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Standing Ground: Situational Crisis Communication Theory and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Handbook Policy Change

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and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Handbook Policy Change

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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ABSTRACT

Standing Ground: Situational Crisis Communication Theory
and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Handbook Policy Change

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Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), experimentally created by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007, is designed to help crisis managers evaluate a crisis situation and craft an effective response strategy based on the organization's crisis history, the crisis type, and prior reputation with stakeholders.

This thesis examined the November 2015 controversial handbook policy update from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which ruled same-sex marriage as grounds for excommunication. Exploring the policy change as a crisis in the context of SCCT and comparing the Church's crisis response strategies with the recommended strategies of SCCT exposes a gap in current SCCT literature—the theory does not lend itself well to crises where an organization's values or guiding morals are under attack. In these scenarios, the organization is unlikely to apologize for or acknowledge the crisis.

The study results demonstrate substantial shifts in stakeholder attitudes following certain strategic statements from the Church even though the Church did not strictly adhere to SCCT's guidelines. According to SCCT's guidelines, because the stakeholder groups framed the handbook change as a crisis of organizational misdeed with injuries the majority of the time, the Church should have responded with third-tier strategies that bolstered its reputation and apologized or compensated those harmed by the policy. Instead, the Church has never apologized for the policy change and specifically reminded stakeholders of its past policies regarding same-sex marriage.

Although the Church used the same strategies throughout the entire crisis, the Church's relatively larger use of crisis basics, justification, and protection in its second wave of statements on November 13, 2015 shifted the crisis framing and sentiment of bloggers and John Dehlin from negative sentiment with frames of high-level crisis responsibility to neutral and positive sentiment with a majority of blogs and social media posts not framing the policy change as a crisis.

Keywords: crisis communication, situational crisis communication theory, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The turn of the 21st century gave rise to a new form of news gathering and sharing-- social media networks. In its first decade, social media has grown to supplement, and, among some demographics, even replace traditional media (Bradtzaeg et al., 2015). Reporters have evolved from printing and broadcasting news once or twice a day to posting or tweeting information on social networks in a never ending 24-hour news cycle. Not only are journalists publishing their stories on social media, but reporters are also consciously changing the mold of their content to be more shareable, with 75% of journalists claiming they feel more pressure now to consider their story's potential shareability on social platforms (Rubel, 2015).

Social media, specifically Twitter and Facebook, does have its merits as an additional news platform for disseminating information and it's easy to see why journalists are more fully adopting it. First, there is already an audience of news consumers using social media, with some specifically looking for news. At the start of 2016, Twitter had more than 300 million regular users with 40% using the service to curate news that was especially important to the individual user (Mihailidis, 2016). Secondly, the combination of social media and smartphone technology make for a strong news gathering tool. Now more than ever witnesses to news events are able to post their unmediated testimonies as events unfold, in real time and those reports remain permanently accessible to anyone, anywhere with uncontrolled Internet access. Reporters can draw from a deep well of sources on social media instantaneously as news breaks and re-share that information within seconds.

While the increased speed and distance a message can travel via social media can be considered a boon to the journalism industry, often lost in the hastening pace is necessary fact checking and verification of sources before tweets, posts, and digital articles are published.

During a breaking news event, misinformation (intentional or otherwise) can spread rapidly through social media. During the coverage of the Sandy Hook massacres in 2012, national news outlets made numerous mistakes, including reports naming Adam Lanza's brother, Ryan, as the shooter (Diaz, 2012). The New York Post, CNN, and other news outlets were also criticized for their inaccurate reports following the bombings in Boston during the 2013 marathon (Foust, 2013). With more than two billion people using social media (Kemp, 2015), there is an overwhelming amount of content to dig through during a crisis. The spread of misinformation by news media may be due to a lack of time needed to sift through and verify rumors while under mounting pressure to be the first entity to break or update the story.

Even outside of spot news, both professional and citizen journalists using social media can make information, or misinformation, quickly go viral. Occasionally, social media users are the creators of a crisis, crying foul against an individual or organization and spreading their disapproval through the social networks. As a result, corporations have begun using social media as a tool for reputation repair and for the prevention of boycotting (Schutz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). Stakeholders are used to being in control of content in the social media realm, so crisis communicators have to be discerning in their social media strategies by listening and providing access to information while using crisis management steps (Coombs, 2012a). This can be particularly challenging for crisis communicators as the era of social media and new technological developments have made expectations "extremely high as to how organizations respond to a crisis and communicate through the course of a crisis" (Malone & Coombs, 2009, p.121).

No stranger to criticism, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints once again fell under scrutiny after making some changes to the official Church handbook used by lay

leadership throughout the organization (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015). In November 2015, the Church updated the handbook's section on disciplinary councils and the criteria for listing a Church member as an apostate, specifically dealing with homosexual relationships. The revisions included three definitive changes (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015):

1) Optional disciplinary councils for individuals engaging in homosexual behavior, particularly involving sexual cohabitation.

2) The definition of apostasy would now include same-gender marriage, requiring a mandatory disciplinary council.

3) A child living with parents in a same-sex relationship may not receive a name and a blessing in the Church, be baptized, confirmed, ordained or recommended to missionary service until the child is of legal age, no longer living with the parents involved, has interviewed with a stake or mission president of the Church, and receives permission from the Church's highest ranking leadership, the First Presidency. (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015)

On November 3, 2015, the Church released these changes in a letter solely intended for lay leadership who would be involved in governing the new changes. A few days after the letter was signed and released, it was "leaked" to the public via social media and quickly became a trending topic, attracting national media attention within hours. Although the handbook revisions may not have originally been perceived by the Church as causing a potential crisis, the viral spread through traditional and social media quickly resulted in a division among members of the Church and inflammatory articles accusing the Church of exclusion and bigotry.

This study analyzes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints crisis

communication strategies during the firestorm following the handbook revisions, based on Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). Specifically, this study focuses on how the news media framed the news of the handbook revisions as the changes first became public knowledge, how the Church responded to the resulting crisis, and whether or not the news media's framing changed following the Church's response. As such, this study additionally relies on underpinnings of image restoration theory, attribution theory, and framing theory. Methodologically, this thesis will employ a content analysis using news articles, blog posts, and social media published over the course of the crisis categorized by their corresponding SCCT components. This data will be used to gauge the effectiveness and appropriateness of the Church's crisis communication.

Background of the Crisis:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is an American Christian church founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith with more than 15 million members worldwide (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS Church], 2015). The Church professes to be a restored version of the Christian church that existed at the time of Jesus Christ (Smith, 1842). It relies on doctrines found in the King James Version of the Bible and an additional ancient text translated by Smith called *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ.* Historically, the Church has maintained a conservative view on marriage and homosexuality. Referring to its scriptural doctrines, the Church specifically states:

> Sexual activity should only occur between a man and a woman who are married. However, that should never be used as justification for unkindness. Jesus Christ, whom we follow, was clear in His condemnation of sexual immorality, but never cruel. His interest was always to lift the individual, never to tear down. (LDS Church, 2012)

The Church does not recognize homosexual marriage and homosexual behavior may warrant disciplinary action. However, the Church does distinguish between same-sex attraction and behavior, acknowledging feeling of attractions as not inherently sinful.

John Dehlin is a popular blogger, personal counselor, and former member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 2011, Dehlin stated that he had stopped attending Church services because he could no longer believe some of the Church's claims (Post Mormon, 2013). After years of challenging Church doctrine and encouraging others to do the same, Dehlin was excommunicated from the Church by his local Church leadership, claiming Dehlin's online statements rejecting particular Church teachings constituted apostasy (Walch, 2015). Despite severing ties, Dehlin continues to monitor and criticize Church policies and activity on social channels like Facebook, Twitter, and his own podcast called *Mormon Stories* (Dehlin, 2016).

On November 5, 2015—just two days after the Church sent a letter to lay leadership informing them of changes to the handbook policy—Dehlin obtained a copy of the letter and posted it to social media citing the changes as "a very sad day for Mormonism" (Dehlin, 2015). In the next 30 hours, Dehlin would post 20 more times on Facebook about the policy change, and reach out to media outlets across the country to cover the issue. As word of the changes spread, it became a trending topic on Facebook, and national media outlets began to take notice. Major media players like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* covered the story within the first 24 hours. On social media, news of the handbook changes caused a division both among members of the Church and even by those unaffiliated with the Church and unaffected by the policy change. In early news reports, the Church would confirm the documents Dehlin shared on social media were accurate (Dobner, 2015) but did not make an official statement clarifying the reasons for the changes until the next day on November 6 around 9 p.m.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand how an organization may respond to a crisis while also choosing to stand by its policies despite the winds of public opinion. An organization may not always choose to acknowledge a crisis, or see a need to apologize for a crisis. Though relatively brief in duration, the crisis resulting from the Church's handbook revisions illustrates this concept.

The Church assumes dual roles as both a religion and organization. Because The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a religion which believes in inspired revelation from God, guided by leaders who establish divine doctrine, the changes to the handbook are based on gospel doctrine and therefore considered to come from God himself. As a religion, the Church cannot recognize the changes as an error or crisis without tacitly inviting speculation that other policies or institutional decisions have also been in error, thereby calling into question its claims of divine foundation and purpose. The Church has not offered an apology or taken corrective action concerning the handbook changes. But as an organization, the Church does recognize there are stakeholders who have been emotionally compromised by the changes. Also, because all of the Church's crisis response statements were presented through the digital world of the Internet, this thesis will greatly contribute to the examination of SCCT in the context of organizational use of social media. Austin, Liu, and Jin (2012) state that recent crisis communication cases highlight the need for a better understanding of effective use of social media during these situations and that currently research on this subject is emerging.

Additionally, the crisis spread quickly on social media, particularly after being leaked by influential blogger John Dehlin. Agarwal, Liu, Tang, and Yu (2008) presented five properties that make up an influential blogger— recognition, activity, generation, novelty, and eloquence.

Dehlin's social media accounts are examples of his influence in terms of *recognition* and *activity*. On Facebook and Twitter combined, Dehlin has more than 15,000 subscribers, and he posts on those social media accounts several times daily (i.e., https://www.facebook.com/johndehlin, https://twitter.com/johndehlin, and https://www.facebook.com/johndehlinpublic). His success in leaking the changes to the public and news media and his ability to hold attention on the issue until the Church responded is evidence of his influence in terms of *generation*. This is important to note, because influencers like Dehlin can be considered stakeholders during a crisis even though Dehlin is not affected by the handbook changes as an ex-member of the Church.

On the other hand, the Church has its own group of influencers in the form of high-ranking leadership (apostles) and active Church members who are popular bloggers, celebrities, and social media users who are esteemed in their respective communities. However, the Church's prior history with doctrinal revisions (Turner, 2012) and other reportedly exclusive restrictions against homosexual behavior made the crisis an easy target for the media (Healy, 2015).

Because it has so many different attributes, this study of the handbook policy change and resulting crisis will contribute to the cultivation of important research areas where crisis response warrants further exploration, such as its use in social media as stated above. The study will also shed light on the effects of crisis communication when the organization in crisis does not or cannot fully recognize the event as a crisis. The case study of the Church handbook revisions and resulting crisis is not only applicable to other religious institutions but also to any organization, politician, or individual who chooses to stand behind policies, procedures, and/or beliefs when it may seem unpopular to do so in the court of public opinion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to understand situational crisis communication theory, one must first define organizational crisis and explore the various methods of crisis management used to respond to crises. Following the definition, SCCT's theoretical roots must be examined to allow for a better understanding of the specific strategies SCCT employs and the history of the theory. Lastly, the SCCT framework and its evolution throughout the last couple of decades needs to be defined.

Organizational Crisis

There are many varying definitions of what constitutes an organizational crisis, though most share conceptual similarities. Coombs (1999) defines it as "an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly" (p.2). Fearns-Banks (1996) similarly describes an organizational crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as publics, products, services of good name. It interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of an organization" (p.1).

Many authors have additionally observed that a single crisis can completely alter an organization. Friedman (2002) concludes that it could be a "radical change" in a positive or negative direction (p. 5); Fink (1986) agrees, citing a crisis is a "turning point for better or worse" (p. 15). Martinelli and Briggs (1988) suggest "a crisis can be seen as an opportunity to demonstrate an organization's commitment to responsible behaviors" (p. 44).

Crisis management. True to its name, crisis management attempts to minimize damage while protecting as much of the organization's reputation as possible. According to Coombs (2012a), crisis management was initially used in emergency scenarios, with four interrelated

factors of crisis management drawn from those situations: prevention, preparation, response, and revision. *Prevention* is the crisis avoidance steps that the organization makes and also the act of heeding warning signs to avoid the crisis completely. *Preparation* is the most well-known step, as it includes examining crisis vulnerabilities, assembling a crisis management team and spokespersons, making a crisis portfolio, and launching a crisis communication system. *Response* is setting those elements into action, which often becomes a very public spectacle garnering media attention. *Revision* involves evaluating the response to make future crisis management more effective.

To define his initial three macrostages of the crisis management process, Coombs (2012a) built upon these principles and past crisis management frameworks, such as Fink's (1986) four-stage model, Mitroff's (1994) five-stage model, and the three-stage model recommended by numerous crisis management authors (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Guth, 1995; Richardson, 1994; Birch, 1994; Mitchell, 1986). Fink's model relates phases of a crisis to a disease, and categorizes them into four stages: the *prodromal stage*, the *acute stage*, the *chronic stage*, and the *resolution stage*. The *prodromal stage* is the warning stage, and the point where crisis managers attempt to identify a looming crisis. The *acute stage* occurs when the crisis actually happens, and its damage is usually a result of how well the crisis was managed in the prodromal stage. The *chronic stage* is the recovery phase where the lasting effects of the crisis are more fully seen. The *resolution stage* is the final phase or the clearly defined end of the crisis.

Mitroff's (1994) five-stage model is composed of five stages: *signal detection*, *probing and prevention*, *damage containment*, *recovery*, and *learning*. *Signal detection* and *probing and prevention* are the counterparts to Fink's prodromal stage, occurring when a company or

organization recognizes the warning signs of a crisis. Additionally, *damage containment* aligns with Fink's acute stage, with *recovery* matching the chronic and resolution stages. The additional stage of Mitroff's model that adds to Fink's four-stage model is the final *learning* stage where crisis managers evaluate the events of the crisis for future prevention of negative events.

Not attributed to any particular scholar, the three-stage model was formed organically by many crisis management authors: "The three-stage model is not associated with any particular theorists, but it appears to have emerged from several research efforts as general analytical framework" (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p.97). Richardson (1994) provided the first defined set of the three-stage model components: *precrisis* or *predisaster phase*, *crisis impact* or *rescue phase*, and *recovery* or *demise phase*. Similarly, Coombs (2012a) defines three macrostages of the crisis management process: *precrisis*, *crisis*, and *postcrisis*. Each of the macrostages also includes substages. Coombs states that he selected this framework "because of its ability to subsume the other stages' approaches used in crisis management" (p.10) and because his stages are broad enough to encompass previous crisis management models while still allowing "for the integration of ideas from other crisis management experts" (p.11).

The *precrisis* phase has three substages: *signal detection*, *prevention*, and *crisis preparation* (Coombs, 2012a). Once again, *signal detection* identifies the signs that a potential crisis is on the horizon. Crisis *prevention* involves managing the signals to prevent the crisis, lowering levels of risk or eliminating the risk altogether, and managing reputation by resolving any relationship problems between the organization and stakeholders. Crisis *preparation* includes finding vulnerabilities within the organization, creating a crisis management plan, creating a crisis management team, and building firm crisis communication systems.

The *crisis* phase is marked by a triggering event, signaling the start of a crisis.

Communication with stakeholders is the primary priority in this stage. This phase has two

substages: *crisis recognition* and *crisis containment*. *Crisis recognition* is the ability of crisis

managers to identify and label a situation as a crisis and furthermore convince the corporation's

managers that there is a crisis. *Crisis containment* is the initial response to stakeholders and all

follow-up communication as well as any other strategies that bring the crisis to a swift end

incorporating the least amount of damage (Coombs, 2012a).

The *postcrisis* phase happens when the crisis has officially passed and is a time when

crisis managers reflect on their response. The phase allows managers to learn from mistakes

and/or victories, improving their plans for future crises. A necessary part of *postcrisis* is follow-

up communication with stakeholders to ensure their satisfaction with the organization's crisis

response strategies (Coombs, 2012a).

Coombs' three-stage crisis model (2012a) will be used for analysis in this thesis. Because

this study argues that the Church never acknowledged the handbook revisions as a crisis to begin

with, there wasn't a *precrisis phase* in this situation. Consequently, John Dehlin triggered the

crisis recognition subphase when he posted about the revisions on his Facebook pages. The

Church's official response to the media attention marks an attempt at a *crisis containment*

subphase, and the second official letter from the Church with an accompanying blog post by

spokesperson Michael Otterson is evidence of a *postcrisis* phase.

Crisis communication. An important part of crisis management, crisis communication is

"defined broadly as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to

address a crisis situation" (Coombs, 2012b, p.20). Fearns-Banks (1996) noted that this crucial

communication occurs between the organization and its public before, during, and after a crisis,

and is designed to "minimize damage to the image of the organization" (p.2). The ultimate

outcome is for crisis communication to be handled quickly and accurately, mitigating any possible damage.

Stakeholder perceptions and reactions are the real test of whether or not a situation is a crisis (Coombs, 2012b). Therefore, in order for an organization to arrive at the positive end of the spectrum following a crisis, efficient crisis communication with the stakeholders is pivotal. Regardless of how the organization views the event, crisis communication from the organization needs to be created from the perspective of the media and the publics involved (Gillingham & Noizet, 2007). If handled poorly, stakeholders can cause widespread damage to the company, from small annoyances to the complete extinction of the organization (Feduik, Coombs & Boltero, 2012).

Crisis Communication and Social Media

Years before social media's rise in dominance, Greer and Moreland (2003) observed the Internet's ability to offer companies new avenues to respond to crises, both internally and externally. United and American airlines both used their respective websites to convey information and offer condolences in the three weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Greer & Moreland, 2003). However, despite the airlines' success in communicating during that crisis period, Perry, Taylor, and Doerfel (2003) found that the majority of organizations still relied on traditional media tactics and one-way communication strategies during a crisis. Though in just a couple of years an updated study by Perry and Taylor (2005) showed that more than half (54%) of organizations were using the Internet as part of their crisis response strategies. Nearly a decade later, Coombs (2012a) explained that many organizations still don't acknowledge a crisis on their websites, but the use of social media for crisis communication is growing rapidly and is now "responsible for the growing link between crisis

communication/management and the online world" (p. 21).

After the initial social networking sites MySpace and Facebook were launched in 2003 and 2004 respectively, the term *social media* was born (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Those two trailblazing companies, along with Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, are the giants of social media in terms of most used platforms (Pew, 2015), but *social media* is a broad term that covers many different communication tools (Coombs, 2012a). The list is always morphing and expanding, but Coombs offered the following categories to assist crisis managers in their understanding of the social media realm (see Table 1).

Currently, people are relying more on social media to acquire information, rather than traditional forms of media (Cho & Park, 2013). But no matter where the crisis actually takes places, social media can immediately make a crisis go viral with shares and reshares "reaching millions of people without the interviewing presence of journalists" (Veil, Beuhner, & Palenchar, 2011, p.111). This heightens the urgency for an organization to communicate reliable information to the stakeholders as quickly as possible, using social media as an advantage while also minimizing the disadvantages (Freberg, 2012).

Table 1

Social Media Categories

Category	Definition
Social Networks	Individual Web pages from which people share content and communicate with friends (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Bebo)
Blogs	Online journals where people post content and others can comment on it (e.g., Blogspot, Wordpress)
Wikis	Web pages where people work together to create and edit content (e.g.,Wikipedia)
Podcast	Audio and video content created and distributed through a subscription based service (e.g., The Executive Lounge With Andrew Coffrey
Forums	Online discussions revolving around specific interests and topics (e.g., Reddit)
Content communities	Places where people organize themselves around specific content that they create and comment on (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, Instagram)
Microblogs	Online communities on which people share small amounts of information through posts (e.g., Twitter)
Aggregators	Tools that collect content (e.g. news stories, blog posts) from different sites in one site; content is frequently ranked by popularity and can include comments from users (e.g., Google Reader)
Social bookmarking	Tool with which people share and rate content they have found online (e.g., Delicious, Pinterest)

Note. Adapted from *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding,* p. 24 by W.T. Coombs, 2012, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Organizational crises can be delineated to include both traditional crises and also crises on social media. Owyang (2011) defines a social media crisis as "a crisis issue that arises in or is amplified by social media, and results in negative mainstream media coverage, a change in business process, or financial loss" (p. 9). Social media crises are separated into three categories: dissatisfied customers, organizational misuses, and challenges. *Dissatisfied customers* are defined as unhappy customers who voice their concerns with a company. This is mainly a customer service problem. *Organizational misuse* is described as a company misusing a social

media channel by posting something inappropriate or unethical (Coombs, 2015). *Challenges* occur when stakeholders believe an organization is acting inappropriately and consequently challenges have their own set of categories: organic, expose, and villain (Coombs, 2010). *Organic* challenges occur when a company simply loses touch with what stakeholders expect. *Expose* challenges happen when stakeholders flag an organization for acting hypocritically. *Villain* challenges transpire when a specific group of stakeholders are arguing with an organization and these stakeholders frame the organization as a nefarious monster "that needs to reform its evil ways" (Coombs, 2015, p.25).

Crisis managers need to understand how social media factors into the three macrostages of the crisis management process in order to determine the best course of action. In the precrisis stage, crisis managers need to be vigilant for warning signs from stakeholders. This can be done by scanning websites and social media. However, crises that begin on social media happen in full view of the stakeholders, though still invisible to traditional media. This "blurs the line between precrisis and crisis response because addressing the paracrisis can appear to be a crisis response rather than preventative action" (Coombs, 2012a, p.26).

Coombs (2012a) suggested three rules for using online communications during crisis response: (a) be present, (b) be where the action is, (c) be there before the crisis. *Being present* restricts crisis managers from shying away from the crisis on social media. They must acknowledge the problem. "If the crisis is never mentioned in the organization's communication, the absence will be noticeable" (p. 27). *Being where the action is* requires that crisis managers use the social media platform the crisis originated on to respond to the online crisis. *Being there before the crisis* demands an organization already have a social media presence before the crisis began. According to Coombs, the most effective crisis response happens when the organization

already has followers who regularly view content (p. 28).

Stakeholders may still require information when a crisis is over in the postcrisis phase and may look to the organization's social media sites for answers (Lambert, 2015). Organizations can accomplish this kind of information sharing on Facebook, Twitter, corporate blogs, websites, or anywhere that stakeholders digitally congregate during the crisis. Coombs (2012a) suggests that any special websites dedicated to the crisis be decommissioned when interest begins to wane (p. 28). Specific to this study, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' website *Mormon Newsroom* is designed for providing new information and clarification on church issues to both those within the faith and those outside.

Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) "provides an evidenced-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication" (p.63). SCCT suggests guidelines which crisis managers can employ for reputational protection during an organizational crisis. To understand the elements of SCCT for the application used in this thesis, it is essential to understand the theoretical roots of crisis communication and SCCT: *framing theory*, *imager repair theory*, and *attribution theory*. These theories provide insight into the building blocks of SCCT, allowing a clearer picture of how SCCT functions when used for crisis response.

Framing Theory. Framing theory is important in crisis communication because in order to form an appropriate response, crisis managers either need to understand how they can frame the crisis as it develops or they must understand how stakeholders and media may have framed the crisis in order to form an appropriate response.

Gamson and Modigliani (1987) described the framing of a news story as a package composed of arguments, information, symbols, metaphors, and images with "a central organizing

idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (p. 143). Additionally, the information in that package may influence the consumers' beliefs about the issue at hand and how it is handled. At their most powerful, frames persuade people to think about an issue in a particular context, as Simon and Jerit (2007) demonstrated by using either *fetus* or *baby* in news articles about abortion. The results of Simon and Jerit's work illustrated the effect of a single word to alter audience perceptions and attitudes. In turn, how people think about issues shapes how they feel issues should be resolved (Druckman, 2001; Entman, 1993; Nelson & Oxley, 1999). Stakeholders depend on news media for information about organizations, including crisis-related information, but one of the limitations to framing is credibility. Only credible news sources have been shown to elicit the framing effect (Druckman, 2001).

Framing involves selecting some aspects of a situation or issue and making those aspects salient so that particular definitions of the situation emerge (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). A news story may emphasize one frame over another by only presenting information that supports the favored frame. Coombs and Holladay's (2010) *crisis framing effect* "occurs when the emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant cues causes stakeholders to focus on these cues when constructing their perceptions" (p. 192). In crisis communication, framing changes the importance of different cues, and as a result, alters the belief of importance related to the cause of the crisis (e.g., Was the Church handbook policy change a matter of incompetence or an intentional, harmful act?). Additionally, Coombs and Holladay asserted that accident crises are particularly subject to crisis framing when considered in terms of an organization's prior reputation: "A favorable prior reputation protects the organization's reputation from the increased threat of a human error crisis. An unfavorable prior reputation automatically makes a technical error crisis appear like a human error crisis—the reputation threat is intensified" (p.

201).

While the "social media categories" (Coombs, 2012a) outlined in Table 1 seem diverse, they do share a common characteristic: they are all user-generated content where "stakeholders are accustomed to being in control" (Coombs, 2012a, p. 24). The two-way communication of social media is drastically different from the one-way method of traditional media, which in turn makes a unique and dramatic difference in crisis communication over social media. In traditional media, crisis managers attempt to frame a crisis, and the news media finalizes that frame or change the frames. In crises that transpire online, any individual who posts information about the crisis provides additional framing, including crisis managers, crisis victims, bloggers, etc. (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). All of these two-way social media contributors can be considered citizen journalists in the context of this study. Citizen journalism, defined as the "collection, dissemination, and analysis of news and information" (Dictionary, 2015), caused the trending of the handbook policy change on Facebook following Dehlin's initial post as the social media posting, sharing, and commenting ultimately determined the public's opinion and sentiment. The frames crafted by the media, citizen journalists, and stakeholders should provide at least one crisis type for the Church to tailor a strategized response.

Image Repair Theory. An organization's image is a fluid impression formed by stakeholders through interactions, both past and present, with the organization (Benoit & Pang, 2008), and this "image, face, or reputation is an important commodity" (Benoit, 2006, p.291). Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory, now known as *image repair theory* (Benoit & Pang, 2008), provides apologia strategies to minimize the threat to an organization's image during a crisis.

Benoit's theory comes from several case studies with peers, penned over several years.

The case studies analyze both organizations and individuals, such as AT&T's long-distance breakdown and subsequent investigation (Benoit & Brinson, 1994) and President George W. Bush's image repair efforts on *Meet the Press* (Benoit, 2006). There are two criteria that must be met for an event to be labeled as an attack on the reputation of an organization: (a) the occurrence of an undesirable act and (b) the following accusation of responsibility for the undesirable act (Benoit, 1995, p. 71). If both elements are present, action must be taken to protect the organization's reputation. Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies are divided into five broad categories: *denial*, *evading responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*. These strategies strongly influenced the strategies in SCCT.

 Denial consists of two substrategies: *simple denial* and *shifting the blame*. *Simple denial* takes place when an organization simply denies that the offensive act occurred, denies that the organization was responsible for the offensive act, or denies that the offensive act caused harm. *Shifting the blame* is when the accused organization blames someone else or a different organization for the offensive act.

 Evading responsibility has four substrategies: *scapegoating*, *defeasibility*, *accident*, and *good intentions* (Benoit, 1995). *Scapegoating*, also known as *provocation* (Benoit, 1997), occurs when an organization insists that their offensive act was a reasonable reaction that occurred on account of someone else's provocation (p.41). *Defeasibility* is defined as an organization's assertion that it had no control over the offensive act and/or lacked necessary information. An organization can also claim that the offensive act was actually just an *accident* and therefore beyond the organization's control. Finally, an organization can claim it acted with *good intention*, because "those who do improper actions while trying to do good are usually not held as accountable as those who intend to do bad" (Benoit, 1997, p. 42).

Benoit (1995) lists six substrategies to reduce an offensive act. *Bolstering* attempts to increase stakeholders' positive feelings towards the organization, hopefully negating any negative feelings or experiences. *Minimization* is a downplaying of the offensive act so it does not appear as damaging. *Differentiation* occurs when the organization compares the offensive act to similar but more offensive actions. *Transcendence* attempts to frame the act in more favorable context. *Counterattack* attempts to reduce the credibility of the attacking party. *Compensation* is used to minimize negative feelings towards the organization by offering money, services, or goods to stakeholders.

The fourth strategy found in image repair theory is *corrective action*, where the organization corrects the issue at hand. This can include "restoring the situation to the state of affairs before the objectionable action and/or promising to 'mend one's ways' and make changes to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act" (Benoit, 1995, p .79). Corrective action does not necessarily imply an admission of guilt.

The last strategy is simply to claim full responsibility for the offensive act and admit guilt— *mortification*. If stakeholders feel the admission is sincere, they may forgive the organization and positively move forward, thus ending the crisis. However, a negative aspect of using mortification is the potential for victims of the crisis to attempt legal action.

Attribution Theory. Attribution theory informs many of the different aspects used in situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007). Attribution theory explores the various ways people interpret and attach meaning to events and, more importantly, how people attribute responsibility to those events (Weiner, 1986). In Weiner's explanation of attribution theory, he compared people to judges who "must rationally interpret evidence and reach a decision regarding an alleged transgression of another" (p. 4). Because stakeholders have a need to

attribute blame or cause for a crisis, this theory coincides naturally with studies of crisis communication and organizational crises.

Additionally, Weiner (2006) found that sympathy "is experienced when the plight of another is due to an uncontrollable cause" and that anger "is generated by a judgment of personal responsibility for a transgression" (pp. 91-92). By applying this to an organizational crisis, it can be deduced that when stakeholders feel the crisis was not caused by the organization, they will most likely respond positively. Conversely, when stakeholders find the organization accountable, the reaction will be negative. Jorgensen (1996) found that an organization's confession and apology could ease negative emotions and even improve attitudes toward the organization. The research also uncovered "the degree of controllability and responsibility is highly linked to negative emotions" (p. 349). As such, admittance of guilt is a double-edged sword because confessions lead to higher attributions of responsibility resulting in increased negative emotion, but the immediate apology often softens the reactions.

Crisis situations center on the audience just as much as the organization involved. SCCT is also an audience-oriented theory, with a foundation of crisis responsibility. Attributions of crisis responsibility are important because they "have a significant effect on how people perceive the reputation of an organization in crisis and their affective and behavioral responses to an organization following a crisis" (Coombs, 2012b, p. 38).

There are three causal branches people rely on when making attributions: *stability*, *controllability*, and *locus* (Coombs, 1995). *Stability* measures whether or not a crisis has happened before and the consistency of which it has happened. *Controllability* indicates if the event was controllable or not, and *Locus of control* addresses any internal or external actors that may have triggered the crisis.

Evolution of SCCT

Coombs started developing SCCT in the mid-1990s, calling it the "symbolic approach"

(1995). Relying on attribution theory, he identified four factors affecting the attribution that

stakeholders make during a crisis: *crisis type*, *veracity of evidence*, *damage*, and *performance

history*. Coombs divided the factors using a crisis-type matrix depending on the corresponding

elements of attribution theory. In SCCT, locus of control falls in the *internal/external* dimension

of crises, while controllability is represented as *unintentional/intentional events* (see Table 2).

Internal signifies the event was caused by an organization, while *external* is due to an outside

force or person. An *unintentional event* denotes that the crisis did not happen on purpose, while

an *intentional event* was committed purposefully.

Table 2

Crisis Type Matrix

	Unintentional	Intentional
External	Terrorism	Faux Pas
Internal	Accident	Transgression

Note. Adapted from "Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the
Selection of the 'Appropriate' Crisis-Response Strategies," by W. T. Coombs, 1995,
Management Communication Quarterly, 8(4), p. 455.

The four possible crisis types (shown in Table 2) are *faux pas*, *accident*, *transgression*,

and *terrorism*. A *faux pas* is when an event where an external agent challenges an organization in

a specific event and attempts to turn it into a crisis, even if there is not one. Boycotts and protests

are typically associated with a faux pas. The organization only suffers minimal attribution in this

type of crisis. *Accidents* are unintentional, unpredictable, and generally also have minimal

attribution for the organization. Product defects, employee injuries, and natural disasters can all

be classified as accidents. *Terrorism* additionally falls into the minimal attribution category

because it's usually caused by an external actor and the organization is typically one of the victims of the crisis. Examples of terrorism include product tampering, a hostage situation, and a violent attack in the workplace. *Transgressions*, however, hold a high level of attribution for an organization. Transgressions include purposefully selling a dangerous product, violating rules and laws, and withholding safety information (Coombs, 1995, pp. 455–456).

Along with crisis types, Coombs created an additional three factors to close some of the gaps that existed between variables in crisis perception and attributions. *Veracity of the evidence* refers to the proof of a crisis event, with the evidence being found as true, false, or ambiguous. *Damage* is the amount of destruction caused by the crisis event, classified by severe or minor, and can include death, injuries, money loss, and environmental or property damage. In this situation, stakeholders are divided into victims and non-victims, if applicable (Coombs,1995, pp. 457–461). P*erformance history* is based on the stability factor mentioned in attribution theory. If the organization has a history of similar crises, the cause of the crisis is considered to be stable. In this case, the attribution of responsibility toward the organization will be high. If it does not have a history of similar crises, the cause is unstable. This will cause the attribution of responsibility to be low (Coombs, 1995, p. 461).

To handle these crisis perceptions and attributions, Coombs offered a playbook of crisis response strategies, based to some extent on Benoit's strategies, to be used in the restoration of organizational image (see Table 3).

Table 3

Coombs' Crisis Response Strategies

Strategy	Substrategy	Sub-Substrategy
Nonexistence strategies	Denial Clarification	

	Attack Intimidation	
Distance strategies	Excuse	Denial of intention Denial of volition
	Justification	Minimizing injury Victim deserving Misrepresentation of crisis event
Ingratiation strategies	Bolstering Transcendence Praising others	
Mortification strategies	Remediation Repentance Rectification	
Suffering strategy		

Note. Adapted from "Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the 'Appropriate' Crisis-Response Strategies," by W. T. Coombs, 1995, *Management Communication Quarterly, 8*(4), p. 455

An organization will use *nonexistence strategies* for arguing that no crisis exists in the first place. The *clarification substrategy* builds on nonexistence by providing an explanation about why there is not a crisis (Coombs, 1995). The *ingratiation strategies* are an attempt by the organization to regain public approval by associating with values and events the stakeholders approve of. For example, *bolstering* is when the organization reminds the public of the positive mission or acts by the organization. Additionally, *transcendence* can be used as an ingratiation strategy similar to *clarification* to frame the crisis in a more desirable context.

Current SCCT framework. Although SCCT has evolved over the last 20 years, the core of of the theory remains focused on crisis responsibility. The threat a crisis poses to an organization is largely dependent on where responsibility for a crisis lies: "Attributions of crisis responsibility have a significant effect on how people perceive the reputation of an organization in crisis and their affective and behavioral responses to that organization following a crisis"

(Coombs, 2012b, p. 38). Initially Coombs and Holladay sought to identify what variables shape crisis responsibility and how those variables correlate to reputational threats (Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001, 2002). Those studies resulted in a two-step process for assessing reputational threat during a crisis.

As a crisis starts, managers need to quickly determine the scale of the crisis the organization is facing in terms of reputational threat. Coombs (2007) lists three factors that contribute to reputational threat: *initial crisis responsibility*, *crisis history*, and *prior relational reputation*. *Initial crisis responsibility* measures how much stakeholders believe the organization is as fault for the crisis. Coombs further identifies three crisis clusters based on their relation to crisis responsibility: *victim*, *accidental*, and *preventable* (better defined in Table 4).

When assessing reputational threat, crisis managers first need to identify the initial crisis responsibility, namely establishing which crisis cluster the incident falls under. Secondly, managers must consider the organization's crisis history and prior reputation. If there are not any past indiscretions in the organization's history and the company is in good standing with the stakeholders, the current crisis has a high chance of having a "halo effect" occur (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). The halo effect can protect the organization from extreme negativity, but conversely, if the organization has a storied history of crises, a "Velcro effect" occurs and all the crises compound against the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, p. 338).

Table 4

SCCT Crisis Types by Crisis Clusters

Cluster	Definition	Reputational Threat	Types
Victim Cluster	The organization is also a victim of the	Weak attribution of crisis responsibility;	Natural disaster Rumor

	crisis.	mild reputational threat	Workplace violence Product tampering/malevolence
Accidental Cluster	The organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.	Minimal attribution of crisis responsibility; moderate reputational threat	Challenges Technical-error accidents Technical-error product harm
Preventable Cluster	The organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions, or violated a law/regulation.	Strong attribution of crisis responsibility; severe reputational threat	Human-error accidents Human-error product harm Organizational misdeed with no injuries Organizational misdeed management misconduct Organizational misdeed with injuries

Note. Adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory.," by W. T. Coombs, 2007, *Corporate Reputation Review, 10*(3), p. 168.

Because the media created the crisis addressed in this thesis, the media and citizen journalists identified the initial crisis responsibility, and in some cases these groups also considered the Church's history and prior reputation of handling homosexual behavior. SCCT asserts that crisis managers need to select crisis response strategies depending on the specific framing of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Analyzing the framing of news reports and social media posts for crisis types as found in Table 4 (Coombs, 2007, p. 168), should result in at least one crisis cluster that will yield a recommended response strategy. Additionally, the Church may identify or acknowledge a crisis frame in its responses. This leads to the following research question:

RQ1a: Which of Coombs' crisis types (e.g., challenges, organizational misdeed management misconduct organizational misdeed with injuries, etc.) did the media, citizen journalists, John Dehlin, and the Church use when framing the handbook policy change?

RQ1b: How did these frames vary by crisis phase (e.g., crisis, postcrisis)?

Crisis Response Strategies. After properly evaluating the reputational threat, a corresponding response should be employed. Although, Coombs advises "every crisis response strategy should begin with *instructing* and *adjusting information*" (2012b, p. 40*). Instructing information* puts a priority on communication with stakeholders to alleviate any real or potential physical harm. Adjusting information furthers stakeholder communication to include protecting against any psychological harm. This kind of communication may involve sharing basic details about the crisis. It also may include communicating plans for corrective action or preventative action. Lastly, the strategy can include expressions of concern and sympathy for victims, which is not an admission of guilt (Coombs, 2012a).

If the crisis situation has minimal attribution, the organization has had no similar crises in the past, and a good relationship with stakeholders exists, instructing and adjusting information can be an adequate crisis response (Coombs, 2007). However, if all of those conditions are not met, crisis managers must advance to higher-level strategies corresponding to the level of attribution, crisis history, and prior relationship status.

Primary-level crisis response strategies include *deny*, *diminish*, and *rebuild*. And organization uses *deny* strategies in hopes of disconnecting the organization from the crisis. *Diminishing* is a strategy which lessens crisis responsibility or minimizes the perceived damage the crisis has caused. Organizations *rebuild* when they make positive actions to improve favor with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007).

Three *bolstering* strategies make up the secondary-level strategies, providing positive information about the organization to offset negative feelings. Coombs (2006) warns these

strategies are not solo strategies and are meant to supplement the initial and primary strategies

mentioned previously (Coombs, 2007).

Table 5 provides a comprehensive summary of every SCCT strategy.

Table 5

SCCT Crisis Response Strategies

Strategy Level	Crisis Response	Strategy
Initial	Instructing information Adjusting information	Protection Crisis basics Corrective action Express concern for victim(s)
Primary	Deny Diminish Rebuild	Attack the accuser Denial Scapegoat Excuse Justification Compensation Apology
Secondary	Bolstering	Reminder Ingratiation Victimage

Note. Adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory.," by W. T. Coombs, 2007, *Corporate Reputation Review, 10*(3), p. 170.

While SCCT offers guidelines for forming crisis response strategies based on attribution

level, crisis history, and prior relational reputation with stakeholders, it is important for crisis

managers to match the response appropriately and not be aggressive with responses (Lambert,

2015). Using overly accommodating strategies can worsen the situation by making stakeholders

think a crisis is worse than it actually is (Coombs, 2007).

Additional crisis response strategy guidelines are listed in Table 6.

Table 6

SCCT Crisis Response Strategy Guidelines

1. Informing and adjusting information alone can be enough when crises have minimal attribution of crisis responsibility (victim crises), no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.

2. Victimage can be used as part of the response for workplace violence, product tampering, natural disasters, and rumors.

3. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with minimal attribution of crisis responsibility

4. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attribution of crisis responsibility (accident crises), no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.

5. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attribution of crisis responsibility (accident crises), coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.

6. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with strong attribution of crisis responsibility (preventable crises) regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation.

7. The deny crisis response strategies should be used for rumor and challenge crises, when possible.

8. Maintain consistency in crisis response strategies. Mixing deny crisis response strategies with either the diminish or rebuild strategies will erode the effectiveness of the overall response.

Note. Adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory.," by W. T. Coombs, 2007, *Corporate Reputation Review, 10*(3), p. 173.

The target audience is also a large factor that cannot be ignored in crisis response. Both victims and nonvictims make up the two broad audiences for a crisis message. Anyone injured, whether physically, emotionally, psychologically, or monetarily by the crisis, can be considered a victim. Nonvictims are those who are associated with the crisis as potential victims and/or voyeurs. While victims may need to be addressed first, potential victims and voyeurs are also

key players because "if these audiences dislike the crisis response, it will damage their relationships and future interactions with the organization in crisis" (Coombs, 2015, p. 139).

Building on the answer to RQ1, the Church should have used an appropriately corresponding "response strategy" and "guideline" (Coombs, 2007, pp.170, 173) found in Tables 5 and 6 respectively. Additionally, stakeholders may identify and/or claim the Church is using specific response strategies, which may have an effect on the persuasiveness of the response. This leads to a second research question presented in four parts:

RQ2a: Which specific crisis response strategies (e.g., protection, crisis basics, denial, justification, etc.) did the Church use in responding to the crisis?

RQ2b: Are the crisis response strategies used in the Church's communication reflected in the media coverage about the issue by the news media, citizen journalists, and John Dehlin?

RQ2c: How did the crisis response strategies used by the Church vary throughout the crisis timeline?

RQ2d: How did the crisis response strategies identified by the media, citizen journalists, and John Dehlin vary throughout the crisis timeline?

Just like any new theory, SCCT has its limitations. The financial standing of an organization may affect which strategy an organization can employ. Legal ramifications can also impede a crisis response strategy. Tyler (1996) noted that even though a crisis may warrant an apology, "the threat of legal liability and consequent threat of corporate extinction make an admission of guilt unwise and perhaps even immoral" (p. 59). Coombs acknowledged these limitations, observing that if an organization admits responsibility, it can potentially lose a lawsuit and bankrupt itself in court fees (Coombs, 2015). If an organization finds itself in such a

predicament, Coombs (2007) advised the "next best" strategy should be used.

Most poignantly for this thesis, there is an additional limitation not yet recognized in SCCT literature: there is no recommended response strategy for an organization that acknowledges the crisis of stakeholders but does not intend to apologize, instead holding to its institutional values. Although there is existing literature on religion and crisis communication, all of the literature involves wrongdoing by the religious institution or its members. For example, in the case of the child abuse committed by Roman Catholic priests, not only were children physically harmed, but the priests were also violating the Church's policies of abuse and celibacy. Even in its own recent past, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has issued an apology for violating a promise to refrain from posthumously baptizing members of the Jewish faith (Niebuhr, 1995). But in both cases, the churches were at fault for violating some kind of law or agreement. Little to no research has been conducted on how a religious or secular institution should handle an accusation of wrong doing when the organization has not broken a law or violated its own policies.

Coombs' situational crisis communication theory is centered on protecting the reputation of an organization during a crisis (Coombs, 2015). If SCCT works effectively, a crisis manager should employ the appropriate "crisis response strategy" to its matching "crisis type" resulting in improved sentiment towards the organization under crisis (Coombs, 2007, pp. 170, 168). However, if an organization cannot acknowledge a crisis, it is unlikely for that organization to accept any framing of crisis type and even more unlikely for an organization to use a crisis response strategy that corresponds to the crisis type. Protecting reputation is still important to an organization, even when apologizing is not an option.

This thesis shows that the Church may still use some of Coombs' crisis response

strategies in its messages, but whether or not those strategies are effective can only be determined through a change in sentiment. Examining a change in sentiment following the Church's responses during the crisis may demonstrate further strengths and weaknesses of Coombs' SCCT model. This leads to a third research question:

RQ3: How did sentiment towards the Church as found in news stories, blog posts, and John Dehlin's social media vary throughout the crisis phases?

Additionally, this research aims to identify and test the effectiveness of best practices for crisis planning, management, and recovery. Employing a form of grounded theory can provide recommendations for improving "organizational and professional practice" (Seeger, 2006, p.232) and close "the gap between desired practice and current practice" (Steelman & McCaffrey, 2012, p.700). As the Church has previous experience dealing with similar crises where an apology is not issued, the Church is likely to have developed its own strategy for responding. Capturing any additional strategy used by the Church or insights from the handbook policy change crisis may identify gaps between current SCCT recommendations and desired outcomes. Therefore, a final research question is posed:

RQ4: Based upon this crisis, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Coombs' SCCT?

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to analyze the effectiveness of the crisis response strategies employed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, both the media about the change and the Church's crisis communication messages were retrieved. Using content analysis, the reports and messages were examined through the lens of Coombs' SCCT model, which allows categorization of the messages according to SCCT, analysis of their effectiveness, and the defining of SCCT challenges in analyzing this organizational conflict.

Data Collection

In the context of this study, the term *media* includes news reports, blog posts, and social media posts from John Dehlin's Facebook account. The unit of analysis is one news article, blog, social media post, or response from the Church that discussed the Church handbook revisions. In order to cover the duration of the crisis, the collected media was published between November 5, 2015, and November 15, 2015. The official letter from Church leadership notifying lay leaders about the change was dated November 3, 2015, but was not leaked until November 5. Eight days later, Church spokesman Michael Otterson offered final clarification on the issue in a blog article posted on the Church media site mormonnewsroom.org. The pivotal moments of the handbook crisis fell between these eight days, but the timeline was extended to November 15, 2015, to capture any responses immediately following the Church's final statement.

Gathered news reports were limited to traditional television, news radio, and newspaper outlets. I used the database LexisNexis Academic to collect media reports about the handbook policy change within the measured time frame using the search terms "Mormon," "LDS Church," and "handbook."

Personal blog posts were gathered from popular publishing sites WordPress.com and

Blogspot.com. Blog posts were found using a customized Google search to specifically look through WordPress and Blogspot for posts mentioning the words "Mormon," "LDS," and "handbook" within the duration of the crisis. One of the limitations of collecting blog posts is that the search only returned blog posts that have been selected by the author to be publicly available. Additionally, influential bloggers with large followings may be publishing on their own web domains and therefore be excluded from the search. However, a preliminary search of WordPress and Blogspot returned more than 70 relevant results with a spectrum of opinions on the issue.

Social media posts collected were limited to the personal Facebook account for John Dehlin during the determined time frame. Although Dehlin has both a public Facebook page and personal Facebook account, he rarely posts on his public page, and when he does post, it is copied content from his personal page. His personal account publishes publicly, and posts were collected directly from Dehlin's personal page. Although the choice to focus solely on Dehlin seems limiting in terms of a social media sample, Dehlin's framing and sentiment is pivotal to this study. Dehlin was integral in identifying the crisis, alerting the news media to the policy change, and influencing the media coverage. As a former member of the Church, Dehlin is likely to have a consistently negative opinion of the Church. Dehlin's views serve as a perfect opposite to the Church as an organization in terms of recognizing the crisis: the Church saw no need to communicate with stakeholders about the change, whereas Dehlin alerted the masses.

Finally, all official responses from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regarding the handbook policy change within the set time period were collected. These responses were mostly found on mormonnewsroom.org. Content from the site includes a video interview with Church leader Elder D. Todd Christofferson, an additional letter from Church leadership,

and the clarifying blog post by spokesman Michael Otterson. Additionally, there were two brief comments made to the media on November 5 and November 14 covering the initial news of the change and a response to a protesting group resigning from the Church en masse in response to the change. These official comments from the Church were collected from the news reports gathered in the Lexis Nexis search.

Procedure

To answer RQ1a, I examined the news reports, blog posts and social media posts to identify framing that used Coombs' crisis types (2007, p.168; Table 4). Although Coombs' divides his crisis types into three crisis clusters (i.e., victim, accidental, and preventable), the victim cluster of crisis types does not apply because the handbook policy change was not a *natural disaster*, *rumor*, *workplace violence*, or *product tampering* by an external agent. Furthermore, some of the crisis types found in accidental and preventable clusters that involve equipment failure (accidental), industrial accidents (preventable), or a recalled product (preventable) are not applicable to the policy change. This narrowed the focus of the study to code specifically for one of four different crisis frames (Coombs, 2007, p.168):

- Challenges: the organization is unaware or unintentionally acting in an inappropriate manner (accidental cluster)

- Organizational misdeed with no injuries: the organization acted intentionally but there was no physical or emotional harm (preventable cluster)

- Organizational misdeed management misconduct: the organization violated laws or regulations (preventable cluster)

- Organizational misdeed with injuries: the organization intentionally put stakeholders at risk and there is physical or emotional harm (preventable cluster)

The Church statements were also coded for crisis type in case the Church were to specifically reference how the handbook policy change had been framed by the different stakeholders.

To answer RQ1a, the most popularly framed crisis type among news media, bloggers, and John Dehlin was identified. This data also provided evidence for whether the Church publicly acknowledged any crisis framing from those stakeholder groups.

To answer RQ1b, the framing of crisis types was identified by date in order to determine if there were shifts in how the stakeholders and the Church framed the crisis throughout the 11-day period.

To answer RQ2a, the Church's statements were coded to identify which of Coombs' 14 recommended crisis response strategies were present in each statement (Coombs, 2007, p.170):

- Protection: provide information for what stakeholders can do to protect from physical/emotional harm

- Crisis basics: provide information about the crisis (i.e., who, what, when, where, why, and how)

- Corrective action: supply information on what is being done to protect stakeholders from future crises.

- Express concern for victims: this is not an admission of guilt, but often expected by stakeholders

- Attack the accuser: confront the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization

- Denial: assert there is no crisis

- Scapegoat: blame some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis

- Excuse: minimize organization's responsibility by denying intent to do harm or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis

- Justification: minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis

- Compensation: offer money or other gifts to victims

- Apology: indicate the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness

- Reminder: tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization

- Ingratiation: praise stakeholders or reminds them of past good works of the organization

- Victimage: remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too

To answer RQ2b, the news articles, blog posts, and social media posts were coded to identify which of Coombs' response strategies used by the Church were identified in the articles, blogs, and social media posts of each stakeholder group. After identifying which strategies the stakeholder groups recognized in the Church statements, the identified response strategies were compared to the actual response strategies used by the Church.

RQ2c accounted for any changes in response strategies used by the Church in different phases of the crisis. The data was coded for publishing date to analyze day by day response strategy changes. RQ2d tracked daily change in response strategies identified by news media, bloggers, and John Dehlin.

To answer RQ3, I tracked change in sentiment of the examined media over time. Sentiment was measured using a three-point scale to measure positive, neutral, and negative sentiment holistically in each piece of media. Each group's sentiment was analyzed on a daily basis to determine shifts in sentiment throughout the crisis.

RQ4 provides an overarching analysis of how the Church's strategy in responding to the handbook policy change crisis fits into SCCT in terms of successful execution and lack of appropriate response options. This question compared the crisis response strategies used by the Church (identified in RQ2a) to Coombs' recommendations for responding to the crisis based on the crisis-type frames (identified in RQ1a), looking for cohesion. If the Church's response strategy was effective, there should be a shift in the framing of crisis types and/or sentiment during the duration of the crisis as the Church responded. The central topic of this study being

the premise that organizations may not always see the need to apologize or cannot apologize for a crisis, RQ4 uses all the data collected to analyze the Church's strategic response when SCCT does not provide an applicable recommendation. Analyzing changes in sentiment following specific crisis response strategies should demonstrate what did or did not work for the Church in terms of Coombs' crisis types and crisis response strategies. The coding sheet was used to collect statements from the Church responses that diverge from SCCT to illustrate what strategies the Church used to respond to the crisis outside of Coombs' recommendations.

The coding instrument included the type of media, name of media, date and time of the publication, crisis type, level of sentiment, and crisis response strategy (see Appendix: Coding Sheet and Codebook).

Data Analysis

To achieve intercoder reliability, another communications scholar and I randomly selected and coded 10% of each media type (i.e., news reports, blog posts, social media posts) (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Using Scott's pi, our lowest reliability coefficient was .83, with most of the agreement hovering between 90 and 100%. After achieving a useable reliability coefficient, I coded the rest of the data by myself.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

During the 11 days of news coverage (from November 5 to November 15) as the handbook change crisis unfolded, there were 60 different news articles of both local and national media coverage, 70 blog posts written by 48 different authors, 56 Facebook posts from John Dehlin, and 5 official statements from the Church. The number of articles, blog posts, and social media posts from news media, bloggers, and John Dehlin gradually started to decrease on November 9, four days into the crisis. Those numbers did spike on November 13 as the Church released two more statements about the handbook change, but the numbers were not nearly as high as they were during the intial days of the crisis (shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of news articles, blogs, and social media posts throughout the handbook policy change.
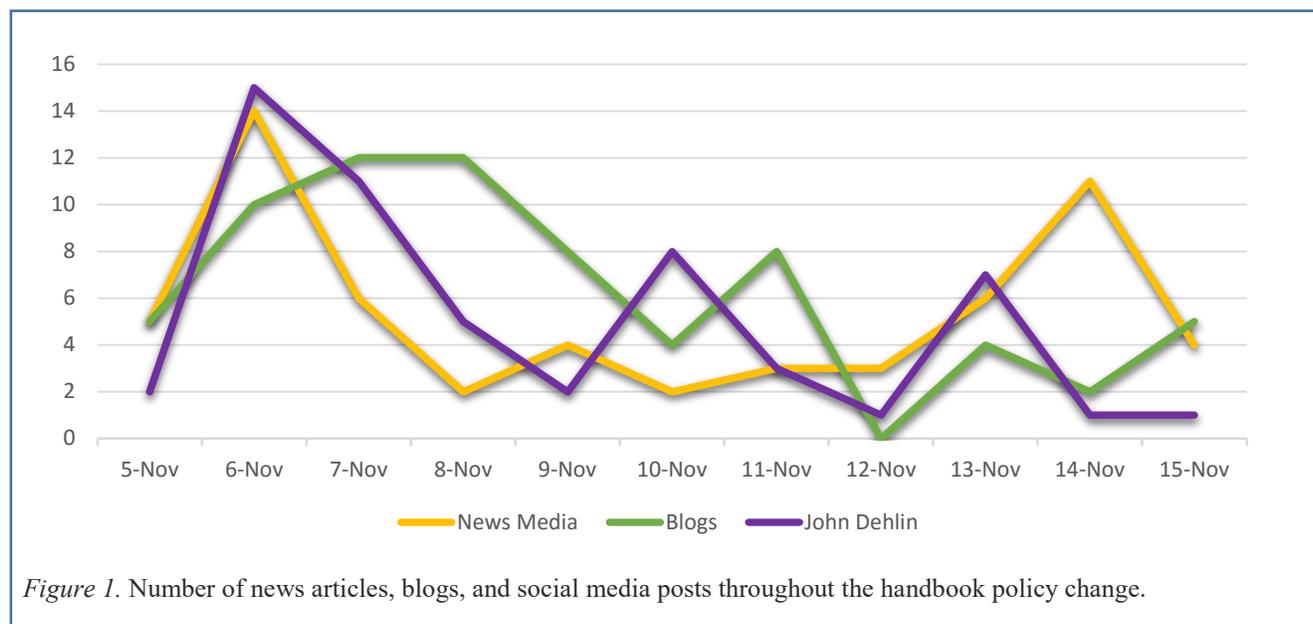
Although a chi-square would have been ideal for showing significance in trends across the timeline of the crisis to answer RQ 1b, 2b, 2d, and 3, 70–80% of the expected counts were less than five (Yates, Moore & McCabe, 1999, p. 734), not allowing for chi-square analysis.

Examination of Crisis Frames

To answer RQ1a, or "Which of Coombs' crisis types did the media, citizen journalists, John Dehlin, and the Church use when framing the handbook policy change?" the collected data was analyzed for the four applicable crisis frames of challenge, organizational misdeed without injury, organizational misdeed management misconduct, and organizational misdeed with injury. Table 7 shows the number of times each frame was used by the differing groups throughout the crisis.

Table 7

Frame of Crisis Type by Stakeholder Group

Crisis Type	News Media	Blog Posts	John Dehlin	Church
Challenge	**53.3% (32)**	18.6% (13)	21.4% (12)	0% (0)
Org. Misdeed without Injuries	0% (0)	2.9% (2)	5.4% (3)	0% (0)
Org. Misdeed Management Misconduct	0% (0)	1.4% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Org. Misdeed with Injuries	46.67% (28)	**55.7% (39)**	**44.6% (25)**	0% (0)
No Crisis Frame	0% (0)	21.4% (15)	28.6% (16)	**100% (5)**
Sample Total	60	70	56	5

The news media were split almost evenly between labeling the event as a challenge (53.3%) or organizational misdeed with injuries (46.67%), with the majority of articles framing the crisis as a challenge. News media was also the only group that always framed the event as a crisis compared to the three other groups that did not identify a crisis frame more than 20% of the time. Bloggers (55.7%) and John Dehlin (44.6%) most often framed the crisis as an organizational misdeed, but the second highest score for both of those groups was no crisis framing. As expected, the Church did not recognize the handbook change as a crisis at all.

The data for RQ1b, or "How did the frames vary by crisis phase?" illustrates a substantial shift across most groups on November 13.

As Figure 2 shows, the news media only used two crisis frames: challenge and organizational misdeed with injuries. Although the challenge frame was more following the first Church statement (November 5), organizational misdeed with injuries became the most commonly used frame as the Church stopped making statements and more individuals came forward about their suffering due to the policy. Because news media always framed the handbook change as a crisis, as the frame of challenge rose, the frame of organizational misdeed with injuries declined and vice versa.

Figure 2. News media frames used throughout handbook policy crisis. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages.
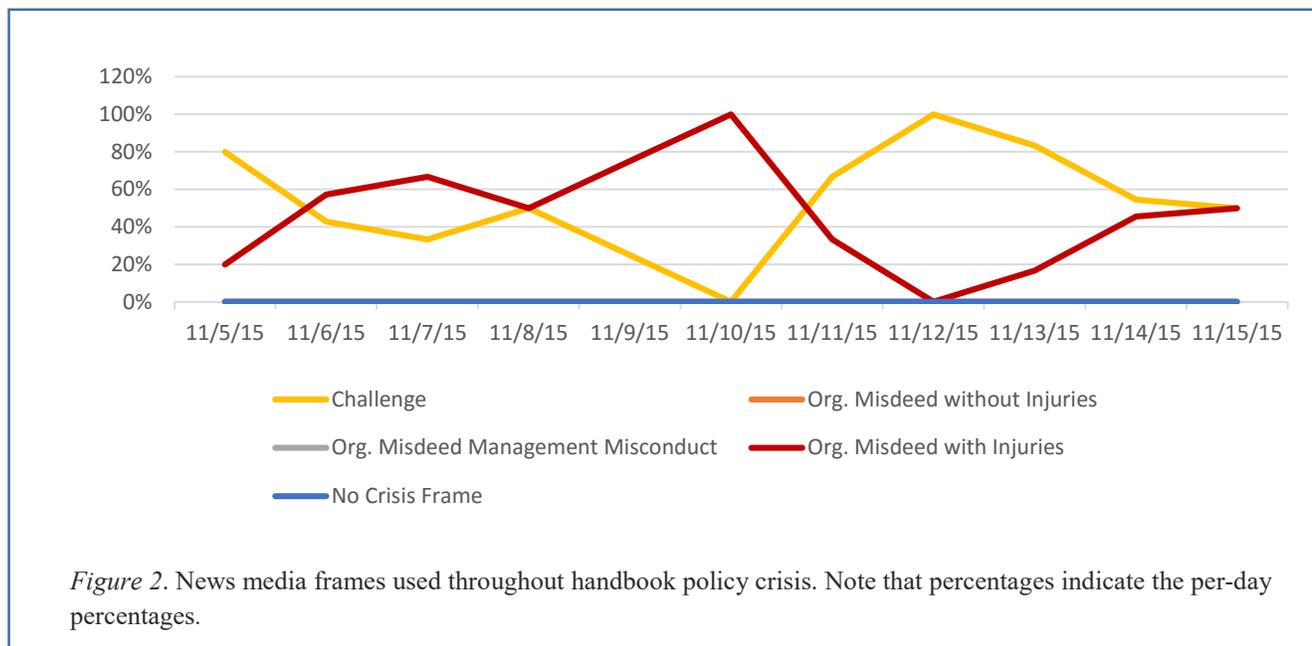
Although organizational misdeed with injuries was the most frequently used frame by bloggers on a daily basis, half of the blog entries briefly stopped framing the policy change as a crisis (50%) following the second wave of Church statements on November 13 with a lack of crisis framing (see Figure 3). Then organizational misdeed with injuries regained the majority of blog framing as policy dissenters organized a mass resignation of membership from the Church on November 14. A trend occurred between organizational misdeed with injury and no crisis frame. As the organizational misdeed with injury frame rises, there is a decrease in the no crisis

frame and vice versa. Even though bloggers used all four crisis frames throughout the crisis, the challenge and organizational misdeed management misconduct are not as prevalent.
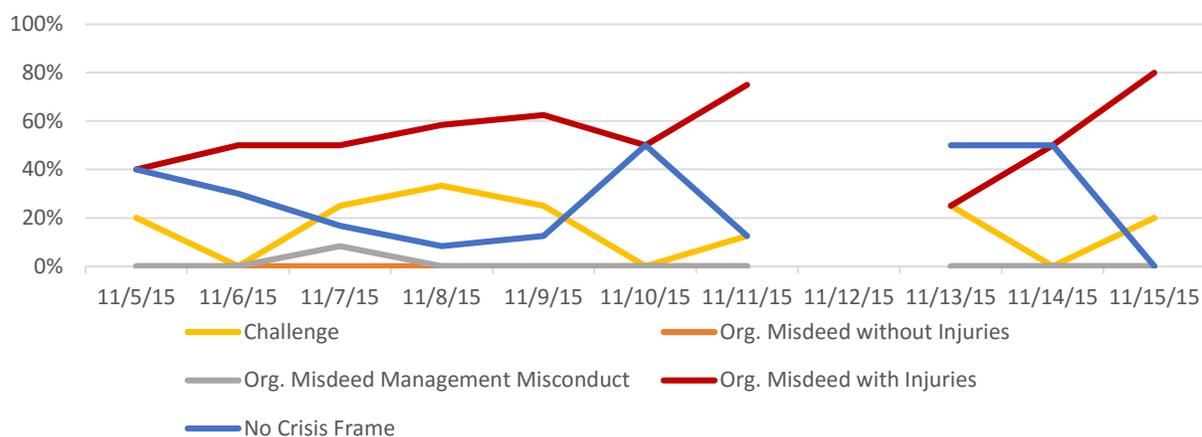
Figure 3. Blogger frames used throughout handbook policy crisis. There were no blog posts on November 12. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages.

John Dehlin's social media posts are particularly interesting because framing remains relatively consistent throughout the first half of the crisis timeline (see Figure 4). On November 6, his posts were ironically split between framing the crisis as an organizational misdeed with injuries and not recognizing the change as a crisis. Organizational misdeed with injuries is the most prevalent frame used by Dehlin. Halfway through the crisis Dehlin created a website called *Suffer the Little Children*, criticizing the Church for creating a policy that opposes its own scripture. The website accuses the Church of misunderstanding its own doctrine more than his previous Facebook posts did, and the frame of incompetency (Challenge) briefly overpowered the frame of organizational misdeed with injuries on November 11. As Dehlin started to focus more on the website on November 12, his organizational misdeed with injuries framing rose from 33% to 100%. On November 13, half of Dehlin's posts (50%) were solely re-sharing the clarifications from the Church without framing the information. It had been four days since

Dehlin had commented on the crisis without attributing a frame, but as Dehlin started to publically process the information, his organizational misdeed with injury frame dominated the whole of his posts for the rest of the crisis timeline at 100%.


Figure 4. John Dehlin frames used throughout handbook policy crisis. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages
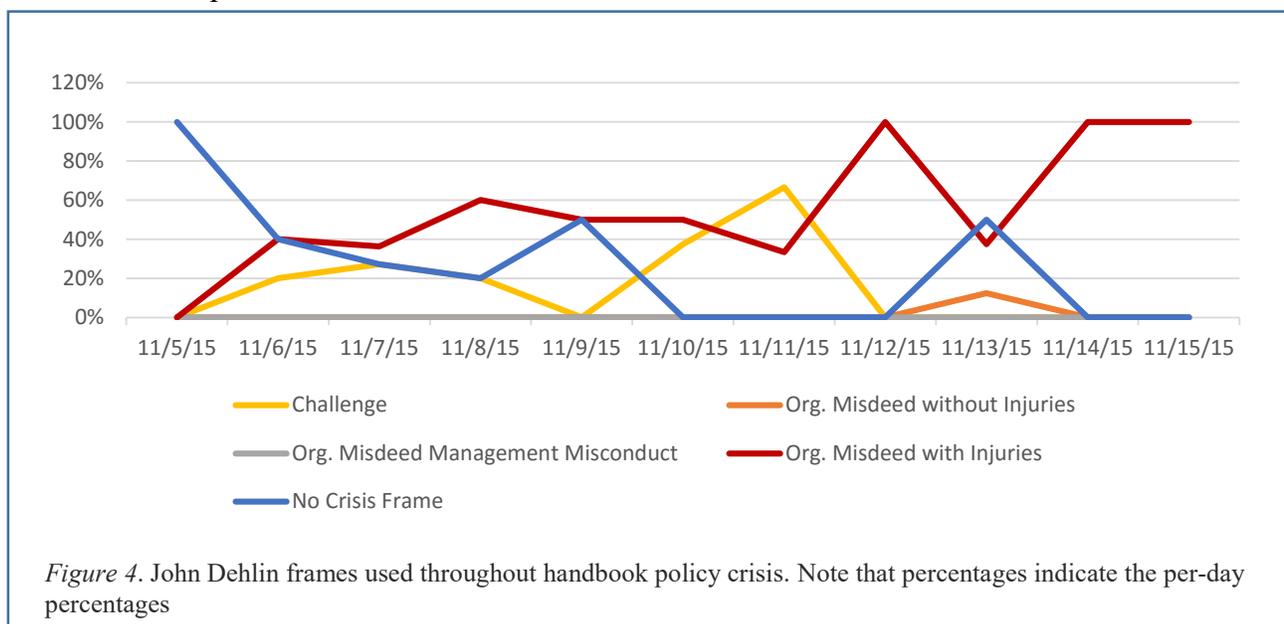
As Figure 5 shows, the Church never recognized the handbook policy change as a crisis. The Church released an intitial statement to news media on November 5 and created a video with contextual information on the policy on November 6. The gaps in the Church's framing timeline represent the Church's silence between statements. On November 13 the Church released two different responses: a clarification on the policy change and a blog post from Church spokesman Michael Otterson with more detail and insight on the policy change.

Figure 5. Church frames used throughout handbook policy crisis. There were no statements issued November 7-12, 15. Note percentages indicate the per-day percentages.
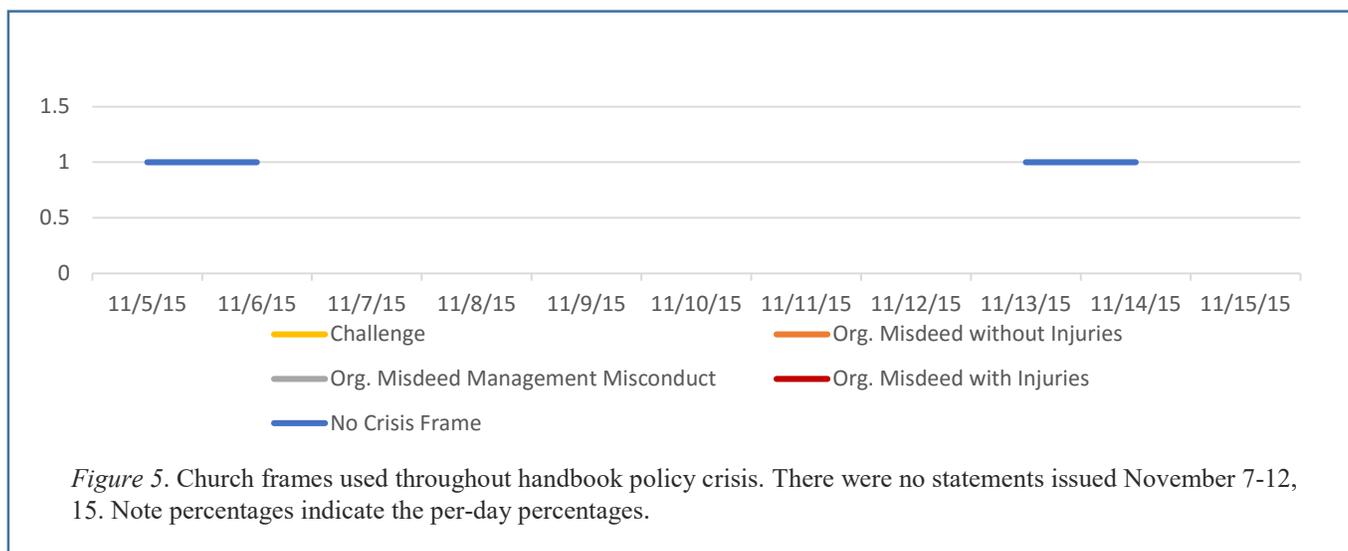
Examination of Crisis Response Strategies

To answer RQ2a "What specific crisis response strategies did the Church use in responding to the crisis?" I examined specific crisis response strategies employed by the Church. As Table 8 shows, of the 14 recommended SCCT crisis response strategies, the Church used seven of the strategies multiple times throughout its five responses (in order of most prevalent response): crisis basics, express concern for victims, justification, reminder, protection, excuse, and ingratiation. Additionally, coding found that the Church used additional tactics of referring stakeholders to its long history of opposing same-sex marriage and defending its value of heterosexual marriage in three of the five responses. By reminding stakeholders of the Church's history and reasons for opposing same-sex marriage (i.e., same-sex marriage is against the teachings of Jesus Christ), the "other" strategy places the burden of acting to resolve the crisis on the stakeholders. It is as though the Church is saying, "We don't have a problem. You have a problem. So you should fix the problem you have."

Table 8

Crisis Response Strategies Used by Church, Identified by Stakeholders

Response Strategy	News Media	Blog Posts	John Dehlin	Church Media
Protection	1.7% (1)	5.71% (4)	1.8% (1)	40% (2)
Crisis Basics	58.3% (35)	38.6% (27)	12.5% (7)	100% (5)
Corrective Action	0	0	1.8% (1)	0
Express Concern	0	0	0	80% (4)
Attack the Accuser	0	0	0	0
Denial	0	0	0	0
Scapegoat	0	0	0	0
Excuse	0	0	0	40% (2)
Justification	26.7% (16)	17.1% (12)	1.8% (1)	60% (3)
Compensation	0	0	0	0
Apology	0	0	0	0
Reminder	0	0	0	60% (3)
Ingratiation	0	0	0	40% (2)
Victimage	0	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0	60% (3)

Note. Percentages indicate percentage of articles identifying specific crisis responses out of the total number of articles in each stakeholder group.

RQ2b compares the crisis response strategies identified in messages by the Church (see RQ2a) and compares them to the strategies acknowledged by stakeholders (i.e., media, bloggers, and John Dehlin). Although the Church used eight response strategies in its messages about the handbook policy change (see Table 8), the news media, bloggers, and John Dehlin only recognized the Church as using three of these same strategies: protection, crisis basics, and justification. Table 8 shows how rarely those response strategies were acknowledged by stakeholders. There were also several news articles (13.3%), blog entries (38.6%), and social media posts (82.1%) that didn't refer to any crisis response strategy used by the Church. This is interesting to note because it illustrates that the news media is more likely to attempt to identify

an organization's response strategies whereas bloggers and John Dehlin were more focused on how the responses impacted individual people.

Crisis basics was the most recognized strategy by the stakeholders. It was also the most used strategy by the Church. However, the Church used the expressing concern strategy in 80% of its responses, yet none of the groups identified expressing concern as a Church strategy.

Additionally, John Dehlin predicted the Church statement clarifying the updated policy would lead to corrective action.

To answer RQ2c "How did the crisis response strategies (e.g., protection, crisis basics, justification, etc.) used by the Church vary between crisis phases?" the crisis response strategies were examined over the duration of the crisis looking for a change in use. Figure 6 illustrates that during its initial brief response on the day the handbook changes were leaked, the Church only employed crisis basics, acknowledging the crisis existed and explaining its long history of opposing same-sex marriage. This was most likely due to the limited amount of time to craft a statement. John Dehlin first leaked the handbook change at 3 p.m. on November 5, and local news were referring to the brief Church statement that evening. In its second, lengthier, video response the Church included seven of its eight strategies.
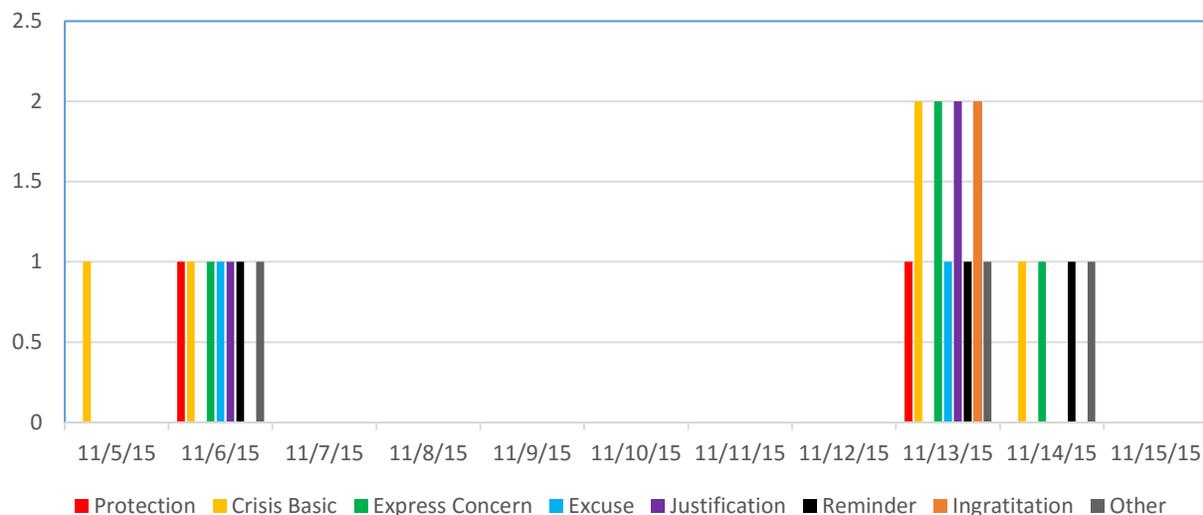
Figure 6. Church response strategies used throughout the crisis. The x-axis describes the number of statements the Church released per day (e.g. on November 13 there were two released statements and each statement included response strategies of crisis basics, express concern, justification, and ingratiation).

A week later on November 13, the Church released two responses: the clarifying statement and the blog post by Michael Otterson. All eight strategies were used that day. Both of the responses included crisis basics, expressions of concern for victims, justification, and ingratiation, but only the clarifying statement used protection, excuse, and reminder. Otterson's blog post employed the additional "other" strategy of referring to the historic teachings and practices of the Church in relation to same-sex marriage:

> This sensitivity to family circumstances is practiced elsewhere. For example, the Church
>
> doesn't baptize minor children without parental consent, even if the children want to be
>
> associated with their LDS friends. That is where Church leaders stand today—holding
>
> firm to the doctrinal position of right and wrong, while extending love to all people.
>
> (Otterson, 2015)

As dissenters to the handbook policy change planned to stage a mass resignation, the Church issued one more brief statement on November 14 reaffirming its position on same-sex

marriage and expressing sympathy and love towards those who disagreed.

RQ2d explored the change of identified crisis response strategies by the stakeholder groups throughout the duration of the crisis. Stakeholder acknowledgement of the protection crisis response strategy, as shown in Figure 7, is relatively low, but bloggers recognize it more often following the day that the Church clarified the policy and confirmed the Church would only bar the children of same-sex couples who had majority custody over the children on November 14.
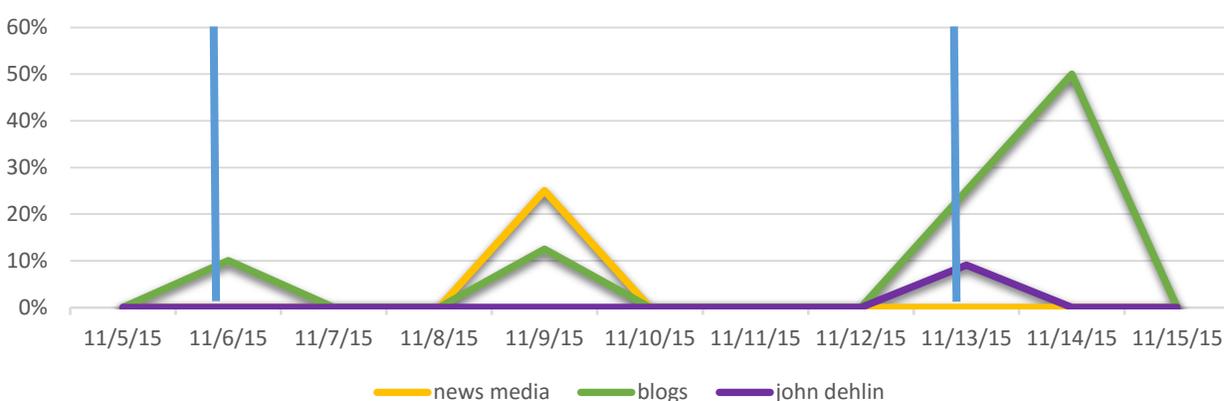
Figure 7. Acknowledgement of protection response strategy by stakeholders throughout handbook policy change crisis. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages. Blue lines indicate the dates the Church actually used protection strategy.

In addition to the protection crisis response strategy, the stakeholder groups also referred to the Church's strategy of providing a crisis basics response strategy. Bound to report the who, what, where, when and why of a crisis, news media referred to the Church's strategy of providing crisis basics most often of the three stakeholder groups and continued to refer to that strategy for several days following the initial statements (see Figure 8). The second wave of statements from the Church resonated more with bloggers as they may have had more time to process and gather information.
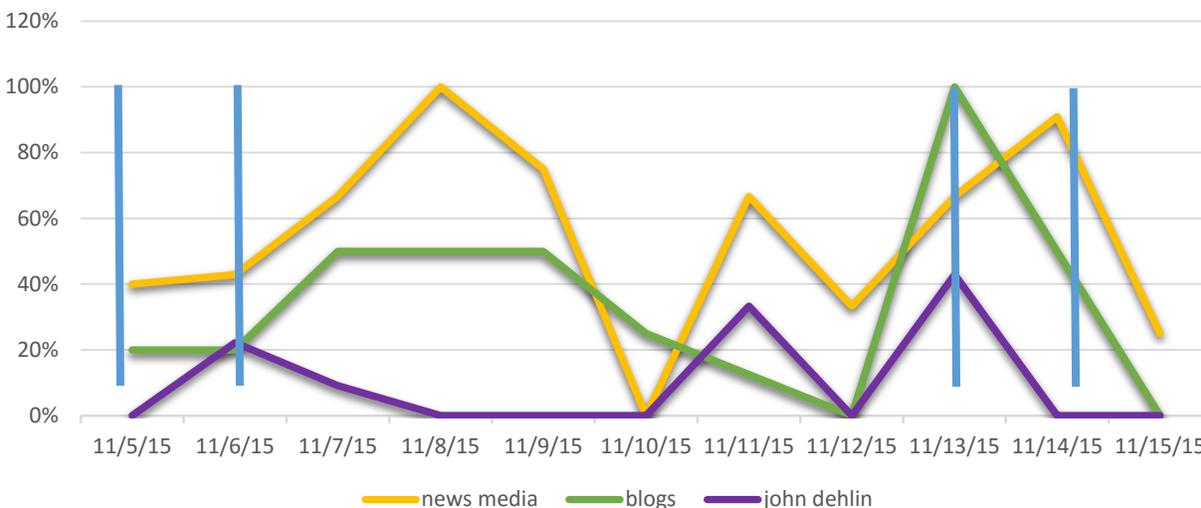
Figure 8. Acknowledgement of crisis basics response strategy by stakeholders throughout handbook policy change crisis. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages. Blue lines indicate the dates the Church actually used crisis basics strategy.

Justification, where a crisis manager attempts to minimize the perceived damage by providing a reason for the crisis, was the second most referred to strategy in this crisis by the stakeholders. In the context of this crisis, the justification strategy was used by the Church to minimize perceived damage in terms of explaining that the Church does not harbor an ill will toward same-sex couples and their children, but that the handbook policy update was needed to help distinguish between moral right and wrong. Figure 9 shows two large peaks for news media's recognition of the justification strategy on November 8 (50%) and November 11 (67%). These recognitions accompanied news reports trying to analyze the policy and include opinions from different scholars and opinion leaders. Additionally, there is a large spike in acknowledgement of justification crisis response strategy by bloggers (75%) on November 13 as the Church released the second wave of clarifying information.
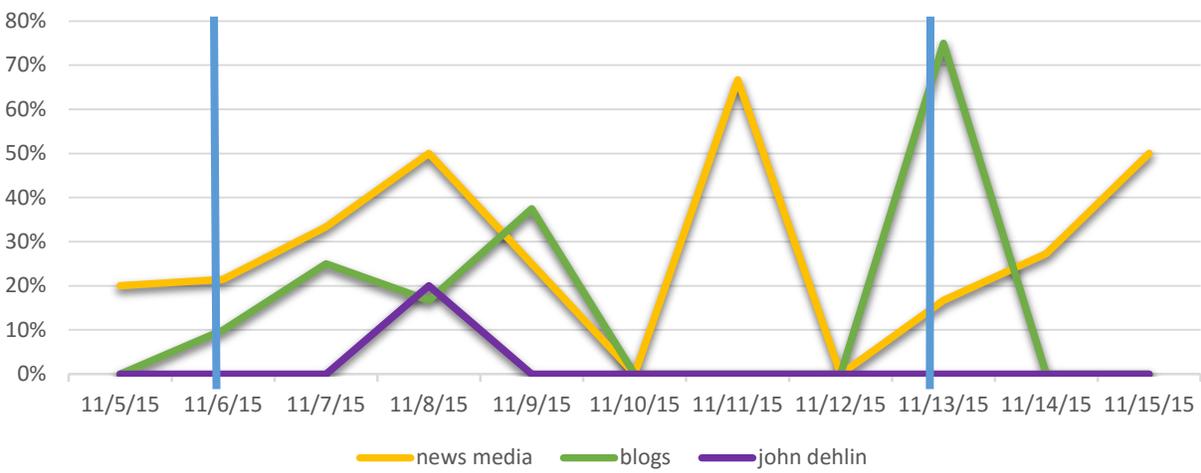
Figure 9. Acknowledgement of justification response strategy by stakeholders throughout handbook policy change crisis. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages. Blue lines indicate the dates the Church actually used justification strategy.

John Dehlin didn't refer to the Church's response strategy very often in his social media posts. However, on one occasion he incorrectly predicted a response strategy of corrective in future Church strategy to undo the policy change as shown in Figure 10.
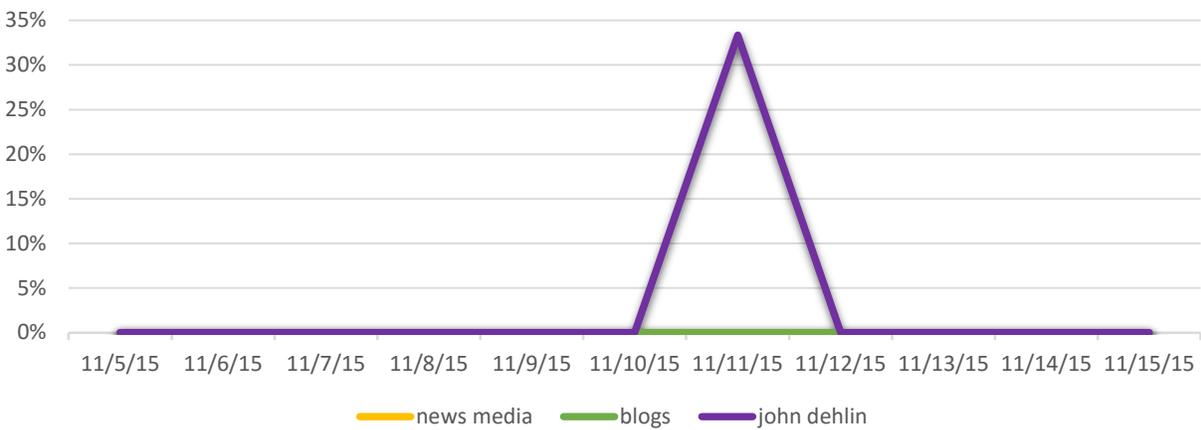

Figure 10. Acknowledgement of corrective action response strategy by stakeholders throughout handbook policy change crisis. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages.

Evaluating Sentiment

To answer RQ3, inquiring how different stakeholder groups viewed the Church throughout different phases of the crisis, the content's sentiment from each group was identified by the number of articles expressing negative, neutral, and positive sentiment each day. As Figure 11 shows, the news media never used positive sentiment while reporting on the handbook policy change. Neutral sentiment was most prevalent, but negative sentiment did spike during the Church's seven-day period of silence between statements. With a lack of Church response and more people speaking out about how the policy impacted their lives negatively, the media struggled to keep the reports balanced.
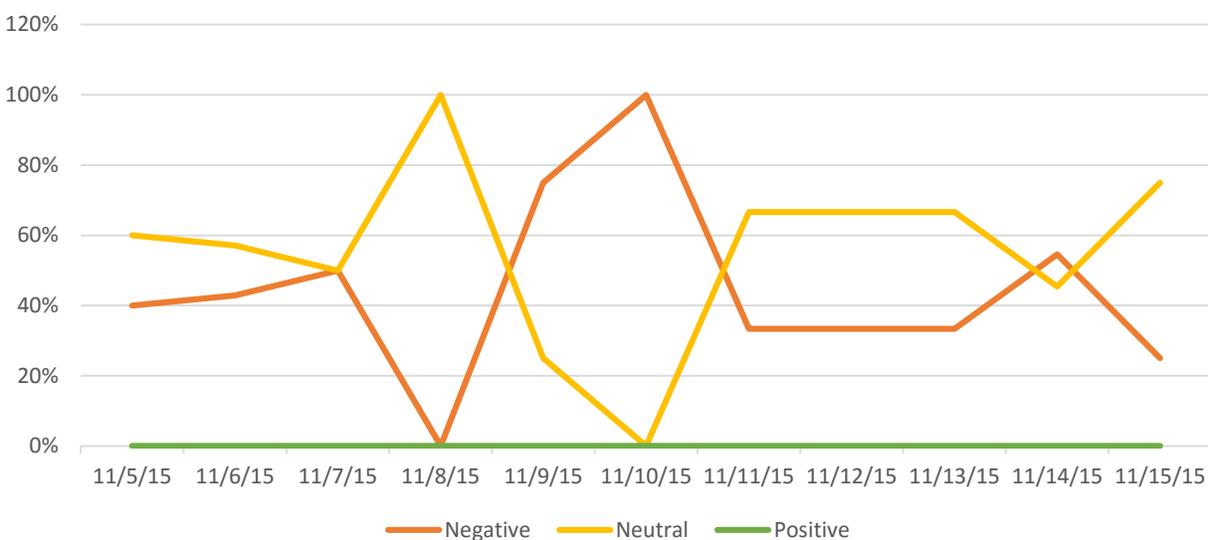
Figure 11. News media sentiment over time. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages.

The majority of the analyzed blog posts were written by authors who were seemingly motivated to write about the policy change because they either saw it as a crisis and wanted to express their frustration and hurt or they felt the need to defend the policy change and speak positively of the Church. Figure 12 shows that 60% of the blog posts were positive toward the Church with the other 40 maintaining a neutral tone on the first day of the policy change leak.

Following the Church's first responses, positive sentiment was replaced by negative sentiment, which consistently prevailed at a daily percentage of 50–60% throughout most of the timeline. However, positive sentiment returned immediately following the second wave of statements from the Church with 50% of the blog responses holding positive sentiment with neutral and negative sentiment equaling 25% each.
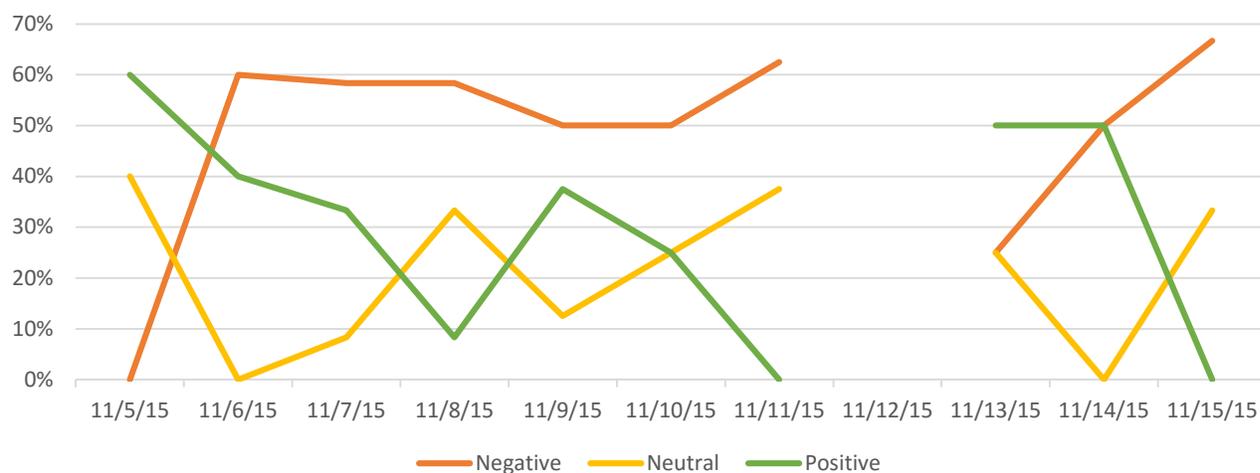
Figure 12. Blogger sentiment over time. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages. There were no blog posts on November 12.

Dehlin, like the news media, never spoke positively about the policy change. When Dehlin's posts contained neutral sentiment it was because he was merely sharing neutral facts about the policy change without sharing his opinion on the matter. Although he started out more neutral, as Dehlin acknowledged a growing number of people impacted by the policy, his content became increasingly negative (see Figure 13). However, several times throughout the crisis, on November 7, 9, and 13, Dehlin was equally divided between negative and neutral sentiment. This is notable because his posts on November 7 and 13 immediately followed Church statements.

Figure 13. John Dehlin sentiment over time. Note that percentages indicate the per-day percentages.
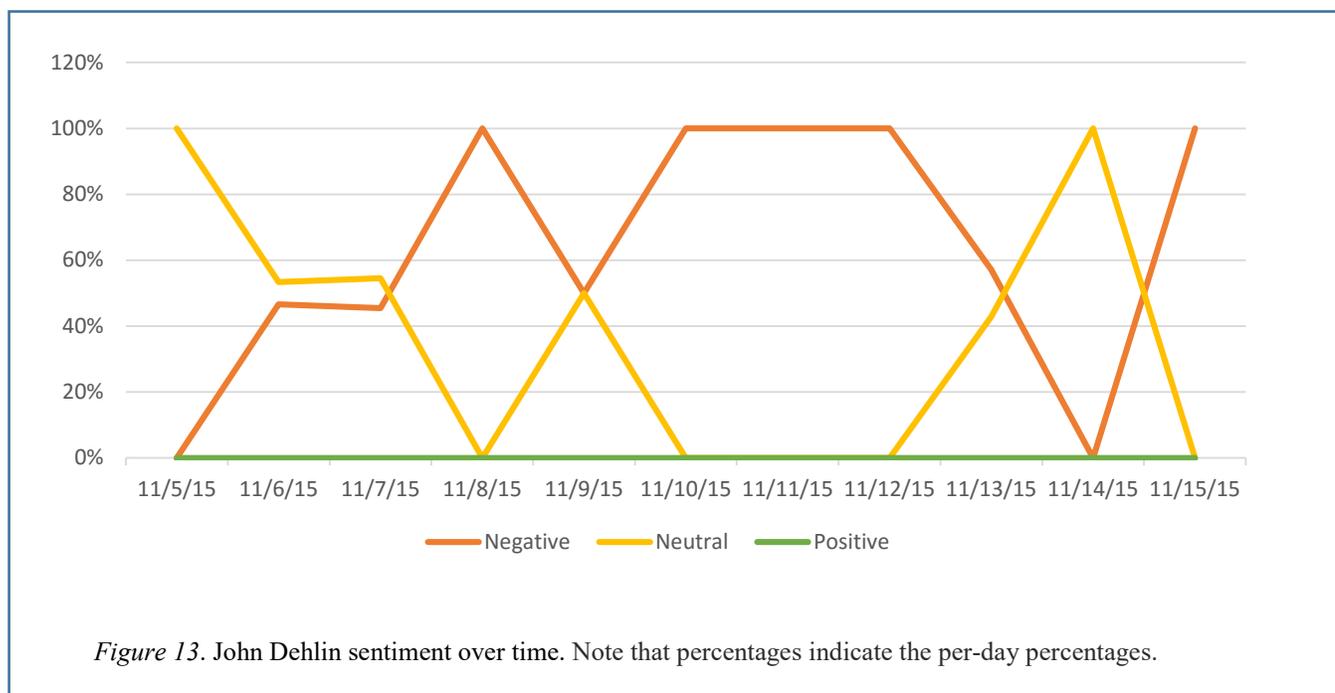
Evaluating SCCT

To answer RQ4, I used all of the data collected for RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 to analyze this crisis situation in the context of SCCT. Because the Church did not recognize the handbook policy change as a crisis or publicly acknowledge the stakeholders' frames of crisis, it could not truly use SCCT to begin crafting its response. However, if the Church understood that stakeholders were most often framing the handbook policy change as a preventable crisis, specifically an organizational misdeed with injuries, the Church should have used a combination of intial, primary, and secondary levels of crisis response strategies. Additionally, because of the high attribution of responsibility associated with a crisis of organizational misdeed with injuries and the long-standing history of the Church in regards to opposing same-sex marriage, there should have been a strong emphasis on the "rebuilding" response strategies of apology and compensation. In its responses the Church did not ever use a rebuilding strategy, but it did use all three levels of crisis response strategies: protection and crisis basics (initial level), excuse and

justification (primary level), and reminder and ingratiation (secondary level).

Furthermore the Church's custom response strategies did appear to shift crisis framing and sentiment in multiple stakeholder groups near the end of the 11-day timeline.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study analyzes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' crisis communication strategies during a controversial handbook policy change by using Coombs' situational crisis communication theory. Using content analysis to track framing, sentiment, and strategic responses and categorizing these variables by their corresponding SCCT strategy, effectiveness and appropriateness of the Church's crisis communication was gauged.

This report offers insight into potentially effective strategies that an organization can use in a crisis situation when the organization does not intend to apologize or recognize a crisis. The descriptive data from this study shows a change in multiple stakeholder groups in crisis framing and sentiment.

Understanding the Crisis Timeline

Because there were multiple responses from the Church throughout the 11-day period, this crisis can be contextualized into three different phases:

1. The intial wave as news broke of the handbook policy change and the Church's response, between November 5–7

2. The philosophical resting period between November 8–12 as stakeholders continued to process and analyze the change despite the Church's silence

3. The second wave of Church responses clarifying the policy and the following reaction from stakeholders, between November 13–15.

The most used frame during the first and second phases of the crisis among all three stakeholder groups was organizational misdeed with injuries. That frame increased during the second phase as more people affected by the policy shared their stories with news media and on social media.

The majority of sentiment during the first phase of the crisis started out neutral for news media and John Dehlin, and positive for bloggers. However, negative sentiment became the

majority across all three groups following the Church's video response with Elder Christofferson. The negative sentiment carried through the second phase as the Church did not provide any additional context and stakeholders continued to discuss the negative implications of the policy.

The third phase of the crisis, when the Church resumed making statements about the policy change, shows a shift in framing and sentiment in multiple stakeholder groups. Stakeholders also referred to response strategies used by the Church more often in the third phase than in the first and second phases of the crisis. I will now discuss this third phase in more detail.

Blogger and Dehlin framing and sentiment changes on November 13. The Church's second wave of statements on November 13 had a substantial impact on crisis framing and sentiment in posts by bloggers and social media commentary by John Dehlin. On November 11, 62% of the blog posts had negative sentiment toward the Church, and 75% of the blog posts framed the crisis as an organzational misdeed with injury, meaning bloggers were framing the handbook policy change as an intentional, wrongful act by the Church that caused emotional or physical harm. After the clarifying statement and blog post from the Church published the morning of November 13, only 25% of the blog posts were negative toward the Church with 50% of the blog posts showing positive sentiment, which had been nonexistent on November 11. Additionally, the 75% of blog posts framing the crisis as an organizational misdeed also dropped to only 25%, while 50% of blog posts did not frame the change as a crisis at all. The dramatic shift in sentiment and crisis framing over a single day of content (there were not any blog posts on November 12) indicates that the Church may have crafted an effective response strategy for bloggers in its second wave of responses.

John Dehlin never wrote positively of the Church throughout the crisis, but his framing and negative sentiment also softened with the second wave of Church statements. On November 12 Dehlin's sentiment was 100% negative and his framing was 100% organizational misdeed with injury, meaning that for that day Dehlin was entirely framing the handbook policy change as an intentional, wrongful act by the Church that caused emotional or physical harm. The next day, November 13, as Church statements were released Dehlin's posts were 50% negative and 50% neutral. Additionally, the frame of organizational misdeed with injury dropped from 100% to only 38%, while 50% of Dehlin's posts did not identify a crisis frame. On November 14 all negativity disappeared as Dehlin was 100% neutral in his sentiment towards the Church.

Church response strategies on November 13. Examining the strategies that resonated with bloggers and Dehlin during the second wave of Church statements may explain the decrease in negativity and softening of crisis framing. On November 13 the Church used crisis basics twice as much as it had in its initial response, and bloggers paid attention. Every blog post on November 13 referred to the Church providing more information about the handbook policy change (crisis basics). It did not matter if the blog post had positive sentiment:

> This came out today, and should clarify many points people have been upset about. . . . It pays to not get too upset too quickly, as the First Presidency have their inspiration from the Lord, and sometimes it isn't immediately explained, but it is RIGHT! (Grandma Pal, 2015)

or negative sentiment:

> Basically it looks as though the Church, while indicating it's welcoming to those who might attend, they really don't want anyone living in a Gay family relationship part of the Church, even if you are a child. And they made it clear that if you are living in a Gay

relationship, even if it is a legal marriage, especially if it is a legal marriage, there is no

place for you among the Latter Day Saints. Jesus wants it that way, according to

them. So fine that's their doctrine, it's been written in stone, or at least in the Handbook.

(Mormon Faith Crisis Help, 2015)

Even though the Church included a response strategy of crisis basics in every statement, the

highest recognition of crisis basics before November 13 was only at 50% of all blog posts on

November 7–9 and that was two days after the Church's initial response.

Furthermore, the Church also used justification twice as much in its November 13

statements compared to the single use of justification on November 6. Following the Church

response on November 6, bloggers recognized justification 25% of the time, but on November 13

that percentage jumped to 75% of all blog posts referring to the Church's justifying arguments

for why the faith updated the policy.

Additionally, only 10% of blog posts recognized the Church's use of protection response

strategy on November 6, but on November 13, 25% of blog entries recognized a protection

response strategy, and that doubled to 50% on November 14. A blog post written by a current

missionary for the Church shows all three of these response strategies in a single sentence: "The

Church made efforts today to clarify [crisis basics] this position as one intended to protect young

people [protection] from being put in the difficult position of conflict [justification] between

loyalty to their parents and loyalty to the gospel" (LJB, 2015).

Explaining the Success of November 13. In understanding what caused the change in

sentiment and framing on the second wave of Church's responses it's important to consider the

context of how the information was released. The handbook policy change was released under

dubious circumstances as John Dehlin, a former member of the church, made the information

public instead of the Church. Because the Church did not release the information publicly, the first wave of Church statements was more likely to be interpreted as an organization trying to talk its way out of a corner after it's been caught acting inappropriately. Furthermore, when the Church remained was silent for the following seven days, it made the first wave of statements seem final. However, when the Church resumed the conversation on November 13, there was a recognizable relief from bloggers that the Church wasn't trying to dodge or close the issue. The Church attempted to take back some control of the discussion and it paid off.

The silent gap between the waves of Church statements may be due to the Church's internal cycle of approving official communication, as many high-ranking leaders are often traveling to visit congregations around the world and weren't readily available to sign off on the second wave of statements. While the delay in regaining control was not ideal, resuming the conversation did have a positive effect. An earlier second wave of response, may have negated some of the crisis framing and negative sentiment that occurred during the gap between Church statements.

Additionally, the crisis response strategy of ingratiation wasn't present in the first two statements from the Church. Even though stakeholders never mentioned the Church's use of ingratiation, it was present in both responses on November 13. Ingratiation is a helpful strategy in repairing a relationship between an organization and stakeholders.

Finally, the medium in which the Church published Otterson's statement, via blog, is also notable. As practitioners and academics manage the impact of the blogosphere on public relations practices, more crisis managers are starting to rely on blog-mediated crisis communication (Jin & Liu, 2010) in order to exhibit authenticity and understanding of the crisis discussion.

The Key Stakeholder

Among the stakeholder groups, bloggers play a key role in responding to the crisis. Bloggers represent the group most likely to share a variety of opinions and feelings about the policy. While not exactly identical, bloggers are also the group in this study that most closely represents the wide variety of thoughts and feelings of members of the Church who would be affected by this policy. In triaging confused or emotionally injured stakeholders as the handbook policy change was leaked, it is likely that the Church would give priority to helping current members of the Church process the change over less connected groups like news media or angry former members such as Dehlin. Because of this, it is important to note the significant shifts in sentiment, crisis framing, and response strategy recognition from bloggers.

With its current resources like *Mormon Newsroom*, the Church does not have to rely on news media to faciliate its message to that priority group. Instead it can publish its statements online without risking information being shared out of context. This further serves as evidence that the Church is not as concerned with changing the news media's framing as it is with a direct message to its members. The Church's frustration with the media miscommunicating the original statement is evidenced in part by the Church's "other" response strategy:

> The episode demonstrates clearly the dangers of drawing conclusions based on incomplete news reports, tweets and Facebook posts without necessary context and accurate information. . . .The vast majority of Church members understand that there has been no doctrinal change with regard to LGBT issues. Church doctrine is consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. There is a strong tendency today for many to talk of Jesus Christ as if His teachings on love were somehow inconsistent with his teachings on divine commandments. (Otterson, 2015)

The "other" strategy, which I would define as *standing ground* reflects an attempt by the Church to defend its changing of the handbook policy without apologizing to anyone who may be hurt by the decision. Every time the Church uses this strategy, it is metaphorically digging in its heels to defy anyone who would challenge the Church on the policy. Additionally by referencing the teachings of Jesus Christ, the "other" strategy puts the responsibility on stakeholders to understand the life and teachings of the Church's central figure in order to find peace about the crisis (e.g., Those who truly understand the gospel of Jesus Christ shouldn't be upset by this policy because it is consistent with those teachings, as articulated through Church leadership).

Crisis management and its relevant strategies such as, SCCT and conflict resolution tactics, focus on building trust and repairing relationships, but as communications scholar Kevin Stoker (2014) asserts, not every relationship is repairable or even worth maintaining:

> Practitioners want two-way symmetrical communication, but the statement itself is one-way, demanding reciprocity. No guarantee exists that the public will reciprocate unless coerced. Dialogue that leads to consensus and agreement may be ethical, but also could be tyrannical (p.353).

Stoker's identification of this paradox in public relations is particular fitting when considering the Church's targeted audience. The Church isn't going to waste time trying to sway the opinion of Dehlin or news media who are biased against the Church. The strategic messages from the Church focused on reaching bloggers and other stakeholders who favor the Church but were distressed by the recent handbook change.

Strengths and Weaknesses of SCCT

According to SCCT, informing and adjusting information in a crisis response strategy, using crisis basics or protection, can be all that is needed when crises have minimal attribution of crisis responsibility or no history of similar cases (Coombs, 2007, p. 173). Similarly, a justification response strategy is only recommended in crises with little to no attribution of crisis responsibility and no history of similar crises. With this theoretical foundation, it is unexpected that the Church response strategies of crisis basics and justification would have had such a substantial effect on John Dehlin's and bloggers' framing and sentiment on November 13 because the majority of both groups had been framing the policy change as organizational misdeed with injuries just prior to the second wave of Church statements. According to SCCT, the crisis type of organizational misdeed with injuries has a strong attribution of crisis responsibility and would thus require many additional response strategies including apology and/or compensation, which the Church never used. It is this type of unexpected result that exposes a weakness in Coombs' SCCT, answering RQ4: "Based upon this crisis, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Coombs' SCCT?"

In SCCT guidelines for crafting a response strategy, Coombs recommends that organizations "maintain consistency in crisis response strategies. Mixing deny crisis response strategies with either the diminish or rebuild strategies will erode the effectiveness of the overall response" (Coombs, 2007, p. 173). Although the Church did use diminishing (excuse and justification) and rebuilding (reminder and ingratiation) strategies, it never used deny strategies.

For as often as the handbook policy change was framed as an organizational misdeed with injuries, SCCT would have recommended that the Church rebuild its reputation through apology or compensation and reminding stakeholders of all the good deeds that are unrelated to

the crisis issue that the Church has accomplished in the past. Although the Church did use reminding, the reminders called attention to the Church's past history of opposing same-sex marriage, which was at the very crux of the crisis. Instead of using the recommended response strategies based on the crisis framing, the Church's statements used lower-level response strategies like justification to distance itself from from the idea that a crisis existed. These additional strategies of reminders, ingratiation, and justificaiton were similar to but not exactly the prescribed method for SCCT. Instead of using justification to explain a misunderstanding or incompetency within Church leadership that resulted in the policy change, the Church instead justified why the policy change was very intentional and fitted with past doctrine. Table 9 illustrates Coombs' recommended strategic responses strategies for the crisis types of challenge and organizational misdeed with injury compared to the respons strategies used by the Church.

Many of SCCT's elements are effective. The foundational strategy of providing information and crisis basics is key in any circumstance for any organization. And, as the Church demonstrated, the recommended crisis response strategies can be tweaked to fit the situation depending on whether an organization chooses to recognize its fault in a crisis or ignore frames of crises altogether. SCCT could potentially be a platform for building a more thorough theory to assist organizations caught in scenarios where key values are under attack and the organization wishes to stand by those values. Currently, there is a lack of literature and case studies in this area.

Table 9

Recommended and Employed Crisis Response Strategies

Challenge	Organizational Misdeed with Injuries	Church's Response
Protection	Protection	Protection*
Crisis Basics	Crisis Basics	Crisis Basics
Corrective Action	Corrective Action	
Express Concern	Express Concern	Express Concern
Excuse	Excuse	Excuse
Justification	Justification	Justification*
	Compensation	
	Apology	
	Reminder	Reminder*
	Ingratiation	Ingratiation
		Other: Standing Ground

Note. Crisis response strategies are adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory.," by W. T. Coombs, 2007, *Corporate Reputation Review, 10*(3), p. 170. A crisis frame of "challenge" asserts an organization acted unintentionally act by a company resulting from incompetence. A crisis frame of "organizational misdeed with injuries" asserts the organization acted intentionally and caused emotional and/or physical harm. *Indicates a variation of the recommended crisis response strategy

Crisis management vs. contingency theory and conflict resolution. Although there is a lack of crisis management literature that explores the scenario of an organization wishing to defend and supports its values, studies of contingency theory and conflict resolution may also fit within the scope of the handbook policy change, and provide strategies for an organization to stand behind its values and actions. It is likely the Church did not perceive the handbook change as a crisis, but rather a conflict where two opposing sides have different opinions on how an issue should be approached: The Church decided it was going to make same-sex marriage grounds for apostasy, while stakeholders outside of the Church are pushing the Church to celebrate and welcome same-sex marriage. If the Church approached the handbook change as

something that caused a conflict, the Church could still respond to the conflict while still maintaining authenticity and holding true to its doctrine.

Contingency theory explains the degree to which an organization uses an advocacy or accommodative response to conflicts with stakeholders (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Motrook 1997; Cameron, Pang, & Jin 2008). Stance is the key variable in contingency theory. A stance is how an organization responds to conflicts with other parties and is placed on a continuum anchored by advocacy and accommodation. Advocacy is when an organization argues for its own interests, while accommodating is when the organizations makes concessions to the other parties (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). In the context of contingency theory, the Church's responses were very much on the advocacy end of the spectrum as the Church did its best to explain why it updated the handbook. The Church positioned itself on that end of the contingency continuum because it was trying to stay true to its values, goals, and divine mission.

A number of studies have begun to apply contingency theory to crisis communication, with research noting similarities between contingency theory stances and the crisis response strategies of SCCT (Pang et al., 2004). Contingency theory offers a useful integrative framework but SCCT, as a middle range theory, can be useful to explain audience effects crisis communication research as in this thesis. SCCT can be used to operationalize the critical variables identified by contingency theory.

While contingency theory covers the position of the organization's response, the conflict resolution field (within the sphere of public relations) employs seven negotiation tactics in managing a conflict: *contending*, *collaborating*, *compromising*, *avoiding*, *accommodating, unconditionally constructive, and win/win or no deal* (Plowman, 1998). Unconditionally constructive is used in the positive sense of Fisher and Brown (1988); that is, the decision of the

organization "will be both good for the relationship between the two parties and good for the organization, whether or not you follow the same guidelines" (p.37). This tactic was employed by the Church in its statements when it argued that barring children of same-sex parents from baptism was in the best interest of everyone. Win/win or no deal is an alternative negotiation tactic that goes beyond being unconditionally constructive. The only options in this situation are for both parties either to collaborate in mutually beneficial circumstances or to "agree to disagree." In the Church blog by Otterson, the repeated idea that the policy change was "a matter of being clear; it's a matter of understanding right and wrong; it's a matter of a firm policy that doesn't allow for question or doubt" (Otterson, 2015) implies the Church never intends to negotiate or collaborate on this stance. If the Church were to use any form of collaboration, compromise, or accommodation it would undermine the foundation of the Church's claim to be led by God and not worldly opinions. These tactics are evidence that the Church was managing a conflict, not a crisis.

There aren't yet distinct markers for where a conflict becomes a crisis, but I propose that in order for an event to be labeled as a crisis, both the organization and the stakeholders must see a need for change. In this thesis, although the opposing stakeholders saw a need for corrective action and change, the Church chose to see the handbook change as a conflict that warranted a response to distressed stakeholders, but not a change to policy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Based on the assumption that SCCT does not lend itself well to crises where the organization does not wish to apologize for or acknowledge a crisis, this study found some susbtantial shifts in stakeholder attitudes following certain strategic statements from the Church even though the Church did not strictly adhere to SCCT's guidelines.

The examination of this crisis offered insight into SCCT's lack of clarity and direction concerning its crisis types, strategies, and guidelines. According to SCCT's guidelines, because the majority of the time the stakeholder groups framed the handbook change as a crisis of organizational misdeed with injuries, the Church should have responsded with third-tier strategies that bolstered its reputation and apologized to or compensated those harmed by the policy. Instead, the Church's responses align with SCCT more as a suggestion than a recipe. The Church used variations of bolstering, such as reminding stakeholders of its past policies regarding same-sex marriage instead of reminding stakeholders of past good works unrelated to the crisis.

Although the Church used the same strategies throughout the entire crisis, the Church's relatively larger use of crisis basics, justification, and protection in its second wave of statements on November 13 shifted the crisis framing and sentiment of bloggers and John Dehlin from negative sentiment with frames of high-level crisis responsibility to neutral and positive sentiment with a majority of blog entries and social media posts having no crisis frame at all.

SCCT is still a relatively new theory and will have to change and evolve as new crisis communication pathways are developed. While not perfect, it does offer a blueprint to help organizations navigate in times of crisis.

Future Research

This study only accounted for the presence of a crisis response strategy in a Church statement, and not the number of times the response strategy was used in the statement. Further research on the reoccurance of response strategies within different statements, both from the handbook policy change and other similar Church crises, may provide additional insight on which strategies the Church uses most often.

Qualitative analysis that includes interviews with the Church public affairs department would further add to the body of knowledge about how organizations respond to such a crisis because crisis managers could potentially explain their thought process as the crisis unfolded.

A comparison of blog sentiment and framing to social media sentiment and framing would also be relevant to demonstrate how blogging content may differ from social media content during this crisis.

Outside of this particular crisis, it would be helpful to study similar cases and strategies of organizations who try to defend foundational values and to compare sentiment changes among the different scenarios.

Limitations

Because of the relatively limited number of articles, blog posts, and social media posts surrounding the handbook policy change, it is difficult to show statistical significance supporting any response strategy from the Church having an effect on sentiment or change in frame.

Another limitation of this study is the grouping of bloggers as a whole. Twenty-three of the blogs came from 14 repeat bloggers, who provided more than one post during the crisis timeline. All of the repeat bloggers whose first post contained positive sentiment, maintained that positive sentiment towards the Church throughout the rest of their blog entries. The waning

positive sentiment from November 5 to November 11 is not because bloggers who started out positive became disenchanted. Instead the downward trend may be due to the positivists being satisfied with Church responses and no longer feeling a need to continue to talk about the change. Additionally, any repeat bloggers who started out neutral or negative in sentiment did not improve their sentiment score. Those scores either remained consistent or increased in negativity. This means that when positive sentiment spiked following the Church statements on November 13, it was due to bloggers who already supported the Church writing additional supportive blog posts for the handbook policy change. It also means that the decrease in negative sentiment and organizational misdeed with injury framing was a result of policy opposers not having an immediate response to the new statements.

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Appendix: Codebook and Codesheet

Church Handbook Policy Change Codebook
INSTRUCTIONS FOR CODING SHEET 1

1.   Please write the name of the news outlet, blog title, social media account, or description of the Church response under analysis.

2.   Please mark (1) if the media is a news article. Mark (2) if the media is a blog. Mark (3) if the media is a Facebook post by John Dehlin. Mark (4) if this is an official Church response.

3.   Indicate the publishing date and time based on the article date or timestamp provided by the blogging site or Facebook.

Crisis Types

4.   Challenges: Code for challenges when the piece of media makes mention of or alludes to the Church being unaware or unintentionally acting in an inappropriate manner. This may include acting incompetently and changing the handbook policies without understanding the consequences.

5.   Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Code for organizational misdeed with no injuries when the media mentions or alludes the Church knowingly caused the crisis, but doesn't mention any potential or occurring physical and/or emotional harm.

6.   Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Code for organization misdeed management misconduct when the media mentions or alludes the Church knowingly violated laws or regulations. The laws and regulations could be internal laws and regulations of the Church or civil laws and regulations.

7.   Organizational misdeed with injuries: Code of organizational misdeed with injuries when the media mentions or alludes the Church knowingly put stakeholders at risk, and mentions possible or occurring physical and/or emotional harm.

Sentiment

8.   Rate the tone of the media in terms of sentiment from a holistic standpoint:

   1 = Negative feelings toward the Church
   2 = Neutral or balanced feelings toward the Church, no clear stance favoring either side
   3 = Positive feelings toward the Church

Crisis Response Strategies

9.   Protection: Code for protection if the Church or crisis manager for the Church provides information for how stakeholders can protect from physical and/or emotional harm.

10.   Crisis Basics: Code for crisis basics if the Church or crisis manager for the Church provides information about the crisis including answers to who, what, when, where, why, and how questions.

11.   Corrective Action: Code for correction action when the Church or crisis manager for the Church describes what is being done to protect stakeholders from similar crises in the future.

12.   Express Concern for Victims: Code for expression of concern when the Church or crisis manager for the Church acknowledges some stakeholders may be physically or emotionally harmed by the change. This is not an admission of guilt, only sympathy.

13.   Attack the Accuser: Code for attack the accuser when the Church or crisis manager for the Church confronts a person or group who has criticized the Church.

14.   Denial: Code for denial when the Church or crisis manager for the Church asserts there is no crisis.

15.   Scapegoat: Code for scapegoat when the Church or crisis manager for the Church blames some individual or group outside of the Church for the crisis.

16.   Excuse: Code for excuse when the Church or crisis manager for the Church minimizes Church responsibility responsibility by denying intent to do harm or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis

17.   Justification: Code for justification when the Church or crisis manager for the Church minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

18.   Compensation: Code for compensation when the Church or crisis manager for the Church offers money or other gifts to victims.

19.   Apology: Code for apology when the Church or crisis manager for the Church indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness.

20.   Reminder: Code for reminder when the Church or crisis manager for the Church tells stakeholders about the past good works and history of the Church.

21.   Ingratiation: Code for ingratiation when the Church or crisis manager for the Church praises stakeholders for past good works of the Church.

22.   Victimage: Code for victimage when the Church or crisis manager for the Church reminds stakeholders that the Church is also a victim of the crisis.

23.   Other: If a Church response varied from the Crisis Response Strategies listed above or didn't use any of the crisis response strategies, explain what the Church did include in its response and include any supporting statements or paragraphs from the response.

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Coding Sheet

1   Description of media (News outlet, blog title, social media, Church response description):

_____

2   Type of Media: (Circle one)

     (1) News Article   (2) Blog Post   (3) John Dehlin   (4) Church Response

3   Publication Date and Time:_____

Crisis Types (most likely mutually exclusive – only one of these)

Accidental Cluster

4   Challenges   (0) Absent (1) Present
  (The Church is unaware or unintentionally acting in an inappropriate manner)

Preventable Cluster

5   Organizational misdeed with no injuries   (0) Absent (1) Present
  (The Church knowingly caused this crisis, but no mention of physical/emotional harm)

6   Organizational misdeed management misconduct   (0) Absent (1) Present
  (The Church is violating laws or regulations)

7   Organizational misdeed with injuries   (0) Absent (1) Present
  (The Church put stakeholders at risk and there is mention of physical/emotional)

Sentiment

8   In relation to the Church, what is the tone of the media?

     Negative   1 2 3   Positive

Crisis Response Strategies (not mutually exclusive)

9   Protection   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Provide information for what stakeholders can do to protect from physical/emotional harm)

10 Crisis Basics   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Provide information about the crisis: who, what when, where, why, and how)

11   Corrective action   (0) Absent (1) Present
(What is being done to protect stakeholders from future crises)

12   Express concern for victims   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Not admission of guilt, but expected by stakeholders)

13   Attack the accuser   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis managers confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the Church)

14   Denial   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis manager asserts there is no crisis)

15   Scapegoat   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the Church for the crisis)

16   Excuse   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis manager minimizes Church responsibility by denying intent to do harm or claiming inability to
control the events that triggered the crisis)

17   Justification   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis)

18   Compensation   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis managers offer money or other gifts to victims)

19   Apology   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness)

20   Reminder   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the Church)

21   Ingratiation   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis manager praises stakeholders or reminds them of past good works of the Church)

22   Victimage   (0) Absent (1) Present
(Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the Church is a victim of the crisis too)

23   Other   (0) Absent (1) Present
(The Church response differs from strategies above)
   Explain below:

Comments: