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Strategic Messaging in a Political Crisis: Testing the Integrated Model for Explaining the Communication Behavior of Publics

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Strategic Messaging in a Political Crisis: Testing the Integrated Model for Explaining the

Communication Behavior of Publics

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Jacqueline Millett, and my sister, Julianne Mohr. Thank you, Mom, for making me feel like I can do anything. Your fierce encouragement and kind words of wisdom have carried me through life with the strength and determination I need to accomplish my goals. Thank you, Julianne, for making me strive to be my best. Your inquisitive nature and love have made me want to be someone worth looking up to, and given me a constant incentive to embody your expectations and to deserve your adoration.

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ABSTRACT

Crisis response message strategies were examined using a post test-only randomized experiment (N=252) to determine their influence on perceptual, cognitive, and motivational antecedents to communication behavior in a political context. Results indicate that: (1) strategy type influences perceived strategy effectiveness; (2) situational beliefs influence situational motivation, subjective norm, and attitudes; (3) subjective norm and attitudes influence behavioral intention; and (4) referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention influence communicative action in publics during a political crisis.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Public relations scholarship has traditionally focused on organizations rather than communication for understanding the communication behavior of organizations—and as such, organizations have been used as the predominant unit of analysis (J. E. Grunig, 1992, 2001; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Using communication as the unit of analysis focuses on the strategic communication between a source (organization) and receiver (relevant public). While extensive research has focused on examining variables related to the source of communication, minimal public relations research has been conducted on message and receiver variables. This gap in research has led to a "limited understanding of public relations strategy use in organizations and the effectiveness of strategies in achieving organizational goals" (Werder, 2005, p. 219). Achieving organizational goals through strategic planning and processes is paramount to every organization's success—rendering the study of public relations strategy use, particularly strategic messaging, integral to the current body of knowledge.

Strategic messaging, as a function of public relations, is a management function in the relationship process between an organization and its publics. The diverse political market of ideas demands the effective use of strategic messaging and public relations in order to achieve political goals. With this in mind, the burgeoning field of political public

relations scholarship seeks to examine "the use of public relations strategies and tactics in political contexts or for political purposes" (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011, p. 7).

A fairly new field, political public relations draws from research in public relations, political communication, political science, and other related fields. It was defined as recently as 2011, as, ""the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals" (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011, p. 8). Within the field of political public relations comes varying opportunities for research unique to public relations due to the challenges of politics. For instance, Stromback and Kiousis (2011) contend that the inherent contentious nature of politics, caused by differing values and goals, makes managing a relationship between an organization and its publics more difficult.

Like any profession and discipline, political public relations encompasses a wide variety of scholarly inquiry, including crisis communication. Coombs (2011) states that crisis communication research can be categorized in two broad contexts of corporate and political. For the purpose of this study, political crisis communication will be the focus. While there are several theoretical frameworks that dominate the field of crisis communication (apologia, image repair theory, situational crisis communication theory, and contingency theory) this study utilizes image repair theory, which is said to be best suited for examining a political crisis case (Coombs, 2011).

Political public relations crises are as many as they are varied. From sex scandals to unpopular policy decisions to unethical legislative practices, political crises run the

gamut. The political crisis examined in this study concerns the results of introducing an unpopular piece of legislation.

In December 2012, Florida Rep. Jimmie Smith (R) of Lecanto, sponsored a bill that would make drastic changes to the Bright Futures state scholarship program. The Bright Futures program, funded by the Florida lottery, provides college scholarships to state residents attending a public university in Florida. The proposed bill would require Bright Futures recipients to pay back their scholarship money if they took jobs outside of Florida after graduation.

The purpose of this study is to further theory-driven research in political public relations and crisis communication, as well as replicate and extend previous research (Werder & Schweickart, 2013). A review of literature related to political public relations and crisis communication indicates a gap in scholarly research exists. Specifically, this study examines crisis communication message strategies in a political public relations context in order to understand how political crises influence the communication behavior of relevant publics. Extensive research has been conducted in these disciplines using a variety of theoretical frameworks and methods. This study utilizes an integrated model for explaining the communication behavior of publics (Werder & Schweickart, 2013) and image repair theory to examine the effects of message strategies on receiver variables during a political crisis. The integrated model incorporates variables from the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This study uses a post-test only randomized experimental design to explore the influence of five message strategies derived from Benoit's (1995) image repair theory on perceptual, cognitive, and

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motivational antecedents to communication behavior. Additionally, this study proposes and tests hypotheses related to the variables of the integrated model.

This research topic warrants scholarly attention given the existing gap in research, the practical implications for political public relations practitioners, and the theoretical contributions to the growing scholarship of political public relations. Chapter Two will review the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks used to inform the study. Chapter Three will describe the research methodology and design of the study. Chapter Four will present an analysis of the data collected. The study will conclude with Chapter Five which will include a discussion of the results and summary of conclusions of the study, along with implications and limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter outlines two theoretical frameworks used to inform this study. First, image repair theory is a crisis communication framework developed by W.L. Benoit and used for understanding and evaluating crisis situations. Second, an explanatory model that incorporates variables from the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) is a public relations model used to explain the communication behavior of publics. This literature review explicates these theories and provides a summary of existing research applicable to this study.

Image Repair Theory

Image repair theory is a prominent framework used in crisis communication research. Stemming from earlier research in *apologia,* image repair provides a typology of message strategies available to be used during a crisis. The theory has been applied using case studies, rhetorical analysis, and experimental designs in the context of corporate, nonprofit, celebrity, and political crises. The main concepts, strategies and tactics, and contributions to scholarly research for communication during political crises are given for image repair theory, followed by justification of its use in the current study.

Image Repair Concepts. Benoit (1995) states that the principal goal of an organization facing a crisis is to protect and restore, or at the very least, repair its damaged image.

An organizational crisis, for the purpose of image repair discourse, is defined as and caused by an attack on the organization. Through understanding the nature or purpose of an attack, image repair strategies can be examined. An attack is made up of two components: 1) the accused is held responsible for an act, and 2) the act is deemed offensive (Benoit, 1995). In other words, an attack can focus on either: (a) the *responsibility* of an organization for an act, or (b) the *offensiveness* of an act (Benoit & Dorries, 1996; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999).

Whether or not an organization is truly responsible, or the act is truly offensive, is far less important than the perceptions of responsibility and offensiveness that key publics attribute to an organization or individual (Benoit, 1997b). It is this perception and attribution by publics that subsequently leads to an attack on an organization, and in turn, prompts the use of image repair strategies by the organization under attack. A *strategy* is defined as a plan of action designed to achieve a broad goal. Benoit (1997b) offers five strategies that can be employed: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Within each strategy category are what Benoit refers to as "variants" of the strategies (1997b, p. 178). These variants are conceptualized as differing strategies within the same category (e.g., shifting the blame is a variant of denial). However, for the purpose and benefit of this study, the author conceptualizes the variants as tactics of the strategies rather than differing strategies within the same category (e.g., compensation is a tactic of the reduction of offensiveness strategy) as Liu (2007) suggests. A *tactic* is defined as a plan of action designed to achieve a specific goal. Table 1 shows a full list of image repair strategies and corresponding tactics (Benoit, 1995; 1997b; Liu, 2007).

Table 1

Image repair strategies and tactics

Strategy	Tactic
Denial	Simple denial: did not perform act
	Shift the blame: another caused act
Evasion of responsibility	Provocation: respond to act of another
	Defeasibility: lack of information or ability
	Accident: mishap
	Good intentions: meant well
Reducing offensiveness	Bolstering: stress good traits
	Minimization: act not serious
	Differentiation: act less offensive than similar ones
Corrective action	Plan to solve/prevent problem
Mortification	Apologize

Note. Adapted from "President Bush's major post-Katrina speeches: Enhancing image repair discourse theory applied to the public sector" by Brooke Fisher-Liu, 2007, *Public Relations Review, 33,* p. 42.

Image Repair Strategies and Tactics. There are five strategies that make up the message typology of image repair theory. The first two strategies, denial and evasion of responsibility, attend to the *responsibility* of an offensive act by an organization or individual. The next two strategies, reducing offensiveness and corrective action, address the *offensiveness* of an act by the organization or individual responsible. The last message strategy, mortification, seeks forgiveness from publics by way of apologizing.

The denial strategy includes two tactics: simple denial and shifting the blame. *Simple denial* is essentially where the organization or individual deny that the offensive act ever occurred, assert that it was not performed by the organization, or was not harmful (or offensive) to anyone (Benoit, 1997b). *Shifting the blame* occurs when the accused organization asserts that another organization or individual is responsible for the offensive act (Benoit, 2006). Evasion of responsibility has four distinct tactics: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Each of the tactics provide a unique way to evade, or attempt to avoid responsibility for an offensive act.

Provocation is a tactic by which an organization can claim that its offensive act was in response to another's offensive act, deeming the subsequent act justifiable (Benoit, 1997b). *Defeasibility* is claiming a lack of control or information about a situation. (Benoit, 1997b) An organization can claim it acted without proper information that could have prevented the offensive act. Another rather commonly used evasion of responsibility tactic occurs when an organization claims the offensive act was an *accident*. "If the company can convince the audience that the act in question happened accidentally, it should be held less accountable, and the damage to that business' image should be reduced (Benoit, 1997b, p.180). A final tactic used by an organization to evade responsibility is to claim that it meant well, or had *good intentions*. If an organization can convince its public that the actions were made with the public's best interest in mind, the public may not hold them as responsible for an offensive act. The next image repair strategy, reducing offensiveness, includes six tactics: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation. *Bolstering*, is defined as stressing good traits of an organization or individual. *Minimization*, occurs by stating the act in question is not as serious as previously claimed by another party (typically a key public, media, or a competing organization) and can be used to reduce negative feelings related to an offensive act or reduce the degree of offensiveness of an act (Benoit, 1997b). *Differentiation* is used to distinguish an act from similar but more serious offensive acts. *Transcendence* is a tactic used to place an act in a more positive setting by way of identifying more important factors to consider than the offensive act. *Attacking the accuser* is a tactic used to undermine the credibility of the attacker in order to redirect any negative attention.

The final tactic that can be used to reduce offensiveness is *compensation*. An organization may choose to reimburse a public for an offensive act in the form of money, free services or products, discounts, and the like. The final two strategies, corrective action and mortification, each have one tactic that may be used to repair a damaged image. *Corrective action* is an organization's plan to prevent or solve a problem. *Mortification* occurs when an organization or individual apologizes for an offensive act.

The image repair strategies and tactics identified by Benoit (1995) can be utilized by scholars and practitioners for identifying strategic message options during a crisis. The framework also provides a means for analysis and evaluation of strategic crisis communication messages. The following literature provides examples of image repair theory applied in political contexts.

Image Repair Theory, Political Applications. In a quantitative review of crisis communication in public relations, Avery, Lariscy, Kim, and Hocke (2010) examined 18 years (1991-2009) of published articles. Using W.T. Coombs' situational crisis communication theory and Benoit's image repair theory, (the two dominant theoretical frameworks of crisis communication) as search items, Avery et. al., found 66 articles published during the specified time period. Of the sample, 24 (36%) used Benoit's work alone, 7 (11%) used both W.T. Coombs' and Benoit's work, 5 (8%) used Benoit's work in combination with others' work, and 2 (3%) used W. T. Coombs', Benoit's, and others' work in combination. In addition, 11 (17%) of the articles published were coded as political in context. Given these results and the political context of the current study, employing image repair theory is fitting.

In a recent study using image repair theory, Taylor (2011) analyzed speeches, debates, and advertisements of Democratic presidential candidates' campaigns during 2004 and 2008 in order to identify the strategies used to repair the Party's image as being the "irreligious or antireligion party" (p. 244). He found that the Democrats used transcendence, attacking the accuser, and corrective action during the campaigns. For example, during the 2004 Democratic presidential primary, Joe Lieberman employed corrective action during a primary debate: "I'm pleased that we in this campaign have started to talk about values. Let's not let George Bush and the Republicans claim they have some kind of monopoly on values or faith-based values. They don't" (p. 253). Although Taylor believes the image repair strategies used by the Democratic candidates were appropriate, he also believes that, as a result of voters' expectations for a candidate to be openly religious, Democrats must now *prove* their religious image—possibly at the expense of other important issues.

In addition to image repair theory being used to analyze political campaign discourse, it has also been used to identify strategies used during presidential speeches, most notably the speeches of President George W. Bush after Hurricane Katrina. Both Liu (2007) and Benoit and Henson (2009) analyzed Bush's speeches after Hurricane Katrina. In a content analysis of nine speeches, Liu determines that although Bush used a variety of image repair strategies (some contradictory), he was ineffectual at repairing his and the federal government's damaged image after Katrina. A content analysis of newspaper articles echoes this assessment as all but one of the 50 articles published negatively evaluated Bush's speeches.

In addition, Liu also notes that Benoit (1997b) states that when an organization is responsible for a crisis, mortification is the most effective strategy; Bush only employed mortification in two of the nine speeches.

In their study of one of Bush's post-Katrina speeches, Benoit and Henson reiterate Bush's lack of mortification and identify bolstering, corrective action, and defeasibility as the dominant strategies used during the speech. For example, Bush described Hurricane Katrina as "not a normal hurricane" and stated that "the normal disaster relief system was not equal to it" implying a lack of control on the part of the federal government (p. 43). Benoit and Henson regard these statements as embodying a defeasibility tactic used as excuses for the poor governmental response. They conclude from their evaluation of the speech and a poll conducted on September 26–28 after the speech that reported only 40% of the public approved of how Bush handled Hurricane Katrina (Benedetto, 2005) that Bush's efforts to repair his damaged image were a failure.

Benoit continued his work analyzing the image repair efforts of President Bush in his studies of a news conference held by the president and an interview on *Meet the Press* (2004, 2007). In both studies he concludes that Bush's image repair efforts are ineffectual due to lack of mortification and a reliance on defeasibility. Furthermore, Benoit notes that it is possible for a president to succeed in repairing his or her image after admitting a mistake and using mortification by referencing President Ronald Reagan (Iran-Contra) and President Bill Clinton (Monica Lewinsky) (Benoit, 2004; Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991; Blaney & Benoit, 2001).

From his analysis, Benoit concludes by cautioning future incumbent presidents when using defeasibility in stating, "When an incumbent president proclaims a lack of information and/or ability to control events in the world, that may excuse blame for past problems, but at the same time, it undermines faith in the president's ability to deal with future problems" (2007, p. 302).

Image repair theory is not limited to studies conducted in the context of American politics. In fact, two studies have applied the theory to an analysis of the image repair efforts of the former Chinese Health Minister, Zhang Wenkang, and of the Saudi Arabian government. E. Zhang and Benoit (2009) deemed the image repair efforts of Health Minister Zhang Wenkang during the SARS crisis to be largely ineffective due to the minister's contradictory statements and his denial of the seriousness of the SARS situation. They further conclude the inaccurate and late information given by the minister ultimately led to his removal from office (E. Zhang & Benoit, 2009). Additionally, J. Zhang and Benoit's study of the Saudi Arabian government concerned accusations that: 1) the country was supporting terrorism, and 2) the country was failing to support a potential U.S. attack on Iraq (2004). Relying on a denial strategy to address the first accusation, Saudi Arabia effectively repaired its image after spending more than 5 million dollars on U.S. public relations, law, and media-buying firms and consultants. The authors further note that Saudi Arabia employed defeasibility and good intention to address the second accusation—and was considered ineffective.

J. Zhang and Benoit conclude from their analysis and polls conducted before and after the image repair campaign that the Saudi Arabian government was "partially effective" in repairing its image and the case study "shows that countries can have modest success improving their reputation through the use of image repair discourse" (2004, p. 166).

The previous literature outlines studies conducted on political figures, a political party, and government crises. All of the studies share a common thread of attacks on job performance in the political realm. However, a few unfortunate political gaffes have provided researchers with an opportunity to explore the image repair efforts of individuals who endured attacks not on their job performance, but on their character. Benoit (1997a) provides three examples of how using image repair strategies can be influenced in a political setting: 1) political figures are faced with the challenge of members of an opposing party trying to prolong a crisis as long as possible, 2) political figures are held accountable to the public and their constituents, and 3) political figures have a more difficult time apologizing, accepting responsibility, and asking for forgiveness as opposed to celebrities or entertainers. For example, during Senator George Allen's reelection campaign in 2006, he referred to his opponent's campaign staffer as a 'macaca'. Considered to be a racial slur, macaca is a type of monkey. Liu (2008) examines this political *faux pas* in a case study of Allen's image repair efforts after a string of other controversies. Allen responded to the macaca incident using mortification and a new strategy identified by Liu: misinterpretation. Allen stated in a media release, "I also made up a nickname for the [Webb campaign] cameraman, which was in no way intended to be racially derogatory" (Statement from Senator Allen, 2006, para. 2, as cited in Liu, 2008).

The campaign also used mortification by apologizing to "anyone who may have been offended by the misinterpretation" of Allen's remarks (Statement from Senator Allen, 2006, para. 3, as cited in Liu, 2008). In another high-profile political controversy, Len-Rios and Benoit (2004) examined U.S. Congressman Gary Condit's image repair efforts. Condit was accused of having an affair with a missing intern, Chandra Levy, and also for not fully cooperating with the investigation to find Levy due to his involvement with her disappearance. In an attempt to repair his image, Condit relied upon denial and shifting the blame, which from their analysis, Len-Rios and Benoit deemed ineffective. The authors reiterate a common theme among image repair studies, "This case study shows again that mortification can be vital to image restoration efforts… Condit, however, never conceded any wrongdoing, never apologized, and that was a huge mistake" (Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit, Gullifor, & Panici, 1991; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004, p. 104-105).

Both Allen and Condit lost their political bids for office. Liu concludes from her analysis of Allen's image repair efforts that it is possible for him to make "a political comeback in the future" citing the infamous Senator Trent Lott's political rebirth after his racially-charged comments about segregationist, Senator Strom Thurmond (2008, p. 336). Furthermore, Len-Rios and Benoit highlight that not only do members of an opposing party attack a politician caught in a political crisis, but so do members of the politician's own party in order to avoid being associated with the scandal. Given these implications for political crisis communication, the context of this study was informed by the idea of a politician's potential for overcoming a crisis, even when members of his own party admonish him and his campaign.

The extensive research using image repair theory to analyze political discourse makes this theoretical framework appropriate to utilize in the current study.

In order to explicate the integrated model for explaining the communication behavior of publics proposed by Werder and Schweickart (2013), the two theoretical frameworks which the model incorporates must be provided. The model incorporates the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The main concepts, variables, and applications of the theories are given, followed by a description of the integrated model used in the current study.

Situational Theory of Problem Solving

The situational theory of problem solving provides a model for explaining and predicting people's communication action in problem solving (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012). Advancing the situational theory of publics, Kim and J. E. Grunig offer the theory of problem solving as a more generalized theory which states: (1) communication action is determined by situational motivation and referent criterion and (2) situational motivation is determined by perceptual antecedents (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011). The theory is based upon the assumption that most human behavior is motivated by problem solving (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011).

The situational theory of publics states that "communication behaviors of publics can be best understood by measuring how members of publics perceive situations in which they are affected by organizational consequences" (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 148).

J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) used problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition as independent variables to predict whether a public will engage in information seeking or information processing behavior. Information seeking is characterized by active communication behavior—the planned scanning of the environment for messages about a specific topic. Information processing is characterized by passive communication behavior—the unplanned discovery of a message followed by continued processing of it.

Problem recognition is the extent to which individuals perceive that a situation has consequence for them, detect a problem in the situation, and begin to think about ways to solve the problem. Constraint recognition represents the extent to which individuals perceive obstacles, or barriers, in a situation that limit their freedom to plan their own behavior. Involvement is the extent to which an issue, problem, or situation has personal relevance to an individual.

J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) summarized the influence of the three independent variables of the situational theory by stating that "high problem recognition, low constraint recognition, and high level of involvement increase information seeking. High problem recognition and low constraint recognition also increase information processing. Level of involvement, however, has a limited effect on information processing" (p. 153).

The situational theory has been widely applied in public relations research, which has contributed to a fuller understanding of the variables of interest and aided the theory's development.

The theory provides a foundation for understanding the concept of publics and the variables important to segmentation of publics; however, research suggests there are other variables that are important to understanding the communication behavior of publics and limitations of the theory (Vasquez, 1993; Werder, 2005; Ni & Kim, 2009).

Kim and J. E. Grunig (2011) addressed several limitations of the situational theory of publics in their article introducing the more generalized situational theory of problem solving: (1) a narrow conceptualization of active communication behavior, (2) not utilizing the independent variable referent criterion in later situational theory research, (3) only considering perceptual variables as antecedents to communication behavior, and (4) the underutilization of the theory due to its name being associated primarily with public relations, and the narrow conceptualization of the dependent variable of information acquiring. Although the authors note that the situational theory of problem solving does not replace the situational theory of publics, "results suggest that the theory of problem solving is a more powerful theory that produces more empirical information and theoretical content" (p. 141).

Situational Theory of Problem Solving Variables. The new situational theory of problem solving has four independent variables (problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, and referent criterion). Although the independent variables (except referent criterion) are taken from the situational theory of publics, there are conceptual differences when used with the theory of problem solving.

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Problem recognition is defined as a person's perception that something is missing and there is no immediate solution; involvement recognition is a person's perceived connection to a problem; and constraint recognition is perceived obstacles that limit a person's ability to do anything about a problem. Referent criterion, a cognitive variable, is defined as "any knowledge or subjective judgmental system that influences the way in which one approaches problem solving" (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011, p. 131).

In addition to using perceptual and cognitive variables to explain communication action, Kim and J. E. Grunig (2011) introduce a motivational variable, situational motivation, which mediates the effect of the perceptual variables (problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition) on the dependent variable, communicative action. Situational motivation is defined as "a state of situation specific cognitive and epistemic readiness to make problem-solving effort" (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011, p. 132). In other words, situational motivation is the culmination and mediator of the perceptual variables on communication action.

Further advancing the situational theory, Kim and J. E. Grunig theorized the dependent variable communicative action as a person's "heightened communicative activeness" in information taking, selecting, and giving—all of which have an active and passive component (2011, p. 124). The situational theory of publics only addressed information taking (information seeking and information processing). Kim and J. E. Grunig (2011) note they have renamed "information processing" to "information attending" in the new situational theory of problem solving in order to avoid confusion with the term "processing" as it is usually associated as a cognitive process.

Information seeking (active) is "the planned scanning of the environment for messages about a specified topic" (Grunig, 1997, p. 9). Information attending (passive) is the unexpected encounter and processing of a message (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011).

In the expanded situational theory of problem solving, Kim and J. E. Grunig have included two additional components of the situational theory dependent variable (2011). In addition to the active subvariable, information seeking, and the passive subvariable, information attending, of the information taking component, information selecting and giving makeup the additional components of communicative action. The information selecting domain is comprised of information forefending and information permitting. Information forefending (active) is defined as a process by which people fend off certain information based upon their evaluation of its relevance and value to a problem. Information permitting (passive) refers to the extent people accept information related to a given problem (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011). The information giving domain is comprised of information forwarding and information sharing. Information forwarding (active) is defined as planned information giving to others—even without the information being solicited. Information sharing (passive) refers to sharing information with others when asked. Kim and J. E. Grunig (2011) summarize the dependent variable communicative action as: the more a person commits to solving a problem, the more a person "takes" information related to the problem with increased "selectivity" of information along with increased "giving" of information to others.

Studies testing the situational theory of problem solving provide support for explaining communicative action. Kim and J. E. Grunig (2011) conducted two studies using a survey questionnaire on individual and social problems such as the war in Iraq, losing weight, and eliminating affirmative action in American higher education. In their second study, health-related problems such as organ sales in poor countries and judging brain stem death for organ donation were used. Results of the study support the hypothesized relationships of the model: the greater the problem recognition, the greater the situational motivation in problem solving; the greater the constraint recognition, the lower the situational motivation in problem solving; and the greater the involvement recognition, the higher the situational motivation in problem solving.

Kim and J. E. Grunig (2011) also predicted that the presence of a referent criterion would have a positive relationship with information selecting and giving. Results of the study confirm this prediction. Finally, the situational theory of problem solving theorizes situational motivation as a mediating variable of the independent variables (problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition) and the dependent variable communicative action. Results of the study indicate support for the mediating effect of situational motivation (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011).

Kim, Shen, and Morgan (2011) also used the theory in the context of organ donation problems. Most recently, Kim, Ni, Kim, and Kim (2012) applied the theory to a sociopolitical problem (South Korea's decision to resume U.S. beef imports) to determine the theory's applicability to a *hot-issue* public and to examine cross-cultural problems. This study also examined the influence of political interest on the theory's independent variables.

Results of the study indicate support for applying the model to sociopolitical issues and for examining cross-cultural problems. Of particular interest for the current study is Kim et al.'s (2012) results of political interest influence on the independent variables of the theory. Items used to measure political interest included: "I enjoy reading political news in newspapers and magazines" as well as "I enjoy talking about news or information about political issues with friends or family" (Kim et al., 2012, p.164). The authors predicted that political interest would influence perceptual and cognitive variables— meaning the greater political interest, the higher the problem recognition and involvement recognition, the lower the constraint recognition, and the stronger the referent criterion (Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012). The data provides support for all of the political interest relationships except its effect on problem recognition (Kim et al., 2012).

While the situational theory of problem solving posits variables important to explaining the communication behavior of publics, its issues management perspective and focus on problem-solving, limit its utility for fully explaining the behaviors of publics related to organizational activities and goals. However, an examination of the variables and relationships posited by the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fisbein, 1980) suggests that an integration of variables from both theories may provide a more comprehensive and robust model for explaining the behavior of publics.

Theory of Reasoned Action

The theory of reasoned action provides a model for predicting people's behavior by measuring beliefs, attitudes, and intentions toward a behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975: Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The theory states: behavior is determined by a person's intent to engage in a behavior; intention is determined by a person's attitude toward a behavior and subjective norm; attitude is determined by a person's behavioral beliefs and evaluations of salient outcomes; and subjective norm is determined by a person's normative beliefs and motivation to comply with salient referents (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The main assumption of the theory of reasoned action is that people are rational beings—and therefore reasonably process information in order to make a decision about behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In accordance with this assumption, Fishbein and Ajzen report that generally, people's behavior is consistent with their attitude (1975; 1980).

Theory of Reasoned Action Variables. The independent variables of the theory of reasoned action, (attitudes and subjective norms) have been shown to affect person's intention to perform a behavior. A person's attitude refers to their beliefs about performing a behavior and the associated consequences of the behavior—along with their evaluation of the consequences (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). According to the theory, a person's attitude is based upon readily available information about the issue; more specifically, a person's salient beliefs about performing a behavior (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). In other words, a person's attitude is his or her favorable or unfavorable judgment about performing a behavior.

The other independent variable of the theory is subjective norm, or a person's perception of what others believe about performing a behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Subjective norms are based upon a person's perception of the social pressures associated with performing or not performing a behavior; and furthermore, a person's motivation to comply with the social pressures (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996).

According to the theory, a person will in most cases engage in behaviors they find favorable and that are favorable with others, and conversely, will avoid behaviors they find unfavorable and that are unfavorable with others (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996).

The dependent variable of the theory of reasoned action is behavioral intention. A person's behavioral intention is a culmination of a person's attitude toward the behavior, and the subjective norm(s) they associate with the behavior (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). According to the theory, a person's behavioral intention is the immediate determinant of their actual behavior (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996). For example, a person believes favorably in volunteering at a local homeless shelter (attitude), and perceives that others view volunteering as a favorable behavior (subjective norm). The person's behavioral intention (a product and function of attitude and subjective norm) will be to volunteer at the shelter.

Studies testing the theory of reasoned action have provided support for its utility in examining the intention-behavior relationship. Sheppard, Hartwick, and Warshaw (1988) conducted a meta-analysis of theory of reasoned action research that confirmed attitudes and subjective norms predict behavioral intentions and overt behavior in a variety of contexts. Of particular interest for this study is the application of the theory to political contexts.

Theory of Reasoned Action, Political Applications. The theory of reasoned action has a long history in social psychology and consumer behaviors and has been applied to a variety of contexts, including health communication (Wang, 2009), advocacy (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995; Werder & Schuch, 2008), and birth control (Crawford & Boyer, 1985).

Of particular interest for this study is (1) the theory's application to political contexts (2) its utility for segmenting publics for strategic messaging, and (3) external moderating variables that are used to more accurately analyze communication and behavior.

For example, Fishbein and F. S. Coombs (1974) applied an earlier version of the theory of reasoned action (theory of attitude, which does not include subjective norm) to voting behavior. The study used a survey during the 1964 presidential election to test the application of the model to voting behavior, and furthermore argued that, despite contradictory evidence from other studies, "voters behave neither capriciously nor irrationally" (Fishbein & F. S. Coombs, 1974, p. 98). The authors report instead that voters act consistent—based upon their evaluations and perceptions of information gained before and during political campaigns. More specifically, voters' behavior is a product of: demographics, party affiliation, and evaluation of candidates, issues, and candidates' stance on issues. The authors conclude by noting that their proposed attitude model serves as "a partial corrective to those which cast the voter as a prisoner of his [or her] demographic attributes or the unthinking captive of his [or her] party" (Fishbein & F. S. Coombs, 1974, p. 122). This study highlights the importance of strategic messaging during political campaigns due to the effect of voters' evaluations and perceptions on their voting intention and subsequent voting behavior.

Applying the theory of reasoned action to a specific political issue, Bowman and Fishbein (1978) examined voter behavior toward placing restrictions on the construction of new nuclear power plants. Results of the study indicate voter intention strongly predicted voter behavior, and attitudes and subjective norms predicted voter intention (with attitude a stronger predictor than social norm).

The authors note in their study that external variables of the model can be related to voting behavior—but only through their relationship to voter intention. In other words, external variables (e.g., goal compatibility) can be related to voter behavior only through their influence of either or both attitude and subjective norm (Bowman & Fishbein, 1978).

In light of the proposition about external variables, scholars have continued to examine the effect of these on the attitude-behavior and intention-behavior relations of the theory of reasoned action. One such study examined the effect of the amount of information about an "attitude object" (political candidates, social policy initiatives, and influenza vaccine) on attitude-behavior consistency (Davidson, Yantis, Norwood & Montano, 1985). Results of the study indicated a strong relationship between the mediating variable of amount of information on attitude-behavior consistency. The authors conclude that the more information a person has about an attitude object, the more consistent their behavior will be; and furthermore, the less information a person has about an attitude object, the less consistent their behavior will be. These results again highlight the importance of strategic messaging and audience segmentation with regard to political campaigns. Voters who have less information about a candidate (or attitude object) are more likely to change their voting behavior due to information gained during the course of a campaign. In another study examining external variables of the theory of reasoned action, Ajzen, Timko, and White (1982) tested the role of self-monitoring as a mediating variable of attitude-behavior consistency in the context of voting during the 1980 presidential election and smoking marijuana.

Results of the study indicate that high self-monitors, which are more susceptible to situational cues on how to behave, have less intention-behavior consistency, whereas low self-monitors, less susceptible to situational cues, have a greater intention-behavior consistency (Ajzen, Timko, & White, 1982).

The previous literature on the theory of reasoned action provides multiple studies of the theory's use in political contexts, along with several external moderating variables of the model. Results of the studies underscore the importance of segmenting publics for strategic messaging, and also reveal external variables that may strengthen analysis of communication and behavior in conjunction with the theory of reasoned action. In addition to the previous literature, Singh, Leong, Tan and Wong (1995) introduced and tested a model modified from the theory of reasoned action to analyze voting behavior. The model specifies: (1) voting behavior can be determined by voting intentions for a political candidate; (2) voting intentions are affected by attitudes toward the candidate and party and interpersonal and mass media subjective norms; (3) attitudes toward the candidate and party are affected by cognitive evaluations of beliefs about specific attributes that a candidate or party possesses and the importance of the attributes; and (4) subjective norms are affected by voters' normative beliefs about interpersonal and mass media referents and their motivation to comply with the referents (Singh, Leong, Tan, & Wong, 1995). The model was tested in Singapore during the general elections in 1988. Results of the study indicate the model was by and large effective in predicting voter intentions, with attitudes contributing more to voting intentions than subjective norms.

The authors note that a possible reason for the weaker relationship between subjective norm and voting intention is that subjective norms are a function of situational factors (Singh et al., 1995).

The theory of reasoned action literature reviewed here demonstrates the utility of the theory for predicting and explaining behavior, application of the theory to political contexts, and multiple variables that can be used in combination with the theory to explain behavior. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argue that the theory provides a complete model for explaining and predicting behavior and no other variables influence behavior—except through their impact on beliefs. However, recent studies have shown support for incorporating variables from the situational theory of publics (and problem solving) with the variables of the theory of reasoned action to more fully explain various types of behavior (Jin, 2007; Werder & Schuch, 2008; Weberling, 2011). Most recently, Werder and Schweickart (2013) proposed and tested an integrated model for explaining the communication behavior of publics using variables from the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Integrated Model

Werder and Schweickart (2013) introduced and tested an integrated model for explaining communication behavior of publics (see Figure 1). The integrated model incorporated the independent and dependent variables of the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The study examined message strategy effect on receiver variables.

More specifically, the study sought to identify the perceptual, cognitive, and motivational antecedents most useful for predicting communication behavior of publics. In doing so, the study used Hazleton and Long's (1998) Public Relations Process Model and the message strategies it identifies to test the utility of the integrated model. To test the relationships posited by the integrated model, an experiment was conducted at a large southeastern university utilizing a "real" problem (Werder & Schweickart, 2013).
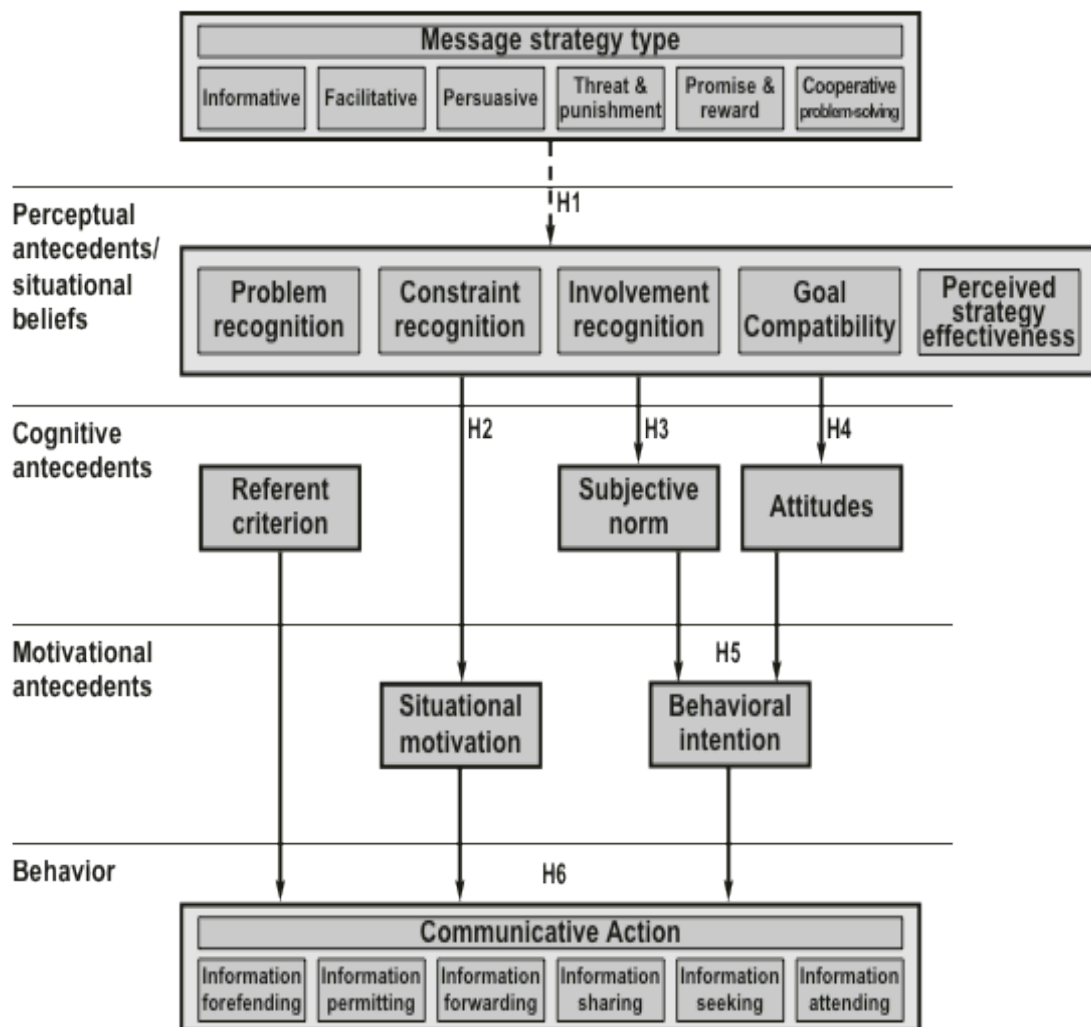
Figure 1: Integrated model for explaining the communication behavior of publics

In September 2012, a professor and several student organizations began circulating a petition to have the fast-food restaurant, Chick-fil-A removed from campus after reports surfaced that Chick-fil-A had donated to organizations that oppose gay marriage. Subsequent comments by the restaurant's president stating his opposition to gay marriage incited controversy on university campuses nationwide. The Chick-fil-A controversy provided an ideal context for examining a salient issue in a university setting and provided a realistic experimental setting for testing the effects of response message strategies (Werder & Schweickart, 2013). In addition to the propositions of the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action being supported in the study, results also indicate that: (1) message strategy type influences perceived strategy effectiveness; (2) situational beliefs influence situational motivation in problem solving, subjective norm, and attitudes (toward the organization and the behavior); (3) subjective norm and attitudes (toward the organization and behavior) influence behavioral intention, and (4) referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention influence communicative action in publics (Werder & Schweickart, 2013).

The results of Werder and Schweickart's (2013) study suggest the utility of an integrated model for explaining the communication behavior of publics. The current study seeks to advance the integrated model for explaining communication behavior and to test the applicability of the model in a political public relations crisis.

Integrated Model Variables. The integrated model places each variable of the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action on the appropriate antecedent level that reflects its function.

The relationships among variables in the model reflect the results of previous research in both theoretical areas (Werder & Schweickart, 2013). The model posits that message strategies communicated from organizations (or in this study, a politician) influence individuals' situational beliefs. According to the situational theory of problem solving, situational beliefs related to problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition are the perceptual antecedents to situational motivation in publics (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011). Furthermore, Kim et al. (2012) examined political interest as an antecedent to perceptual variables in their study of hot-issue publics arguing that "those with greater interest in political affairs are likely to activate more knowledge, experiences, and subjective political perspectives" (p. 151). In other words, political interest will have a positive relationship with referent criterion. Results from the study indicate a strong relationship between the variables ($r = .34$, $p < .001$). In addition, the notion that the content of communication (message strategies) is related to the perceived effectiveness of messages from an organization or individual is an important situational belief—one that influences communicative action through its effect on cognitive and motivational antecedents. Thus, this study examines a situational belief set advanced through previous research that includes problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, political interest, and perceived strategy effectiveness.

The integrated model reflects the relationships posited by the situational theory of problem solving. According to the theory, situational beliefs influence situational motivation in problem solving, which in turn operates with referent criterion to predict communicative action.

Similarly, it reflects the relationships supported by the theory of reasoned action—that situational beliefs influence attitudes and subjective norm, which in turn predict behavioral intention to engage in behavior. However, an important aspect of the integrated model is its addition of behavioral intention to the variables that predict communicative action. In addition, the theory of reasoned action is aimed at predicting behavior, and it is specific in its rule that all variables have the same target behavior. The integrated model draws from the issues management framework offered by the situational theory of problem solving to suggest that attitudes toward the organization or individual and the issue/problem are also important for predicting behavioral intention and influencing communicative action in publics. The model also draws from the theory of reasoned action to suggest that behavioral intention, specifically signing a petition in this study, is a factor that should be considered when attempting to understand communicative action, and other behaviors of publics that impact political public relations activities and goals.

Hypotheses

Drawing from previous research, this study seeks to test hypotheses related to the integrated model. Specifically, this study seeks to advance the external validity of the integrated model by testing its utility in a political crisis context and by using a different message strategy taxonomy for understanding and explaining communication behavior of publics. The hypotheses are given below, followed by the method used to examine the hypotheses.

Therefore, this study replicates and extends the work of Werder and Schweickart (2013) by examining the following hypotheses adapted from their study, but framed in a political public relations and crisis communication context:

H1: Message strategy type influences the situational beliefs of publics.

H2: Situational beliefs of publics influence situational motivation.

H3: Situational beliefs influence subjective norm.

H4: Situational beliefs influence attitude toward the politician, attitude toward the problem, and attitude toward the behavior.

H5: Subjective norm, attitude toward the politician, attitude toward the problem, and attitude toward the behavior influence behavioral intention.

H6: Referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention influence communicative action.

In addition, Kim et al. (2012) examined political interest as an antecedent to perceptual variables in their study of hot-issue publics, arguing that "those with greater interest in political affairs are likely to activate more knowledge, experiences, and subjective political perspectives" (p. 151). Results indicated a strong relationship between political interest and referent criterion. ($r = .34$, $p < .001$). As such, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H7: Political interest influences referent criterion.

The next chapter provides the method used in the study to answer the previously stated hypotheses. The chapter also provides information on the study design, participants, procedures and stimulus material. A detailed list of the instrumentation is provided followed by the data analysis procedures used.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

The purpose of this study is to contribute to theory-driven research in political public relations and crisis communication while also replicating and extending previous research by Werder and Schweickart (2013).This chapter describes the method used in this study along with information about the participants, procedures, and research instrument. Data analysis procedures used in the study are also provided.

Experimental Design

To test the relationships posited by the hypotheses in this study, an experiment using a posttest-only randomized design. In an effort to increase the external validity of the integrated model, this study utilizes a political problem and crisis communication message strategies in order to vary the contexts in which the model is tested. The political "problem" chosen for this study is an actual political public relations crisis that became newsworthy in December 2012. As mentioned, Rep. Jimmie Smith's introduction of a bill that would alter the Bright Futures program encountered extreme opposition from Florida voters. This political crisis serves as an ideal problem in which to test the model, given the salience of the problem for college students.

Participants

Research participants (N = 252) for the experiment were recruited from a population of undergraduate students enrolled in mass communication classes at the University of South Florida.

Of these, 201 (79.8%) were female, 49 (19.4%) were male, and 2 (0.8%) did not report.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 32, with an average age of 20, and 9 (3.6%) were

freshmen, 33 (13.1%) were sophomores, 91 (36.1%) were juniors, 116 (46%) were

seniors, 1 (.4%) reported other, and 2 (.8%) did not report. Of the research participants,

192 (76.2%) were Bright Futures scholarship recipients, 57 (22.6%) were not scholarship

recipients, and 3 (1.2%) did not report.

Procedures

The experiment took place at the beginning of class. Each participant was

randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions resulting from a post-test only

experimental design with five message strategy treatments and a control condition.

Variation of the conditions was achieved through the use of booklets containing stimulus

material and an instrument designed to measure the variables of interest. At the beginning

of each booklet, research participants were given an informed consent statement,

followed by a brief explanation, purpose of the study, and instructions.

Stimulus Material

The stimulus materials included an actual news article covering the proposed bill

that was slightly altered for this study (see Appendix B). Specifically, the full news article

was used, but variation in crisis response message strategy type was achieved by

embedding a response statement from Rep. Smith that reflected each of the five crisis

response strategies examined in this study. Participants in the control condition read the

news article with no response message from Rep. Smith. Research participants were

instructed to read the news article and complete the questionnaire that followed.

In order to examine the effect of the message strategies, five response messages were created based upon the conceptual definitions provided by image repair theory. The response message treatments were included at the end of the news article, as well as in a pull quote along the right side of the article. Each message strategy began with the following quote from Rep. Smith: "This bill reflects my commitment to being fiscally responsible," with the message treatments immediately following. Each message treatment consisted of 16 words. Table 2 provides the conceptual definitions of the image repair strategies and the corresponding operationalization of each message treatment.

Table 2
Message strategy conceptual and operational definitions

Message Strategy	Tactic	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition
Denail	Shift the blame	Offensive act performed by another	This bill is a result of the Florida legislature's failure to reform the Bright Futures program.
Evasion of responsibility	Good intentions	Meant well	My intention is not to punish students, but to provide an incentive to stay in Florida.
Reducing offensiveness	Bolstering	Stress good traits	This bill will keep the best and brightest students here in Florida and grow the economy.
Corrective action	n/a	Plan to solve or prevent problem	However, after learning many of my constituents oppose the bill, I have decided to withdraw it.
Mortification	n/a	Apologize	I am deeply sorry that this proposed bill has offended some of my constituents and others.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire consisted of 55 items used to measure the variables of interest. Most of the measures used in this experiment were adapted from the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Werder & Schweickart, 2013) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Additional measures were adapted from Werder's (2005) work with goal compatibility, and Kim et al.'s (2012) work with political interest. All of the items used to measure the variables of interest utilized a seven-point modified Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), except the attitude measures, which were tested using semantic differential scales. Standard demographic measures were also used, including sex, ethnicity, age, and year in school.

The next section provides the items used to measure the variables of interest, and is organized according to the antecedent levels of the integrated model: *perceptual/situational belief variables* (problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, perceived strategy effectiveness, and political interest), *cognitive variables* (referent criterion, subjective norm, and attitude), *motivational variables* (situational motivation, and behavioral intention), and *behavior* (communicative action).

Perceptual/situational belief variables. The first antecedent level of the integrated model includes variables from the situational theory of problem solving, goal compatibility, perceived strategy effectiveness, and political interest.

Measures for these variables were adapted from previous research (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Werder & Schweickart, 2013; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Werder, 2005). Items measuring problem recognition include:

1. I believe more people should pay attention to this political issue;

2. I believe something needs to be done to improve this political problem;

3. I do not believe this is a serious political problem.

Items measuring constraint recognition include:

1. I do not believe that I, personally, can do anything to make a difference in the way this problem is solved;

2. I believe that my opinions about this problem matter to politicians;

3. I do not believe I have the ability to influence the outcome of this problem.

Items measuring involvement recognition include:

1. I believe this problem affects my life;

2. I have strong opinions about this problem;

3. I believe this problem involves me personally.

Items measuring goal compatibility include:

1. I agree with Rep. Jimmie Smith's stance on this problem;

2. My goals are compatible with the goals of Rep. Jimmie Smith;

3. Regarding this problem, Rep. Jimmie Smith and I want the same thing.

Items measuring political interest include:

    1. I enjoy reading political news in newspapers, social media, and online news sources;

    2. I enjoy talking about news or information about political issues with friends or family;

    3. Even if there are no political hot issues, I enjoy conversations with acquaintances about political topics.

Items measuring perceived strategy effectiveness include:

    1. I like the way Rep. Jimmie Smith responded to this problem;

    2. Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message was effective;

    3. Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message was appropriate.

The previous items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Three additional items measuring perceived strategy effectiveness were measured using semantic differential scales: My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message is (1) negative—positive, (2) bad—good, and (3) unfavorable—favorable.

    Cognitive variables. The second antecedent level of the integrated model includes variables from the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action. Measures for these variables were adapted from previous research (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Werder & Schweickart, 2013; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Items measuring referent criterion include:

      1. I have dealt with problems like this in the past;

      2. I strongly support a certain way of resolving this problem;

      3. Past experience has provided me with guidelines for solving this problem.

Items measuring subjective norm include:

      1. Generally, I do what people who are important to me think I should do;

      2. Most people I care about think that I should not support Rep. Jimmie Smith in this problem;

      3. My friends think it's okay to agree with Rep. Jimmie Smith in this problem.

All of the items listed were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Items measuring attitudes of the research participants toward the politician, problem, and behavior used semantic differential scales (negative—positive, bad—good, unfavorable—favorable) include:

      1. My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith is;

      2. My attitude toward this problem is;

      3. My attitude toward signing the petition at USF is.

Motivational variables. The third antecedent level of the integrated model includes variables from the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action. Measures for these variables were adapted from previous research (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Werder & Schweickart, 2013; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Items measuring situational motivation include:

1. I frequently think about this problem;

2. I would like to understand this problem better;

3. I often think about ways that I can solve this problem.

As mentioned in the literature review, an important aspect of the integrated model is the addition of the behavioral intention variable *toward the behavior* and *to communicate.* Items measuring behavioral intention toward the behavior—in this case signing a petition at USF include:

1. I intend to sign the petition at USF in the future;

2. I intend to not sign the petition at USF;

3. I will not sign petitions like this in the future.

Items measuring behavioral intention to communicate include:

1. I intend to seek more information about this problem;

2. I plan to visit a Web site to learn more about this problem;

3. I intend to communicate with others about this problem.

All of the items listed were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Behavior/Communicative action. The final level of the integrated model includes the dependent variable from the situational theory of problem solving, communicative action. The dependent variable is comprised of six subvariables—measures of which were adapted from previous research (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Werder & Schweickart, 2013).

Items measuring information forefending included:

1. I have invested enough time and energy to understand this problem;

2. I have learned enough about this problem to judge the value of information immediately.

Items measuring information permitting included:

1. I listen to diverse opinions about this problem;

2. To make better decisions about this problem, I listen to opposing views.

Items measuring information forwarding included:

1. If it is possible, I take time to explain this problem to others;

2. I look for chances to share my knowledge and opinions about this problem.

Items measuring information sharing included:

1. I am someone who my friends and others come to learn more about this problem;

2. I am likely to share information about this problem with others.

Items measuring information seeking included:

1. I regularly check to see if there is any new information about this problem in the media;

2. I actively seek information about this problem;

3. I regularly visit Web sites that have information about this problem.

Items measuring information attending included:

1. I pay attention to what others say about this problem;

2. If I hear someone talking about this problem, I am likely to listen.

All of the items listed were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Manipulation Check

To increase validity of the manipulated variable (image repair message response) the five message treatments were reviewed by graduate students enrolled in an advanced public relations campaigns course. The message treatments were compared to the conceptual strategy definitions to achieve the most accurate operationalization of the variable. After the review, revisions were made to the message treatments.

Data Analysis

SPSS 21.0 was used to analyze the data. An alpha level of .05 was required for significance in all statistical tests. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the multi-item scales used to measure the variables of interest. Scales that demonstrated internal consistency were collapsed to create composite measures for hypothesis testing.

To test H1, a series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine if message strategies influence situational beliefs. The dependent variables were problem recognition, constrain recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, perceived strategy effectiveness, and political interest. The independent variable was message strategy type with six levels (denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, mortification, and control). For all ANOVAs, a Levene's Test was conducted to determine whether the assumption of equality of variance was violated. The results of those tests were used to select appropriate pair-wise comparisons when the omnibus ANOVA test was significant.

Additionally, Tukey's HSD was used for post-hoc comparisons due to the assumption of equal variances

Linear regression analysis was used to test H2-H7. For H2-H4, situational beliefs were entered as predictors and situational motivation (H2), subjective norm (H3), and attitudes (H4) were the criterion. For H5, measures of subjective norm and attitudes were predictors and behavioral intention was the criterion. For H6, referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention were entered as predictors and communicative action was the criterion. For H7, political interest measures were entered as predictors and referent criterion as the criterion.

The next chapter provides the results of the hypotheses. Cell frequencies, reliability analysis, and descriptive data are provided. The results of each hypothesis is given along with a corresponding table showing the mean scores and mean differences for H1 and the beta weights, degrees of freedom, t-test score, and significance of each variable for H2-H7.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to further theory-driven research in political public relations and crisis communication by examining the influence of message strategies on perceptual, cognitive, and motivational antecedents to communication behavior. As such, H1 tested message strategy influence on situational beliefs, H2-H4 tested situational belief influence on situational motivation, subjective norm, and attitudes, H5 tested the influence of subjective norm and attitudes on behavioral intention, H6 examined the influence of referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention on communicative action, and H7 measured the influence of political interest on referent criterion.

Although a balanced design was desired, random distribution resulted in unbalanced cell frequency ranging from 41-43 in the experiment, shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Cell distributions for experimental conditions

Condition	Frequency	Percentage
Denial	42	16.7
Evasion of responsibility	42	16.7
Reducing offensiveness	43	17.1
Corrective action	42	16.7
Mortification	42	16.7
Control	41	16.3

Data analysis began with an examination of descriptive statistics for the items measuring the variables of interest. The means and standard deviations for the situational belief variables of the integrated model are shown in Table 4, cognitive and motivational variables Table 5, and behavioral variable Table 6. Prior to hypothesis testing, reliability analysis for the multi-item scales measuring the variables of interest indicated that most of the items demonstrated internal consistency. Some variables produced lower reliability coefficients than is normally acceptable. Two of the three items measuring subjective norm were dropped for hypothesis testing due to low reliability and conceptual issues. The multi-item scales were collapsed to create composite measures for hypothesis testing. The reliability coefficients are shown in Table 4, 5, and 6.

Tests of Hypotheses

H1 posited that message strategies influence situational beliefs. Results of one-way ANOVAs indicated that no significant differences existed in problem recognition, $F(5, 246) = 1.500$, $p = .190$, involvement recognition, $F(5, 246) = .552$, $p = .737$, goal compatibility, $F(5, 246) = 1.947$, $p = .087$, constraint recognition, $F(5, 246) = .670$, $p = .647$, and political interest, $F(5, 246) = 1.916$, $p = .092$, due to strategy type.

Results of ANOVA indicated significant differences in perceived message strategy effectiveness due to message strategy type $F(5, 246) = 10.094$, $p < .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .180$. Approximately 18% of the variance in perceived message strategy effectiveness was due to message strategy type. The corrective action strategy produced the highest mean score for perceived message strategy effectiveness followed by the mortification, bolstering, shift the blame, and good intentions message strategy. These results are shown in Table 7.

Table 4

Means and standard deviations of situational belief variables

Item	N	M	SD	a
Problem recognition (composite)	252	6.35	.719	.56
I believe people should pay more attention to this political issue.	252	6.47	.995	
I believe that something needs to be done to improve this political problem.	252	6.37	.877	
I do not believe this is a serious political problem. (R)	252	6.23	1.071	
Constraint recognition (composite)	252	3.19	1.350	.77
I do not believe that I, personally, can do anything to make a difference in the way this problem is solved.	252	3.04	1.530	
I believe that my opinions about this problem matter to politicians. (R)	252	3.61	1.772	
I do not believe that I have the ability to influence the outcome of this problem.	252	2.92	1.582	
Involvement recognition (composite)	252	5.56	1.687	.85
I believe this problem affects my life.	252	5.63	2.077	
I have strong opinions about this problem.	252	5.77	1.519	
I believe this problem involves me personally.	252	5.31	2.134	
Goal compatibility (composite)	252	1.61	.9930	.82
I agree with Rep. Smith's response to this problem.	252	1.62	1.217	
My goals are compatible with the goals of Rep. Smith.	252	1.66	1.064	
Regarding this problem, Rep. Jimmie Smith and I want the same thing.	252	1.58	1.177	
Perceived strategy effectiveness (composite)	236	2.21	1.314	.93
I like the way Rep. Jimmie Smith responded to this problem.	252	2.17	1.576	
Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message was effective.	252	2.27	1.488	
Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message was appropriate.	252	2.49	1.710	
My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message is negative/positive.	243	2.18	1.518	
My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message is bad/good.	243	2.16	1.447	
My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith's response message is unfavorable/favorable.	240	2.01	1.425	
Political interest (composite)	252	4.52	1.574	.85
I enjoy reading political news in newspapers, social media, and online news sources.	252	4.58	1.820	
I enjoy talking about news or information about political issues with friends or family.	252	4.67	1.724	
Even if there are no political hot issues, I enjoy conversations with acquaintances about political topics.	252	4.31	1.834	

R = Reversed item

Post hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD examined the exact differences indicated by the results. The Levene's Test was significant, $F(5, 241) = 3.969$, $p = .002$, and used for post hoc analysis. The corrective action message strategy produced a significantly higher mean score than all other crisis communication message strategies. These results, which provide partial support for H1, are shown in Table 8.

Table 5

Means and standard deviations of cognitive and motivational variables

Item	N	M	SD	a
Situational motivation in problem solving (composite)	252	3.92	1.059	.48
I frequently think about this problem.	252	3.08	1.801	
I would like to understand this problem better.	252	5.62	1.296	
I often think about ways that I can solve this problem.	252	3.07	1.391	
Subjective norm (composite)	252	3.15	.9378	.01
Generally, I do what people who are important to me think I should do.	252	3.65	1.652	
Most people I care about think that I should not support Rep. Jimmie Smith in this problem. (R) (D)	252	3.33	1.778	
My friends think it's okay to agree with Rep. Jimmie Smith in this	252	2.49	1.387	
Attitude toward Rep. Smith (composite)	237	2.22	1.374	.98
My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith is negative/positive.	242	2.24	1.420	
My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith is bad/good.	238	2.26	1.390	
My attitude toward Rep. Jimmie Smith is unfavorable/favorable.	242	2.18	1.388	
Attitude toward problem (composite)	233	2.64	1.594	.97
My attitude toward this problem is negative/positive.	242	2.66	1.630	
My attitude toward this problem is bad/good.	234	2.68	1.601	
My attitude toward this problem is unfavorable/favorable.	234	2.57	1.682	
Attitude toward behavior (composite)	235	6.26	1.146	.99
My attitude toward signing the petition at USF is negative/positive.	242	6.24	1.160	
My attitude toward signing the petition at USF is bad/good.	237	6.28	1.150	
My attitude toward signing the petition at USF is unfavorable/favorable.	236	6.28	1.158	
Behavioral intention, toward behavior (composite)	252	6.26	.9856	.88
I intend to sign the petition at USF in the future.	252	6.17	1.140	
I intend to not sign the petition at USF. (R)	252	6.44	.982	
I will not sign petitions like this in the future at USF. (R)	252	6.17	1.166	
Behavioral intention, toward communicating (composite)	252	5.14	1.393	.87
I intend to seek more information about this problem.	252	5.27	1.584	
I intend to visit a Web site to learn more about this problem.	252	4.95	1.621	
I intend to communicate with others about this problem.	252	5.20	1.500	
Referent criterion (composite)	252	3.65	1.027	.48
I have dealt with problems like this in the past.	252	2.63	1.521	
I strongly support a certain way of resolving this problem.	252	4.95	1.431	
Past experience has provided me with guidelines for solving this problem.	252	3.37	1.443	

R = Reversed item; D = Dropped item

H2 stated that situational beliefs influence situational motivation in publics. Results of regression analysis indicated that 28% of the variance in situational motivation was due to the linear combination of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, political interest, and perceived strategy effectiveness, R^2 = .295, Adj. R^2 = .276, $F(6, 229) = 15.940$, $p < .001$.

Table 6

Means and standard deviations of behavioral variable

Item	N	M	SD	α
Communicative action (composite)	252	3.95	1.002	.88
Information forefending				
I have invested enough time and energy to understand this problem.	252	3.79	1.787	
I have learned enough about this problem to judge the value of information immediately.	252	4.01	1.633	
Information permitting				
I listen to diverse opinions about this problem.	252	3.63	1.676	
To make better decisions about this problem, I listen to opposing views.	252	4.70	1.457	
Information forwarding				
If it is possible, I will take time to explain this problem to others.	252	4.11	1.740	
I look for chances to share my knowledge and opinions about this problem.	252	4.19	1.517	
Information sharing				
I am someone who my friends and others come to learn more about this problem.	252	3.04	1.590	
I am likely to share information about this problem with others.	252	5.57	1.403	
Information seeking				
I regularly check to see if there is any new information about this problem in the media.	252	2.61	1.450	
I actively seek information about this problem.	252	3.19	1.562	
I regularly visit Web sites that have information about this problem.	252	2.63	1.292	
Information attending				
I pay attention to what others say about this problem.	252	4.21	1.866	
If I hear someone talking about this problem, I am likely to listen.	252	5.69	1.253	

Table 7

Perceived message strategy effectiveness mean scores

Message strategy	N	M	SD
Corrective action	39	3.43	1.543
Mortification	37	2.16	1.046
Bolstering	41	2.06	1.112
Shift the blame	40	2.03	1.446
Good intentions	40	1.87	0.861
Control	39	1.76	1.066

Involvement recognition, constraint recognition, and political interest significantly

contributed to the prediction equation, with involvement recognition contributing most to

unique item variance. These results, which partially support H2, are shown in Table 9.

Table 8
Corrective action mean differences for perceived strategy effectiveness

Message strategy	MD	p
Control	1.667	.000
Good intentions	1.564	.000
Shift the blame	1.407	.000
Bolstering	1.375	.000
Mortification	1.269	.000

Table 9
Regression analysis for situational motivation predicted by situational beliefs

Predictor	β	df	t	p
Involvement recognition	.389	229	6.075	.000
Constraint recognition	-.173	229	-2.831	.005
Political interest	.124	229	2.190	.030
Problem recognition	.120	229	1.849	.066
Goal compatibility	.111	229	1.439	.151
Strategy effectiveness	.023	229	0.297	.767

H3 stated that situational beliefs influence subjective norm. Results of regression analysis indicated that 13% of the variance in subjective norm was due to the linear combination of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, political interest, and perceived strategy effectiveness, $R^2 = .154$, Adj. $R^2 = .132$, $F(6, 229) = 6.971$, $p < .001$. Measures of constraint recognition, goal compatibility, and strategy effectiveness made significant positive contributions to unique item variance. These results provide partial support for H3 and are shown in Table 10.

Table 10
Regression analysis for subjective norm predicted by situational beliefs

Predictor	β	df	t	p
Goal compatibility	.204	229	2.442	.016
Strategy effectiveness	.192	229	2.306	.022
Constraint recognition	.162	229	2.409	.017
Problem recognition	.074	229	1.003	.303
Political interest	.009	229	.141	.888
Involvement recognition	.000	229	.006	.995

H4 stated that situational beliefs influence attitudes toward the politician, problem, and behavior. Results of regression analysis indicated that 47% of the variance in attitude toward the politician was due to the linear combination of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, political interest, and perceived strategy effectiveness, $R^2 = .486$, Adj. $R^2 = .473$, $F(6, 229) = 36.091$, $p < .001$. Goal compatibility and strategy effectiveness contributed positively to unique item variance. The measure of problem recognition made a significant negative contribution to unique item variance. These results are shown in Table 11.

Table 11
Regression analysis for attitude toward the politician predicted by situational beliefs

Predictor	β	df	t	p
Goal compatibility	.369	229	5.618	.000
Strategy effectiveness	.304	229	4.677	.000
Problem recognition	-.168	229	-3.031	.003
Political interest	-.043	229	-.894	.372
Constraint recognition	.028	229	.530	.596
Involvement recognition	.021	229	.381	.703

Results of regression analysis indicated that nearly 9% of the variance in attitude toward the problem was due to the linear combination of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, political interest, and perceived strategy effectiveness, $R^2 = .111$, Adj. $R^2 = .087$, $F(6, 225) = 4.669$, $p < .001$. Only involvement recognition made a significant negative contribution to unique item variance. These results are shown in Table 12.

Table 12
Regression analysis of attitude toward the problem predicted by situational beliefs

Predictor	β	df	t	p
Involvement recognition	-.209	225	-2.873	.004
Problem recognition	-.131	225	-1.780	.076
Goal compatibility	.062	225	.719	.473
Political interest	.055	225	.854	.394
Constraint recognition	.023	225	.325	.745
Strategy effectiveness	.015	225	.170	.865

Finally, results of regression analysis indicated that nearly 41% of the variance in attitude toward the behavior was due to the linear combination of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, political interest, and perceived strategy effectiveness, $R^2 = .425$, Adj. $R^2 = .409$, $F(6, 226) = 27.809$, $p < .001$. Measures of involvement recognition and problem recognition made significant positive contributions to unique item variance. The measure of goal compatibility made a significant negative contribution to unique item variance. These results are shown in Table 13.

Table 13
Regression analysis of attitude toward the behavior predicted by situational beliefs

Predictor	β	df	t	p
Involvement recognition	.392	226	6.720	.000
Problem recognition	.263	226	4.454	.000
Goal compatibility	-.163	226	-2.349	.020
Constraint recognition	-.060	226	-1.081	.281
Political interest	.039	226	.751	.453
Strategy effectiveness	.019	226	.282	.778

The previous results provide support for H4, with 47% of the variance in attitude toward the politician, 9% in the attitude toward the problem, and 41% in the attitude toward the behavior explained by the situational belief variables of the integrated model.

H5 predicted that subjective norm and attitudes influence behavioral intention (to sign the petition and communicate about the problem). Regression analysis indicated that 27% of the variance in behavioral intention to communicate about the problem was due to the linear combination of subjective norm, attitude toward the politician, attitude toward problem, and attitude toward behavior, $R^2 = .284$, Adj. $R^2 = .271$, $F(4, 228) = 22.572$, $p < .001$. An examination of the coefficient matrix indicated that attitude toward behavior (signing the petition) was the only predictor that significantly contributed positively to unique item variance. These results are shown in Table 14.

Regression analysis also indicated that 58% of the variance in behavioral intention to sign the petition was due to the linear combination of subjective norm, attitude toward the politician, attitude toward problem, and attitude toward behavior, $R^2 = .597$, Adj. $R^2 = .590$, $F(4, 228) = 84.603$, $p < .001$.

Table 14
Regression analysis of behavioral intention to communicate predicted by subjective norm and attitudes

Predictor	β	df	t	p
Attitude toward behavior (signing the petition)	.479	228	8.221	.000
Attitude toward politician	-.094	228	-1.564	.119
Attitude toward problem	-.081	228	-1.405	.161
Subjective norm	-.015	228	-.257	.797

Measures of attitude toward the behavior (signing the petition) and subjective norm significantly contributed to unique item variance. These results support H5 and are shown in Table 15.

Table 15
Regression analysis of behavioral intention to sign the petition predicted by subjective norm and attitudes

Predictor	β	df	t	p
Attitude toward behavior (signing the petition)	.725	226	16.599	.000
Subjective norm	-.095	226	-2.116	.031
Attitude toward problem	-.073	226	-1.692	.092
Attitude toward politician	-.057	226	-1.260	.209

H6 predicted that referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention influence communicative action. Regression analysis indicated that nearly 48% of the variance in communicative action was due to the linear combination of referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention, $R^2 = .492$, Adj. $R^2 = .486$, $F(3, 248) = 80.013$, $p < .001$. All predictors significantly contributed to unique item variance. These results, which support H6, are shown in Table 16.

Table 16
Regression analysis for communicative action predicted by referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention

Predictor	β	*df*	*t*	*p*
Behavioral intention	.393	245	6.903	.000
Referent criterion	.230	245	4.061	.000
Situational motivation	.226	245	3.385	.001

H7 predicted that political interest influences referent criterion. Regression analysis indicated that nearly 2% of the variance in referent criterion was due to political interest, $R^2 = .023$, Adj. $R^2 = .019$, $F(1, 250) = 5.829$, $p = .016$. These results, although weak, support H7 and are shown in Table 17.

Table 17
Regression analysis of referent criterion predicted by political interest

Predictor	β	*df*	*t*	*p*
Political interest	.151	250	2.414	.016

The next chapter provides a discussion of the results. Theoretical and practical implications are also provided along with limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. Conclusions of the study are also summarized.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study contributes to current theory-driven research in public relations and political public relations by examining strategic messaging in a political crisis context. Specifically, this research examined the influence of crisis response message strategies on the perceptual, cognitive, and motivational antecedents to communication behavior of publics during a political crisis. After introducing a bill that would make changes to the Bright Futures scholarship program, Rep. Smith encountered major opposition to the bill from his constituents—leading to the political crisis tested in this study. Using a post-test only random experimental design, message strategies derived from image repair theory were used to test their influence on perceptual/situational beliefs, along with testing the relationships of the integrated model. Results of the hypotheses generally provided support for the integrated model and provided findings important to public relations and political public relations theory and practice.

H1 predicted that crisis response strategy type influences situational beliefs (problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, political interest, and perceived strategy effectiveness) in publics. This hypothesis was minimally supported, since strategy type only produced a significant effect on perceived strategy effectiveness. More specifically, 18% of the variance in perceived message strategy effectiveness was due to message strategy type. Post hoc analysis revealed that the corrective action message strategy produced a significantly higher mean score than all other crisis communication message strategies.

The corrective action strategy read, "However, after learning many of my constituents oppose the bill, I have decided to withdraw it." This message strategy explicitly states Rep. Smith understands many of his constituents oppose the proposed changes to the Bright Futures scholarship program and he has decided to heed their concerns. Given the context of this study, the argument can be made that publics respond more favorably to a message strategy that negates or alleviates the original cause for their concern and or the catalyst of the crisis issue. The good intentions message strategy, which produced the lowest mean score (other than the control) for perceived message strategy effectiveness read: "My intention is not to punish students, but to provide an incentive to stay in Florida." This message strategy implies Rep. Smith meant well by introducing the bill and attempts to convey that he personally should not be held responsible for any negative feelings from publics. In the context of this study, it is clear publics do not value or consider the intentions of the politician to be an effective message strategy when communicating about a crisis. Furthermore, the control treatment of this study (no crisis response message) produced the lowest mean score for perceived strategy effectiveness, supporting previous findings that state "the argument can cautiously be made that… any strategic message response regarding the organization's position on the issue will be better at producing perceptions of strategy effectiveness than no communication from the organization" (Werder & Schweickart, 2013, p.18). Although the findings of H1 contributed meaningful results for the strategy effectiveness variable, the other situational belief variables were not significantly influenced by message strategy type. Previous research has demonstrated the effects of situational beliefs due to message strategy type. The lack of effects in this study may be attributed to the study design.

For example, the message treatment was embedded at the end of the news article and as a pull quote. It is possible that participants did not read the article in its entirety and therefore were not exposed to the message treatment. Another possibility is the brevity of the message treatments, each only 16 words. It is possible that for the sake of conciseness, the design of the messages failed to achieve a significant effect due to length, and thus lacked enough content.

H2 posited that situational beliefs influence situational motivation in publics. This hypothesis was partially supported. Specifically, 28% of the variance in situational motivation was due to the linear combination of situational beliefs tested in this study with involvement recognition, constraint recognition, and political interest significantly contributing to unique item variance. This result supports the relationship proposed by the integrated model. Situational motivation is defined as a state of readiness to make a problem-solving effort specific to a situation (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011). Given this definition, results of the hypothesis, and context of the study, this result suggest that publics had a heightened sense of ability and willingness to put forth effort to solve the problem based on their level of involvement, constraint recognition, and political interest. This result is consistent with the situational theory of problem solving and the integrated model assumption of constraint recognition contributing negatively to unique item variance and involvement recognition and political interest contributing positively to situational motivation. In other words, the more publics perceived themselves to be involved with the problem of the proposed bill and the greater their political interest, the more motivated they were be to solve the problem. Conversely, the less constraints or obstacles the publics perceived in problem solving, the more motivated they were to act.

H3 predicted that situational beliefs influence subjective norm. Regression analysis revealed that 13% of the variance in subjective norm was due to situational beliefs, and that goal compatibility, strategy effectiveness, and constraint recognition were significant unique contributors to the prediction equation. These results partially support H3 and the relationship proposed by the integrated model. Examining the items used to measure the variables of interest for this hypothesis suggest some interesting implications for strategic messaging during a political public relations crisis. For instance, the item used to measure subjective norm, "My friends think it's okay to agree with Rep. Jimmie Smith in this problem," implies that not only do a public's friends think it's okay to agree with Rep. Smith in the problem, but also that a public does in fact agree with Rep. Smith in the problem. Depending on the message strategy treatment received, publics may differ on what they perceive to be agreeing with (e.g., corrective action strategy withdrew the bill, mortification strategy apologized for offending constituents). Regardless, given the context of the study and results of the hypothesis, publics who perceived their goals to be similar to Rep. Smith's indicated a higher level of agreement with the item used to measure subjective norm. Additionally, publics who perceived the message strategy treatment as more effective indicated a higher level of agreement with the item used to measure subjective norm—suggesting that not only did the publics perceive the message to be effective, but they also feel their friends would approve of their assessment.

H4 posited that situational beliefs influence attitudes (toward the politician, issue, and behavior). Results of regression analysis indicated that nearly 47% of the variance in attitude toward the politician was due to the linear combination of problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, and perceived strategy effectiveness. In addition, both goal compatibility and strategy effectiveness made significant positive contributions while problem recognition made a significant negative contribution to the prediction equation. These results provide partial support for H4 and support the proposed relationship of the integrated model. Given the context of this study, it is clear that publics' perceived message strategy effectiveness and goal compatibility with Rep. Smith influenced their overall attitude toward him. These results are not surprising and suggest that publics are more apt to evaluate someone positively if they perceive their goals as similar and receive messages they deem effective.

Additionally, nearly 9% of the variance in attitude toward the issue was due to situational beliefs, with involvement recognition as a significant negative contributor to the prediction equation. In other words, the more a person perceives themself to be involved with the issue, the less favorable his or her attitude will be toward the issue. This result suggests that those who perceive a higher level of involvement with a crisis issue like the proposed changes to the Bright Futures program, are more likely to demonstrate a negative attitude toward the issue. The results support H4 and the relationship proposed by the integrated model.

Finally, nearly 41% of the variance in attitude toward behavior (signing the petition) was due to situational beliefs, with problem recognition and involvement recognition contributing positively, and goal compatibility contributing negatively to the prediction equation. Given the context of the study, these results suggest that those publics who perceive a higher level of involvement with the proposed bill and greater understanding of the problem are more likely to have a favorable attitude toward signing the petition opposing the bill. Additionally, the negative contribution of goal compatibility suggests that those publics who perceive their goals to be similar to Rep. Smith's are less likely to have an attitude which favors signing the petition. Depending on the message strategy treatment publics received (e.g., corrective action) their attitudes toward signing the petition may also have been influenced in this way. These results support H4, and provide further support for the relationships proposed by the integrated model.

H5 predicted that subjective norm and attitudes (toward the issue, politician, and behavior) influence behavioral intention (to sign the petition and communicate about the problem). Regression analysis indicated that 27% of the variance in behavioral intention to communicate about the problem was due to the linear combination of subjective norm, attitude toward the politician, attitude toward problem, and attitude toward behavior. Only attitude toward the behavior (signing the petition) made a significant positive contribution to unique item variance. These results suggest that within the context of this study, publics who demonstrated a stronger positive attitude toward signing the petition are more likely to communicate about the problem.

Furthermore, 58% of the variance in behavioral intention to sign the petition was due to the linear combination of subjective norm, attitude toward the politician, attitude toward problem, and attitude toward behavior, with subjective norm contributing negatively and attitude toward the behavior contributing positively to the prediction equation. For this study, these results suggest that a positive attitude toward a behavior influences behavioral intent to perform the behavior. Additionally, the negative contribution of subjective norm suggests that those who reported their friends would not be supportive of their decision to support Rep. Smith are more likely to demonstrate the behavioral intention of signing the petition. These results support H5 and the relationships predicted by the integrated model.

H6 posited that referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention influence communicative action in publics. Regression analysis indicated that nearly 48% of the variance in communicative action was due to the linear combination of referent criterion, situational motivation, and behavioral intention. Most importantly, all of the predictor variables made significant unique contributions to the prediction equation. This finding suggests that a more comprehensive robust model for understanding and explaining the communication behavior of publics is provided by the integration of variables from the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action. These results also underscore the results of Werder and Schweickart's (2013) study testing the integrated model and provide increased external validity through varying the contexts in which the model is tested.

H7 predicted that political interest influences referent criterion. Regression analysis indicated that nearly 2% of the variance in referent criterion was due to political interest. These results, although weak, support H7 and underscore the results of Kim et al.'s (2012) study predicting a positive relationship between the two variables. These results also suggest that the addition of political interest as a perceptual/situational belief variable may be useful for explaining the communication behavior of publics when the context of the problem is political in nature.

Overall, the results of the study support the proposed hypotheses. A discussion of the results reveal interesting findings for both theory-building in public relations and political public relations and implications for strategic messaging during a political crisis. This study was able to replicate and extend the work of Werder and Schweickart (2013), providing support for combining the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action to more fully explain the communication behavior of publics. This, along with continued research, suggests the potential for a more general theory of public relations. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and a summary of conclusions.

Limitations and Future Research

While the results of this study are meaningful to public relations, political public relations, and crisis communication, it has, as with any research, limitations. To begin, it is possible the message strategy treatment operationalizations may not truly represent the conceptual definition without any evidence to support their validity. This study asked graduate students who did not participate in the study to examine the message treatments to ensure the operationalizations reflected the conceptual definitions.

Previous research suggests that qualitative expert review is appropriate to use for manipulation checks. However, this study could have used a quantitative approach for the manipulation check by including additional items in the measurement instrument for the study participants to respond to. This approach could have provided more meaningful manipulation check results. For example, future studies may embed manipulation checks in measurement instruments by including items such as:

1. Rep. Smith apologized for introducing the bill;

2. Rep. Smith said he was sorry to his constituents;

3. Rep. Smith regrets introducing the bill.

Another limitation of the study was the multi-item scales used to measure the variables of interest. Some of the scales demonstrated low alpha scores. Two of the three items used to measure subjective norm were dropped for hypothesis testing resulting in a one-item measure, "My friends think it's okay to agree with Rep. Jimmie Smith in this problem." The sampling technique used in the study was purposive but appropriate given the salience of the Bright Futures bill to the student sample. Additionally, this study was conducted in a unique academic and political context; therefore, the results are not generalizable to other contexts and situations.

Future research should focus on refining the items used to measure the variables of the integrated model along with testing different message strategies. Given the current shift toward digital media, stimulus material using blogs, websites, and other sources should be tested along with crisis situations that originate on the internet. Testing the model in varying contexts will continue to support the external validity and the predictive power for explaining the communication behavior of publics.

In doing so, more may be understood about public reactions to public relations campaigns and other communication programs and also provide actionable insight for evaluation. In addition to experimental designs, survey research could also be used to test the model with more diverse sample populations. To further refine and strengthen the model, structural equation modeling could be used to provide support for the path relationships of the model. Additionally, this study did not fully examine the communicative action variable of the model. Future research should explore the effects of the six subvariables.

Conclusions

Results from the study suggest that an integrated model for explaining and predicting the communicative behavior of publics is most useful. Integrating variables from the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action provides a more robust framework for segmenting publics for strategic messaging. Results from the study also underscore the importance of effective strategic messaging when communicating with publics.

Despite its limitations, this study has important implications for public relations theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, it demonstrates the linkage between public relations message strategies and communication behavior along with contributing to the growing body of knowledge in political public relations. In addition, this study contributes to public relations practice. It attempted to determine the most effective message strategies for producing positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, and for motivating communication behavior.

The results increase understanding about the effectiveness of strategic communication and provide valuable insight into the strategic communication approaches that may be most successful at achieving organizational and political goals and repairing a damaged image during a crisis. Finally, this study provides support for the integrated model for explaining the communication behavior of publics that can be further tested and refined in the future.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
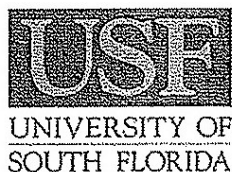
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

June 25, 2013

Tiffany Schweickart
Mass Communication
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Exempt Certification**
IRB#: Pro00012229
Title: Crisis Communication Message Strategy Influence: Advancing an Integrated Model for Explaining the Communication Behavior of Publics

Study Approval Period: 6/24/2013 to 6/24/2018

Dear Ms. Schweickart:

On 6/24/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that your research meets USF requirements and Federal Exemption criteria as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Approved Documents:

Version 1 (Protocol)

Research Script Version 1 (Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at **45CFR46.117(c)** which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects).

APPENDIX A (Continued).

As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF IRB policies and procedures. Please note that changes to this protocol may disqualify it from exempt status. Please note that you are responsible for notifying the IRB prior to implementing any changes to the currently approved protocol.

The Institutional Review Board will maintain your exemption application for a period of five years from the date of this letter or for three years after a Final Progress Report is received, whichever is longer. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond five years, you will need to submit a new application at least 60 days prior to the end of your exemption approval period. Should you complete this study prior to the end of the five-year period, you must submit a request to close the study.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board

Lawmaker proposes dramatic changes to Bright Futures scholarships

December 12, 2012|By Denise-Marie Ordway and Kathleen Haughney, Orlando Sentinel

A bill filed Wednesday in the Florida House would make drastic changes to the state's popular Bright Futures scholarship program.

The measure, filed by a legislator representing Citrus and Hernando counties, would force students to pay back their scholarship money if they take jobs in other states after graduation.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Jimmie Smith, R-Lecanto, also wants to require students to pay back at least part of their scholarships if they do not complete their academic degree.

But some education leaders and students are raising concerns about a plan that would penalize students for circumstances, such as job availability, that are often beyond their control.

Under the bill that Smith filed, college graduates would have to reimburse the state for part or all of their Bright Futures awards if they leave Florida to secure work.

They would pay back an amount based on the number of semesters they received scholarship money and also the number of months they worked in Florida after graduating college.

Michael Long, who recently served as chairman of the Florida Student Association, predicted that a lot of students will oppose the change. He likened the proposal to a loan program. He added that some graduates would be forced to pass up excellent job opportunities in other states in order to pay off their scholarships in Florida.

"This specific proposal hamstrings graduates and forces them to stay home and work lower-tiered jobs and live with their parents so they don't have to pay," said Long, a public policy major at New College who worries he might have to go out of state for work after graduation.

Students across the state are circulating petitions to oppose the bill. University of South Florida student, Julie Snyder, is encouraging all students to sign the petition.

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"We as students deserve the right to follow our dreams without being punished," said Snyder.

Rep. Smith released a statement regarding the highly criticized bill.

"This bill reflects my commitment to being fiscally responsible."