced years ago, but court files give better picture	CTV News Atlantic
16	7/7/2021	Premier Rankin Challenged on statement that he was 'found innocent' of 2005 impaired driving charge	Saltwire
17	7/7/2021	Premier Rankin dodges drunk driving questions, court records detail 2005 crash	CBC News
18	7/7/2022	Stephen Wentzell: Rankin's DUI story is big. How journalists tell the story could be even bigger	The Nova Scotia Advocate

19	7/17/2021	The writ has finally dropped: N.S. to go to the polls Aug. 17	Global News
20	7/8/2021	N.S. Premier deflects questions on drunk driving charges he faced years ago, but court files give better picture	CTV News Atlantic
21	9-Jul-21	Rankin looking beyond charges	Chronicle Herald
22	14-Aug-21	Platform planks, leadership tests: delicate balancing act for voters	Chronicle Herald
23	6-Jul-21	Fifteen News Watch	The Canadian Press
24	17-Jul-21	Provincial vote in Nova Scotia called for Aug 17	The Canadian Press
25	8-Jul-21	Rankin challenged on 'found innocent' statement	Chronicle Herald
26	6-Jul-21	Rankin's disclosure not quite complete	Chronicle Herald
27	7-Jul-21	Rankin chastised for handling of DUI admission	Chronicle Herald
28	8-Jul-21	Rankin faces new questions about 2005 charge	The Simcoe Informer
29	17-Jul-21	Nova Scotia heads into summer election as Premier Iain Rankin calls vote for Aug.17	National Post (Online)
30	5-Jul-21	Iain Rankin	CTV National news
31	18-Aug-21	Nova Scotia proves an unhappy test run for the Liberals	Maclean's
32	17-Jul-21	Liberals popular heading into election	Chronicle Herald
33	9-Jul-21	N.S. premier continues to be in hot seat	North Bay Nugget
34	10-Jul-21	Nova Scotians will soon decide if this matters	Chronicle Herald
35	5-Jul-21	Nova Scotia Premier Iain Rankin says he was convicted for drunk driving in 2003	The Canadian Press
36	6-Jul-21	N.S. premier details drunk driving charges	Toronto Star
37	13-Jul-21	Give it a rest	Chronicle Herald
38	6-Jul-21	Premier reveals impaired driving conviction	Chronicle Herald
39	7-Jul-21	Rankin's revelation	Chronicle Herald
40	7-Jul-21	Politics Briefing: PM plays down suggestions of a pre-election tour while visiting Alberta	The Globe and Mail
41	10-Jul-21	bad decisions	Chronicle Herald
42	10-Jul-21	Time to reconsider young male drinking culture	Chronicle Herald

43	10-Jul-21	OLD NEWS	Chronicle Herald
44	8-Jul-21	Iain Rankin sways he'll consider making candidate declare criminal convictions	CBC News

Appendix B

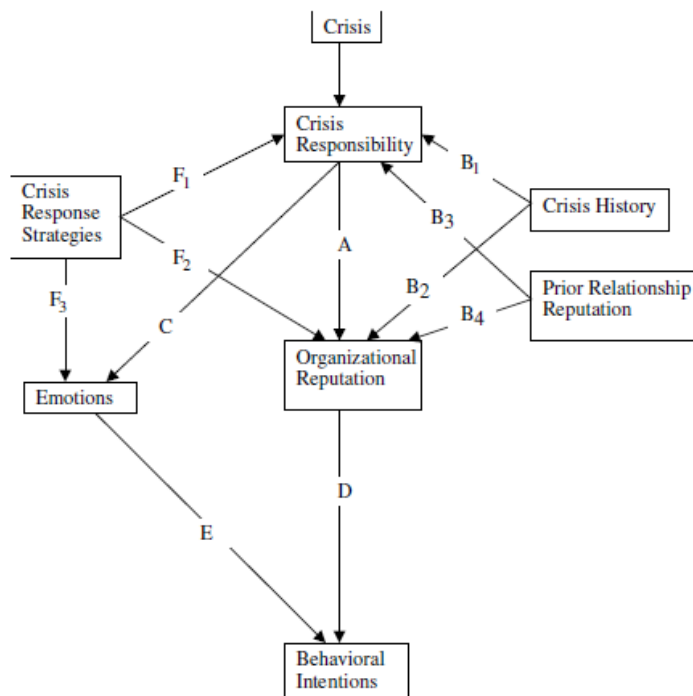


Figure 1: Crisis situation model of SCCT

(Coombs, 2007, p. 166)