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Predictability: The Missing Variable in Public Relations

Abstract

This study offers an initial and exploratory examination of the role that the variable of predictability plays in crisis management. Leveraging the situational crisis communication theory, it employed two separate but inter-related experiments. They examined how manipulations of the level of crisis predictability impacted a number of crucial variables important for crisis response. The findings strongly indicate that when a crisis is framed as having been predictable, it results in a host of negative consequences for the involved organizations and complicates the recovery process. When a crisis is framed as having been unpredictable, it results in positive benefits for the organizations involved. This study provides justification for future research exploring the role of predictability during a crisis.

Keywords: public relations, predictability, crisis management, situational crisis communication theory

Introduction

The discipline of public relations (PR) contains an extensive body of research on all aspects of crises. However, there is a surprising gap in the literature on the variable of predictability and how it impacts crisis management. Only two PR articles, (Jin, 2010; Jin, 2009), have examined any aspect of predictability. Some conceptualizations of crisis imply that they are inherently perceived as unpredictable events (Coombs, 2014). However, a wide body of trans-disciplinary literature suggests that the manifestation of risks causing crises are in fact quite predictable and known to organizations (Peters & Shevchenko, 2015). Crises are fundamentally the manifestation of risks (Heath & O’Hair, 2020). Research has developed models specifically designed to help organizations predict the manifest of crises causing risks (Lentz et al., 2019; Holopainen & Sarlin, 2015). Thus, why is there a lack of research on perceptions of crisis predictability in the PR crisis management literature?

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Another gap from the literature are the consequences of what happens when the news media discovers that a crisis had or could have been predicted beforehand, but responsible agents failed to act? Perceptions about the predictability of risks can be created for the public through the mass media and other forms of communication (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). This recently happened in national news coverage about winter storm power failures in Texas (McLaughlin & Kelly, 2021). If organizational leadership could anticipate reputational harm from failing to better mitigate predictable risk, would it cause them to make greater risk reduction efforts? Would understanding the level of a risk's predictability improve how the PR team's conduct pre-crisis response planning?

The concept of uncertainty has been identified as a crucial component of crisis management (Coombs, 2014). Uncertainty is strongly related to predictability, but it is a different construct. Uncertainty can be defined as a cognitive state caused by a person's assessment of a number of available alternate predictions (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Prediction in science is a forecast about the probability of an event occurring based upon observations of evidence and statistical analysis (Reber, Allen & Reber, 2009). Liu, Bartz and Duke (2016) called for more research into the causes of uncertainty in crisis. Thus, the purpose of this project is to conduct an exploratory and deductive research to uncover some initial evidence that perceptions of a crisis' predictability is a variable worthy of study.

Review of Literature

A crisis is a significant event with negative outcomes that affects an organization, company, industry, public, or products (Fearn-Banks, 2002). It generates an information vacuum amongst various publics that they will seek out if it is not provided. People process this information to create both accurate and inaccurate knowledge, which they subsequently share with others (Coombs et al., 2010). This information vacuum is predominately generated by uncertainty and people's innate drive to reduce and manage it (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Crisis communication very often overlaps with and impacts Issue and Risk management. Poorly managed issues and risk can easily manifest into a crisis (Jaques, 2009). For instance, during the Hurricane Katrina natural disaster, the inadequacy of the flood levies was a known issue long before the hurricane. The likelihood of its failure under certain conditions had been predicted. However, the government failed to properly manage the issue (Waymer & Heath, 2000). Risk management communications are used in the pre-crisis phase where organization attempt to mitigate or prevent a crisis. Effective organizations have a multi-disciplinary crisis management plan and team. Assessment of the predictability of a crisis would naturally fit in in this plan (Coombs, 1999). As part of the pre-crisis plan, pre-crisis plan, risk communication messages should be developed and are shown to be effective (Heath, Li & Ni, 2009). Highly predictable crisis can shape and prioritize the pre-crisis plan, making it more effective. While the literature doesn't specifically address predictability in risk communications, it is fundamentally a key ingredient to it. Thus, this research project also contributes to the risk communication and issues management literature.

Prediction and Crisis

As the manifestation of risks, many crises can be avoided or mitigated through the identification and analysis of relevant data. The probability of occurrence and the level of harm can often be determined beforehand with a reasonable degree of reliability and validity (Bodemer & Gaissmaier, 2015). Even when a potential crisis has low levels of predictability, tools and techniques such as identifying and mitigating a planner's cognitive biases, have been developed to improve risk management (Wright & Goodwin, 2009). James and Wooten (2005) discussed how organizations can actively look for signs of trouble through signal detection during the prevention stages of pre-crisis management, which would include assessments of predictability of a crisis, in order to head it off. Thus, PR professionals should never assume that the manifestation of risks are never predictable.

Perceptions of predictability have been shown to be important variables within the social sciences. Psychological research shows a person's perceptions about the predictability of external events play a significant role in the manifestation and management of normal and abnormal anxiety. Increased perceptions about the lack of predictability for stressful events tends to increase inter-personal anxiety (Zvolensky et al., 2000). Humans will decide how to socially interact with each other based upon the perceptions about the predictability of another's behavior (Hudson, Bach & Nicholson, 2017). Investors make financial decisions based upon perceptions of stock market predictability, which are derived from economic news coverage and verbal framing of economic conditions from experts (Zarate & Zambrano, 2018). Therefore, a person's perceptions about the predictability of events play a significant role in their decision making and affective responses to traumatic events like crises.

Predictability was studied in a PR context by Jin (2009). Drawing from the psychology of emotions, she studied how the interaction of crises predictability and controllability impacted public's emotions. In both papers?? which papers? predictability was conceived of as the operationalization of certainty, even though they are separate constructs. In conditions of high predictability and controllability, anger was the dominant emotion present in publics, while in high predictability and low controllability sadness was dominant. Fright was the dominant emotion when predictability and controllability were low. Jin (2010), replicated and extended the findings of the previous study. Under conditions of both high predictability/controllability and low predictability/controllability the participants favored a defensive/scapegoat strategy. In the conditions of high crisis predictability and low controllability, an apology strategy was favored by participants. It was also found that high crisis predictability was related to crisis familiarity and informational certainty. Both can be shaped by news media content framing the level of predictability for a given crisis.

Crisis, Message Credibility and Attitude Towards the Organization

The role of message source credibility in communication effectiveness is very well established. Credible messages are psychologically more likely to be persuasive (Chaiken, & Maheswaran, 1994). Research shows that company spokesperson characteristics mediate message credibility, which directly impacts the effectiveness of organizational crisis communications (Stephens, Waller, & Sohrab, 2019). When a company spokesperson is perceived to be a member of an audience's in-group, they are more credible to that group and the crisis com-

munication messaging is generally more persuasive (Einwiller, Laufer, & Ruppel, 2017). How crisis predictability impacts organizational message credibility is untested. However, it can be assumed that if a crisis is framed as having been predictable then source credibility of a message should be rated lower than if it had been framed as having been unpredictable. This is likely due to people ascribing more responsibility to an organization for a predictable versus an unpredictable crisis.

A crisis and the effected organizations subsequent response can easily impact a person's attitude to towards the organization involved in either a positive or negative direction (Park & Reber, 2008). For instance, unsubstantiated online rumors can negatively affect a person's attitude towards the organization involved in a crisis (Nekmat & Kong, 2019). Kim (2009) found a strong relationship between a public's attribution for a crisis and their subsequent attitude towards that organization and an intention to do business with that company. It is plausible that if an organization is framed as having been able to predict a crisis, then publics will display a more negative attitude towards that organization.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The situational crisis communication theory doesn't specifically address predictability, but it leaves a space for predictability to be examined. As the dominant theory of crisis management, it should be able to account for predictability as opposed to leaving it as a confounding variable. The core of the theory is that public's attribute blame for a crisis based on their perception of who or what is responsible. This has a direct impact upon an organization's reputation, which they ideally want to preserve and enhance. Once this attribution is made then it determines how publics will likely respond and what repair strategies are most likely to work (Coombs et al., 2010). An organization's ability to predict the manifestation of a specific risk does impact how responsible they are for that crisis. An organization's reputation is in part derived from predictably since how it behaves over time is perceived by the public (Lange, Lee & Dye, 2011).

SCCT research identified 13 crisis types that are grouped into three clusters: the victim, accidental and preventable clusters. Victim cluster crises happen when the public attributes victimhood to the organization itself. These include natural disasters, product tampering by rogue employee's and malicious rumors. Victim cluster crises do the least amount of damage to an organization's reputation and are the easiest to recover from (Coombs, 2007). If the crisis is framed as having been predictable, it could be escalated from the victim cluster into the accidental or preventable cluster. For instance, an organization could place a facility in a location with a known natural disaster risk like hurricanes, which would normally fall into the victim cluster. However, if they fail to design chemical storage devices that are capable of withstanding a category five hurricane, a spill would be predictable if that hurricane happened. A journalist framing this crisis as having been predicted could escalate this crisis to the preventable cluster.

The second cluster is accidental and happens when public's ascribe lower levels of responsibility for the crisis to the organization. These can be caused by unintentional technical errors, like an automotive parts failure, that causes vehicular accidents. They usually do moderate amounts of damage to a company's reputation and are more challenging to recover from (Coombs, 2007). It is possible that a crisis in the accidental cluster could be lowered into the

victimhood cluster if it is framed as having been unpredictable. Taking the automotive parts failure, let's suppose a supplier was intentionally using inferior quality metal for its parts and was lying to the company about it. An accidental cluster crisis could also be escalated into the higher level preventable cluster if it was framed as being highly predictable. Unintentional production errors are predictable using techniques like six-sigma (Tennant, 2001). If the automotive company failed to use quality control techniques, knowing that they would help to identify and eliminate technical errors, then the occurrence of those errors becomes more predictable and can be framed as such.

The preventable cluster is when public's attribute a high degree of responsibility to the organization. These include human error and misdeeds that are mostly the result of intention or willful negligence. They do the most damage to an organizations reputation and are the most challenging to recover from (Coombs, 2007). Preventable cluster crises are logically the most predictable. Their rate of occurrence would indicate that organizations are lax in their risk mitigation control programs. It is possible that a preventable cluster crisis could be framed as being unpredictable and that this might mitigate the damage. The bottom line is that the news media can frame organizations in all three clusters as being predictable. This could move to public's perception of a crisis from the victim or accidental clusters into the preventable cluster. Thus, predictability is truly a variable that needs to be better accounted for in a crisis. Given this reviewed literature, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1. A highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit higher mean scores for crisis responsibility than a crisis in the low predictability condition.

H2. A highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit lower mean scores for organizational reputation than a crisis in the low predictability condition.

H3. A highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit lower mean scores for attitude towards the organization than a crisis in the low predictability condition.

H4. A highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit higher mean scores for perceptions of crisis severity than a crisis in the low predictability condition.

SCCT Crisis Response Strategies

SCCT's crisis response strategies are constructed around an organization's acceptance of responsibility for a crisis based upon the type of attribution the public ascribes to them. As crisis response strategies become more accommodative, organizations demonstrate greater concern for victims (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). SCCT crisis response strategies are grouped into three groups, denial, diminish and rebuild and are selected based upon how attribution for the crisis is ascribed. Deny strategies try to remove connections between the organization and the crisis. Diminish crisis response strategies argue that a crisis is not as severe as people think or that the organization lacked control over the crisis. Rebuild strategies attempt to improve the organization's reputation by offering material and/or symbolic forms of aid to victims (Coombs, 2006).

SCCT prescribes that the optimal response strategies for the victim cluster are to use the denial group of response strategies. These include attack the accuser, deny the crisis and find a scapegoat. The optimal strategies for the accidental cluster are to use the diminish group of response strategies that include minimizing intent to do harm, and to justify or minimize per-

ceptions of damage. The best response strategy for preventable crises is to use the rebuild group of response strategies, such as offering an apology and compensation to the victims (Coombs, 2007). It is currently unknown how the framing of predictability would impact SCCT's prescribed crisis response strategies. If a victim cluster crisis is framed as being unpredictable, then it should reinforce the effectiveness of the denial response strategy. If a victim cluster crisis is framed as having been predictable, it might be more optimal to use a preventable cluster response strategy instead of a denial strategy. This is because the framing of predictability might have escalated the crisis into the accidental or preventable cluster. Given the exploratory nature of this problem, the following research questions are offered below.

R1. In a high predictability condition with a victim cluster crisis, will an accommodative news release using an apology with compensation or an advocative news release using a scapegoat strategy perform better at reducing negative perceptions of organization message credibility?

R2. In a low predictability condition with a victim cluster crisis, will an advocative news release using a scapegoat strategy or an accommodative news release using an apology strategy perform better at reducing negative perceptions of organization message credibility?

Manipulative Intent

Manipulative intent is not a variable that is usually associated with or studied in SCCT. However, it has good potential to provide insight into the phenomenon under study. Research shows that when people perceive manipulative intent by an organization, it causes them to negatively evaluate their messages (Wentzel, Tomczak & Herrmann, 2010). Thus, perceptions of manipulative intent would certainly impact crisis response messaging. The relationship between perceptions of predictability and manipulation has not been empirically studied. However, it is entirely plausible that a crisis framed as being highly predictable might increase a person's perceptions that the same organization is being manipulative. For instance, if a company knew that a specific risk was likely to manifest under certain conditions and intentionally failed to take countermeasures, then why wouldn't they engage in other unethical behavior. Perceptions of manipulative intent should manifest in participant assessments of company messages. Given this, the final two research questions are offered.

RQ3. In the high predictability condition will an accommodative news release using an apology with compensation or an advocative news release using a scapegoat strategy have a greater impact at reducing negative perceptions of manipulative intent by the organization?

RQ4. In the low predictability condition will an advocative news release using a scapegoat strategy or an accommodative news release using an apology with compensation strategy have a greater impact at reducing negative perceptions of manipulative intent by the organization?

Methods

This paper consists of two inter-related and mutually supporting studies. The first study was limited and exploratory in nature by testing hypotheses one through four. It used an accidental cluster crisis, and the goal was to determine whether framing a crisis as having ei-

ther high or low predictable had any impacts on participant perceptions of attitudes towards the organization, its reputation, crisis responsibility and its level of severity. The second study replicated and extended upon study one by re-testing all the hypotheses and addressing the research questions. It used a victim cluster crisis to determine whether framing the crisis as having high or low predictability would have similar or different impacts compared to study one. Study two extended upon study one by examining if SCCT's prescribed response strategies are also impacted by framing of predictability.

The stimulus materials were comprised of fake but realistic looking news articles and press releases. Fake news stories were used because it allowed for better manipulation of the variable of predictability than would be offered by real news articles. Additionally, the study used made up companies and locations to avoid the potential that pre-existing attitudes towards real companies could bias the study. The news articles were produced by a trained journalist with over 30 years' experience who taught news writing. The press releases were written by a highly trained public relations professional who taught PR writing. All the stimulus material were reviewed and approved by a board of three tenured journalism professors.

Manipulations Pre-Test

All four stimulus news articles and both press releases were tested on ($N=114$) undergraduate journalism students prior to their use in studies one and two. For the news articles, students were asked to rate the manipulation of predictability by answering how predictable the event in the story was on a Likert scale ranging from, one = not predictable at all to seven = completely predictable. For the press releases they were asked to rate them on a seven-point bipolar scale. The left side equaling one was labeled accommodative, while the right side equaling seven was advocative. The results are displayed below in table one: Mean scores for manipulations. These scores indicated that the manipulations in the stimulus material were effectively developed.

Table 1: Mean Scores for Manipulations

Stimulus	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Study 1 High Predictability News Story	6.45	1.23
Study 1 Low Predictability News Story	2.61	1.12
Study 2 High Predictability News Story	6.03	0.98
Study 2 Low Predictability News Story	2.33	1.41
Study 2 Accommodative Press Release	1.98	0.89
Study 2 Advocative Press Release	6.75	1.87

Measures

Crisis responsibility

The crisis responsibility scale, (Brown & Ki, 2013), measured the degree to which participants ascribe blame to the organization for the crisis. It is commonly used in SCCT research. This scale was used to test hypothesis one. It has 12-items measured, ($\alpha = 0.92$), on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). This scale was administered after participants read the news article stimulus.

Organizational reputation

The organization's reputation was measured using an organizational reputation scale (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). It is commonly used in SCCT research. This scale was used to test hypothesis two. It has five items, ($\alpha = 0.93$), measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). This scale was administered after exposure to the stimulus news story.

Attitudes toward the organization

Participant attitudes towards the organization were measured on a scale developed by McCroskey and Richmond (1989). This scale was used to test hypothesis three. It has six items measured on a seven-point semantic differential continua anchored by: Good/Bad (reversed), Wrong/Right, Harmful/Beneficial, Fair/Unfair (reversed), Wise/Foolish (reversed), and Negative/Positive. It had good, ($\alpha = 0.91$), reliability. This scale was administered after exposure to the stimulus news story.

Perceptions of crisis severity

Perceptions of crisis severity scale was derived from, (Billings, Milburn, & Schaalman, 1980), and had, ($\alpha = 0.89$), good reliability. Four items were used that were measured on a seven-point semantic differential scale. These questions asked participants how disruptive, threatening to the company were, as well how likely it was to spur the company to make changes and how likely it was to create less support for the company. This scale was administered after exposure to the stimulus news story.

Corporate message credibility

Corporate message credibility was used to rate participant's perceptions of the both the accommodative and advocative press releases credibility. This scale was used to test research questions one and two. It was measured using six items, ($\alpha = 0.87$), with seven-point bipolar opposite scales: unbiased-biased, accurate-inaccurate, believable-unbelievable, convincing-unconvincing, trustworthy-untrustworthy and telling the whole story-not telling the whole story (Ohaninan, 1990).

Perceived manipulative intent

Perceptions of manipulative intent were measured on a scale developed by Lunardo and Mbengue (2013). This scale was used to test research questions three and four. It has five-items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree): “The way this organization tries to persuade people seems acceptable to me; The organization tries to manipulate the customers in ways that I don’t like; The organization tries to control the customers; The organization tries to be persuasive without being excessively manipulative; I think this organization is fair”. The scale reliability ($\alpha=.92$) was good.

Study One

Study one involved an online panel of ($N = 214$) participants recruited from M-Turk for a between subject factorial design experiment. All participants were randomly assigned to either a high or low predictability condition. In this each condition they were shown a news article manipulated to present the crisis as having either high or low predictability. The content of the articles concerned an actual crisis involving oil and gas transportation accidents that are based on actual news articles from several South Texas newspapers. The crisis was the same in both conditions and was portrayed as a technical error accident within the accidental cluster. The crisis was a series of deadly traffic accidents caused by a mass number of 18-wheel trucks owned by a fictional hydraulic fracturing company (Correlian Energy) on the rural highways. The accidents were caused because the roads were not designed to handle the influx of hundreds of large trucks. The roads were too narrow and the signage was poor. Thus, several dozen collisions between trucks and local residents had caused 7 fatalities and 21 serious injuries.

Predictability manipulation was achieved through wording describing exactly how predictable the traffic situation was. For instance, in the high predictability condition the company, “Knew for with a high degree of probability that poor condition of the roads would lead increase in accidents with local traffic”. It was stressed that the county government assessments of the road conditions established that they would be inadequate to handle that much traffic prior to the company’s operations. In the low predictability condition the company, “Could not have known with any degree of probability that the poor condition of the roads could lead to some increase in accidents with local traffic”. County government assessments of the roads gave no indication that they were inadequate for increased traffic.

Findings

Most participants, 58 percent, were Caucasian while 16 percent were black and 14 percent Hispanic. Most participants, 53 percent, identified as male. In terms of age most, 39 percent, were aged 40-49, while those aged 30-39 composed 32 percent. Participants aged 20-29 comprised 18 percent while those aged 50-59 were 7 percent. In terms of education most, 49 percent, had a bachelor’s degree and 23 percent had a master’s degree or higher. The remainder had at least a high school diploma.

The first hypothesis stated that a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit higher mean scores for crisis responsibility than a crisis in the low predictability condition. A T-Test

revealed $t(198) = 16.$, $p < .05$. a significant mean score differences between the high and low predictability conditions in terms of perceptions of crisis responsibility. The mean score for the, ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.01$), high predictability condition was in fact higher than the low ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.03$) predictability condition. Thus, H1 is supported.

The second hypothesis asserts that a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit lower mean scores for organizational reputation than a crisis in the low predictability condition. A T-Test $t(198) = 26.2$, $p < .001$, revealed significant differences between the conditions in terms of organization reputation. The mean score for the ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.32$) high predictability was in fact lower than the low ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.23$) predictability condition. Thus, H2 is supported.

The third hypothesis stated a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit lower mean scores for attitude towards the organization than a crisis in the low predictability condition. A T-Test revealed, $t(196) = 27.2$, $p < .001$. significant differences between the conditions in terms of attitudes towards the organization. The mean score for the ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.43$) for high predictability was in fact lower than the low ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 1.11$) predictability condition. Thus, H3 is supported.

The fourth hypothesis stated a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit higher mean scores for perceptions of crisis severity than a crisis in the low predictability condition. The T-Test revealed, $t(200) = 31.6.$, $p < .001$, significant differences between the conditions in terms of participant perceptions of the crisis' severity. The mean score for the ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 0.83$) for high predictability was in fact higher than the low ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.05$) predictability condition. Thus, H4 is supported.

Discussion

The goal of study one was to provide some preliminary evidence that framing a crisis as having either high or low predictability would have an impact upon participant perceptions of crisis responsibility, severity, organizational reputation, and attitudes towards the organization. It found that when a crisis is framed as being highly predictable participants ascribed greater responsibility to the organization. They gave it lower scores for organizational reputation and had more negative attitudes towards the organization. When the crisis was framed as having low predictability the opposite effect was achieved. In terms of crisis severity, participants perceived that the highly predictable crisis was significantly more severe than the lower predictability crisis. Given this evidence, it is possible that framing an accidental cluster crisis as being highly predictable escalated it into the preventable cluster.

Study Two

Study two consisted of an online panel of ($N = 302$) participants recruited from M-Turk for a 2 (High Predictability vs. Low Predictability) X 2 (Accommodative vs. Advocative) mixed factorial design experiment. The between subject portion was executed by having all participants randomly assigned to either a high or low predictability condition. In this each condition they were shown a news article manipulated to present the crisis as having either high or low predictability. The within subject portion of the experiment was performed by having each participant view and rate both an accommodative and an advocative press release.

The scenario in study two differed from study one in that the crisis fell within the victim cluster of the SCCT instead of the accidental cluster, which was used in study one. It involved a rogue employee tampering with medicine, inserting fentanyl into medication killing three people, at a fictional pharmaceutical company. In the high predictability condition, the employee was framed as having provided the company with a series of behavioral warning signs that the company failed to act upon. For instance, a fictional co-worker was quoted as saying that the employee liked to talk admirably about serial killers at work, and this was reported to management. He was also framed as having a history of safety violations. In the low predictability condition the employee was framed as being a quiet loner who barely talked to anyone, thereby giving no hints of his malicious intentions. He was also described as having only one minor violation of procedure on his record. In the accommodative press release the CEO apologized for the incident, offering no excuses for what happened. Efforts to reform safety procedures were stressed and generous compensation offered to the victims was mentioned. In the advocative press release, the company used the scapegoat strategy by placing all the blame on the rogue employee. It stressed that the rest of its workforce was made up of good people and that they had passed every government safety inspection for 10 years.

Findings

Most participants, 67 percent, were male and the majority of participants, 44 percent, were aged 30-39. Participants aged 20-29 were the second most common at, 22 percent, while those age 40-49 composed 14 percent and those aged 50-59 were 13 percent. In terms of race, 77 percent were white, 9 percent were black, and 8 percent were Asian. Most, 55 percent had a bachelor's degree and 20 percent had a master's degree.

The first hypothesis stated that, a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit higher mean scores for crisis responsibility than a crisis in the low predictability condition. A significant $t(289) = 15.5, p < .001$, effect was found between the high and low predictability conditions in terms of perceptions of crisis responsibility. The mean score for the, ($M = 5.04, SD = 0.89$), high predictability condition was in fact higher than the low ($M = 3.98, SD = 0.96$) predictability condition. These scores are roughly equivalent to those discovered for H1 in study one. Thus, H1 is supported.

The second hypothesis asserts, a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit lower mean scores for organizational reputation than a crisis in the low predictability condition. Significant differences were revealed, $t(287) = 12.5, p < .05$, between the conditions in terms of organization reputation. The mean score for the ($M = 3.55, SD = 0.93$) for high predictability was in fact lower than the low ($M = 4.98, SD = 0.90$) predictability condition. These scores are roughly comparable to those found in study one. Thus, H2 is supported.

The third hypothesis stated a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit lower mean scores for attitude towards the organization than a crisis in the low predictability condition. Significant differences, $t(290) = 23.4, p < .05$, between the conditions in terms of attitude towards the organization. The mean score for the ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.74$) for high predictability was in fact lower than the low ($M = 4.56, SD = 1.52$) predictability condition. These findings differ from study one in that participants in the low predictability condition were more neutral in their attitude towards the organization, whereas they were slightly positive in study one. Thus, H3 is supported.

The fourth hypothesis stated a highly predictable crisis condition will exhibit higher mean scores for perceptions of crisis severity than a crisis in the low predictability condition. Significant differences, $t(291) = 27.9$, $p < 0.01$, between the conditions in terms of participant perceptions of the crisis' severity. The mean score for the ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.99$) for high predictability was in fact higher than the low ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 0.66$) predictability condition. Compared to study one, the high predictability condition had slightly higher mean scores, with study two participants tending to default to neither agree nor disagree instead of somewhat agree. In terms of the low predictability condition, mean scores for study two were 1.14 lower than in study one. Thus, H4 is supported.

Research questions

Research questions 1 through 4 relied upon two dependent variables, the corporate message credibility and perceived manipulative intent scales, which were administered twice. One time after exposure to the accommodative and advocative press releases from the company in crisis. Thus, a repeated measures MANOVA was performed here and discovered a slightly significant interaction effect, using Pillai's Trace $F(3,284) = 4.61$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.046$, between the condition and the dependent variables.

Research question one asked whether in a high predictability condition with a victim cluster crisis, will an accommodative news release using an apology with compensation or an advocative stance using a scapegoat perform better at reducing negative perceptions of organization message credibility? The mean scores for message credibility for the advocative press release were, ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.08$), while the accommodative press release ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.11$), had higher mean scores. High predictability participants favored the accommodative message, 1.26, more than the advocative message.

Research question 2 asks the following: In a low predictability condition with a victim cluster crisis, will an advocative news release using a scapegoat strategy or an accommodative news release using an apology strategy perform better at reducing negative perceptions of organization message credibility? The mean scores for message credibility for the accommodative press release were, ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.62$), and for the advocative press release, ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.59$), in the low predictability condition. Low predictability participants more preferred the advocative message, 0.60, over the accommodative message. However, participants were not negative towards the accommodative message, answering neither agree nor disagree.

Research question 3 asks if in the high predictability condition will an accommodative news release using an apology with compensation or an advocative stance using a scapegoat strategy have a greater impact at reducing negative perceptions of manipulative intent by the organization? The mean scores for perceived manipulative intent in the high predictability were, ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.62$), for the accommodative press release and, ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.64$), for the advocative press release. This means that participants in the high predictability condition perceived the company as being manipulative despite the choice of press release strategies presented.

Research question 4 asks whether in the low predictability condition will an advocative news release using a scapegoat strategy or an accommodative stance using an apology with compensation strategy have a greater impact at reducing negative perceptions of manipulative intent by the organization? The mean scores for perceived manipulative intent in the low

predictability were, ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.58$), for the accommodative press release and, ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 0.77$) for the advocative press release. This means that low predictability condition participants were generally neutral, answering neither agree nor disagree, to the company's perceived manipulateness. The advocative press did in fact have a very slight lead, 0.57, over the accommodative press release.

Discussion

Study two found that framing a crisis as being highly predictable lead to higher levels of attribution of responsibility for the crisis to the organization involved compared to the low predictability condition. It also led to lower mean scores for the organization reputation and participants attitudes towards the organization. It also led to higher levels of perceived crisis severity, which generally complicates the crisis response. It is entirely plausible that the high predictability manipulation escalated this crisis into a higher-level crisis category.

Research questions 1 through 4 also yielded some interesting insights. SCCT theory prescribes that a victim cluster crisis should use a denial response strategy as represented by the advocative press release using a scapegoat strategy. Despite this, participants in the high predictability condition preferred the accommodative press release using an apology. This response is more in line with what one would expect from a preventable cluster crisis. However, they tended towards neutrality for the advocative press release. In the low predictability condition participants slightly favored the advocative press release, which is in line with SCCT. They were also neutral towards the accommodative press release. For manipulative intent, participants in the high predictability condition perceived that the company was being manipulative across both the accommodative and advocative press releases. This means that while they preferred the apology with compensation message, it failed to negate their perceptions of the company being manipulative. In the low predictability condition, participants were neutral on whether the company was being manipulative. This is not ideal as a company in crisis needs to create the perception that they are not all manipulative.

General Discussion

The findings of this preliminary study into the role of predictability in crisis management yielded some promising initial results. Study two successfully replicated the findings of study one for hypotheses 1 through 4. This is despite the fact the study one was an accidental cluster crisis, where the organization bears a moderate amount of blame, and study two was a victim cluster crisis where the victim bears a minimal amount of blame. Theoretically, participants in study two should have rated the organization as having lower responsibility for the crisis, and rated the crisis as being less severe compared to study one despite the manipulation. They should have also given the company higher marks for organizational reputation and attitude towards the organization compared to study one. The high predictability manipulation appears to have mitigated the advantages of being in the victim cluster. The results also strongly suggest that in the high predictability condition, the crisis was escalated into the preventable cluster.

In both studies, the low predictability condition proved to be somewhat advantageous for the organization. In both cases, participants answered slightly disagree to the company's being responsible for the crisis. Assessments of organizational reputation were slightly favorable. For attitudes towards the organizations participants were clearly favorable towards the

organization in study one but leaned neutral in study two. In both cases, the crisis was rated as not being severe for low predictability participants.

In terms of crisis response, study two demonstrates that the high predictability manipulation is a potential game changer for PR practitioners. Having a victim or accidental cluster crisis framed as being predictable may necessitate a departure from the theoretical prescriptions for the appropriate crisis response. With low predictability framing, the theoretically prescribed response appears to remain effective in light of this study's findings. Furthermore, manipulative intent appears to be a viable variable of study in PR research. There appears to be some tentative evidence of a causal relationship between the high predictability manipulation and perceptions of manipulative intent, although further research is needed to establish this relationship. The impact of perceived manipulative intent upon crisis response strategy effectiveness opens up a series of new questions. Creating perceptions of manipulations certainly complicates crisis response and mitigates the effectiveness of response messaging.

Theoretical Implications

To survive any theory must be able to grow and develop, accounting for new phenomenon and expanding its explanatory ability. Much knowledge about human psychology has been discovered since SCCT was founded on the psychological theory of attribution. This research issues a call for SCCT to grow in a new direction by examining factors, like predictability, that influence the process of attribution in a crisis. A public's perceptions of a crisis are malleable and can be influenced by factors like a journalist framing it as being predictable. SCCT's response strategies need to be re-examined in light of how factors affecting attribution might manifest. Beyond SCCT and crisis management, predictability can play a role in theoretical development for health, risk, and disaster communications.

Practical Implications

This study has useful practical implications. PR practitioners need to consider how predictable a certain risk is of manifesting. Working in cross functional teams should help with this. For instance, engineers are trained to make predictions about equipment failure under varying conditions. Human resource managers are often in a position to be aware, or gain awareness of employees engaged in high-risk behaviors. In this setting, a PR practitioner can conduct more precise pre-crisis planning based upon the predictability of a risk manifesting. They can prioritize pre-crisis work according to the levels of predictability for a crisis. More effectively, they can influence their peers and superiors to take more efforts to mitigate those risks with the goal of preventing what could be a very costly crisis. They can present organizational leadership with cost/benefit analysis for taking pre-emptive action as opposed to allowing a crisis to manifest. This could lead to an organizational cultural change that is pro-active in crisis prevention.

If a crisis does occur, it is prudent for a PR practitioner to carefully manage company communications about how predictable the crisis was. If it was predicted, then the counter-measures that were taken to mitigate it beforehand should be stressed. If it was not predictable,

then this may present an advantage to the organization that may reduce the negative consequences and should therefore be intentionally promoted. PR practitioners need to engage with journalists about the level of predictability for the crisis and ensure that they do not inflate the perception of predictability.

Limitations and Conclusions

The first limitation is that study one involved the negative feelings about the oil and gas industry, which some participants might have a pre-existing negative attitude against. Unfortunately, feelings towards this industry were not controlled for. The second limitation is the stakeholder relationships with a company profoundly affect how they perceive a crisis response, and this would even impact the role of predictability. That relationship needs to be explored in future research. The third limitation is that an attention check was not used to adequately ensure participants were attending to the materials. It is possible that a number of them were simply satisficing. Furthermore, the majority of participants were white males between the ages of 30-49, represents a lack of sufficient diversity. It is difficult to control for this using M-Turk.

It is time for PR scholars to re-think the role of predictability in crisis management and public relations in general. Literature from other disciplines strongly indicates that accidents, mistakes, and misbehavior are in fact predictable. This study has shown that predictability is in fact an important variable in two studies. It is high time to reconsider the assumption that crises are not predictable. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that how the news media frames the variable of predictability and how and much an organization could predict a crisis before its occurrence matters. It is plausible that the high predictability condition pushed both the accident and victim cluster crises into the preventable. Ultimately, there is insufficient literature to draw upon more precise conclusions. Thus, this study serves as a clarification call for more research on the variable of predictability and its role in crisis management.

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