INACTIVE PUBLICS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS:
A TEST OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES’ EFFECTS ON
INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

By
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For all that I have accomplished and become, I dedicate this thesis to my parents. Without their love and support, I would not be where I am today.
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An effective public relations effort builds on a positive long-term relationship with an organization’s stakeholders. Activists and active publics receive much attention in organization-public relationship research. However, the majority of the stakeholders remain invisible and inactive. To advance a business, an organization should motivate those publics and engage them in the process of relationship-building.

The purpose of this study is to test the effects of corrective actions and ingratiation crisis strategies in motivating inactive and active publics’ information seeking and attitudes. Based on Grunig’s situational theory, and Hallahan’s Five Public Model and Issues Processes Model, the study proposes five hypotheses: 1) that the level of knowledge of and involvement with an organization is positively related to the degree of information seeking about an organization’s crisis; 2) inactive publics are more likely to show information seeking behavior when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy compared to when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy; 3) active publics are more likely to show information seeking behavior when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy compared to when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy; 4) inactive publics are more likely to construct positive attitudes towards the
organization when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy compared to when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy; 5) active publics are more likely to construct positive attitudes towards the organization when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy compared to when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy.

To test the proposed hypotheses, a 2 (type of crisis communication strategy: ingratiation vs. corrective action) x 2 (type of publics: inactive vs. active) factorial design was developed. This study used a real crisis case—Gap Inc.’s child labor crisis in 2007. And two scenarios of crisis communication strategies (ingratiation and corrective actions) based on Gap Inc.’s actual crisis responses. The dependent variables were information seeking and attitudes toward Gap. The results show that subjects’ levels of knowledge of Gap and involvement with Gap are positively related to the degree of information seeking about Gap’s crisis. Further, subjects in the group of inactive publics are more likely to seek information about Gap’s child labor crisis when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy compared to when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy. Subjects in the group of active publics are more likely to show information-seeking intention about Gap’s child labor crisis when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy compared to when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy.

The results of this study provide theoretical applications to connect crisis communication strategies to different kinds of publics and explore the effects of corrective actions and ingratiation strategies on inactive and active publics’ information-seeking behavior and attitudes. This study also provides practical implications to public relations practitioners when they are preparing strategies in an organizational crisis situation.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

An effective public relations effort builds on a positive long-term relationship with an organization’s stakeholders (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). It is important for an organization to maintain good relationships with stakeholders because organizations affect and are affected by their stakeholders. A positive organization-public relationship may have short-term and long-term benefits to organizations. In public relations research, one major goal is to understand how to establish and maintain organization-public relationships.

In particular, activists and active publics receive much attention in organization-public relationship research (Hallahan, 2000b). Organizations often have to confront activists who either support or condemn the organizations. Active publics are those who are aware of the organizations activities and operation and openly express their opinions towards the organizations. Active publics are comparatively easy to identify and to target in strategic public relations efforts.

However, active publics turn out to be only a relatively small percentage of stakeholders (Hallahan, 2000b). The majority of the stakeholders remain invisible and inactive. Hallahan (2000b) describes inactive publics as those who “possess comparatively low levels of knowledge about an organization and low levels of involvement in its operations” (p. 504). They are uninterested, unconscious, or unaware of the organization’s public relations efforts. To advance the business, an organization must motivate these inactive publics. At the same time, an organization needs to engage inactive publics in relationship building. However, few studies have focused on identifying and motivating inactive publics.

Grunig’s situational theory explains the reasons of various publics to communicate with organizations and states that “communication behaviors of publics can be best understood by
measuring how members of publics perceive situations in which they are affected by such organizational consequences as pollution, quality of products, hiring practices, or plant closings” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 148, see also Grunig, 1997). Therefore, publics interact or communicate with organizations depending on their perceptions of how they are directly affected by a given situation. Publics’ differing perceptions about a certain situation or issue may lead to different responses or different levels of interaction with the responsible organization.

An organizational crisis is one type of situation that may affect perceptions of an organization among mass publics including those who do not pay much attention to the organization during normal times. For example, a crisis can cause inactive publics to consider the consequences of the crisis on their lives and to realize their relationship with the organization.

To establish and maintain good relationships, organizations may need to use different communication approaches to address different publics who have varying levels of existing interaction with the organizations. Hallahan’s (2001) Issues Processes Model explains various response strategies for different publics. Hallahan posits that inactive publics lack initiative in communicating with organizations because they have little problem recognition or perceived ability to solve the problem. Therefore, if inactive publics can identify an organizational problem or believe that they have the ability to solve the organizational problem, they may be motivated to communicate with the organization.

An organizational crisis and strategic crisis communication can enhance interactions between an organization and its publics. A crisis can activate information-seeking behavior in people and cause them to re-evaluate their relationship with the organization. The organization must actively engage in crisis communication to minimize the negative effects on its stakeholders and the damage to the business. Crisis communication can change attitudes and
motivate inactive publics to pursue a higher level of interaction with the organization. A good crisis communication strategy may not only mitigate the negative impacts on the organization but also motivate inactive publics to reassess their relationship with the organization, which results in a higher level of knowledge and involvement.

The purpose of this study is to test the effects of various crisis strategies in motivating different publics. Hallahan (2000a, 2000b, 2001) argues that in order to raise inactive publics’ knowledge and involvement in organizations, communication should increase the publics’ motivation and ability to process information. A crisis strategy targeting inactive publics should therefore provide them with information about the organization’s successful communication attempts. Active publics by contrast already pay attention to an organization’s communication efforts and operation. How the organization deals with the present crisis is their primary concern. Their attitudes toward the organization may be affected by the organization’s actions and ability to solve the problem. Based on Coombs’s (1999) crisis communication strategies and Hallahan’s (2001) Issues Processes Model, an ingratiation strategy, which focuses on an organization’s past and on-going efforts to establish and maintain a good relationship with its publics, may be one of the most effective approaches in motivating inactive publics. A more accommodative strategy—corrective action—would be more appropriate in targeting active publics.

As Hallahan (2000a) suggested, understanding inactive publics is necessary for organizations’ development and public relations research. There are importantly practical and theoretical reasons for studying how to motivate inactive publics, especially in a crisis situation. From the perspective of business operation, changing inactive publics into active publics is important for an organization’s business development. Business advancement is based on sound relationships with various stakeholders. An organization should not only pay attention to active
publics but also needs to engage all other publics, because all the publics have potential impact on the organization’s development and operation. How to change a one-time buyer into a loyal customer? How to attract talents to join the organization? How to persuade a potential donor to support the organization? These people may be the inactive publics, but they can have significant impact on the organizations. In a crisis situation, an organization’s communication and ways to deal with the crisis can influence its reputation and publics’ perceptions of the organization. Inactive publics may become adversarial and confront with the organization, but it is also possible that inactive publics become active and develop positive perceptions of the organization if they are more aware of the organizations’ communication and operations.

From the perspective of public relations research, it is important to identify inactive public and their motivations to engage in communication and interaction with organizations, because “inactive publics are the groups from which aroused, aware, and active publics springs” (Hallahan, 2000a, p.464). The main focus of public relations research is to study the relationship between organization and its stakeholders and provide a theoretical basis for positive relationship-building. Having a better understanding of the effects of various crisis strategies on motivating different publics can contribute to the theoretical development of crisis management and organization-public relationship.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Publics’ Segmentation

Organizations have intricate relationships with various stakeholders. On the one hand, organizations’ survival and development rely heavily on the various activities and functions of stakeholders; on the other hand, organizations’ survival and development affect their various stakeholders. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) stated that “[o]rganizations are bombarded by demands from stakeholders both inside the organization and in their environments—employee, governments, communities, consumers, stockholders, and organized activists” (p. 2). According to Grunig and Repper (1992), the difference between stakeholders and publics is that stakeholders are “passive” communicators while publics are more aware of an organization’s activities and also more interactive with the organization. Stakeholders are influenced by organizations’ actions, while publics are segmented by their level of interaction with organizations.

Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) argued that “[o]ne powerful strategic method for segmenting publics is based on a situational theory that argues that organizations create publics when their actions have consequences for other organizations or groupings of people” (p. 31). They identified four kinds of publics by their level of interaction (p. 31):

Nonpublics are organizations or groups of individuals in the environment who are not affected in any way by an organization’s behavior.

Latent publics are organizations or groups of individuals in the environment who are affected by organizational behavior, but are not aware of this.

Aware publics are organizations or groups of individuals in the environment who realize that they are affected by organizational behavior.

Active publics are organizations or groups of individuals in the environment who realize that they are affected by organizational behavior and organize to do something about their common problem.
According to this segmentation, organizations’ survival and development are influenced by and influence three kinds of publics: latent publics, aware publics, and active publics. While these publics are affected by the organization’s operation and decisions, their levels of involvement with organizations are different. Dozier et al. (1995) stated that “[b]ecause active publics are the only ones that generate consequences for organizations, communicators might be tempted to ignore latent and aware publics” (p. 31). Organizational communication efforts often engage active publics more than the other two kinds of publics even though active publics may compose only a small part of the organization’s stakeholders (Hallahan, 200b).

Hallahan (2000b) argues that Grunig and Repper’s (1992) definitions of stakeholders and publics are inconsistent because Grunig and Repper “freely acknowledged that public relations initiatives are not limited to publics alone, that is, active groups, but can (and should) be directed to passive stakeholder groups as well” (p. 501). According to their explanation, an organization’s communication efforts should not be limited to active publics, but they also need to address passive stakeholders, who may become active publics if their level of involvement with the organization increases. Therefore, Hallahan (2000b) differentiates various publics according to their level of involvement with the organization. He defined a public as “a group of people who relate to an organization, who demonstrate varying degrees of activity-passivity, and who might (or might not) interact with others concerning their relationship with the organization” (p. 502). Hallahan’s definition combines “public” and “stakeholder,” which is more consistent and clear than Grunig and Repper’s definition. No matter whether they are passive communicators or active communicators, the groups of people related to an organization are its publics. He develops the Five Publics Model based on publics’ knowledge of and involvement with
organizations. Figure 2-1 shows that various types of publics have different levels of knowledge about and involvement with an organization.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>No Knowledge/No Involvement</td>
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Figure 2-1. Hallahan’s (2000b) Five Publics Model (p.504)

According to Hallahan’s (2001) model, knowledge “refers to beliefs and attitudes held in memory about a particular object, person, situation, or organization, based on everyday experiences or formal education,” and involvement “refers to the degree to which an individual sees an object, person, situation, or organization as being personally relevant or having personal consequences” (Hallahan, 2000b, p. 507). Therefore, publics’ knowledge about an organization refers to their cognitive level of understanding about the organization. In addition, publics’ involvement with the organization refers to their attitudinal or behavioral relevance to the organization.

According to the Figure 2-1, an inactive public possess only a minimum understanding of the organization and have minimum interaction with the organization. They have low knowledge about an organization and low involvement in its operations. Aroused publics also possess only a minimum understanding of the organization, but they have more interaction with the
organization than inactive publics. They have low knowledge about an organization and high
involvement with its operations. Aware publics understand the organization better than inactive
publics, but they also have minimum interaction with the organization as inactive publics do.
They have high knowledge about an organization and low involvement with its operations.
Hallahan’s definition of active publics is similar to Grunig and Repper’s (1992) definition of
active publics. These publics have a good understanding of the organization and a high level of
interaction with the organization. They have high knowledge about an organization and high
involvement with its operations. Nonpublics do not know about the organization and have no
interaction with it.

The Five Publics Model suggests that a type of public is not permanent but rather may
move to a higher level of knowledge or involvement triggered by certain factors or move down
to a lower level of knowledge and involvement under certain circumstances. Due to the large size
of inactive publics and their potential in advancing organizational development (Hallahan,
2000a), it is worth exerting public relations efforts to reach them. Inactive publics can be
motivated to become aware or aroused publics by organizations’ attempts in enhancing inactive
publics’ motivation, ability, and opportunity to process information.

An organizational crisis is one event that can change publics because it may attract a large
amount of media coverage, which can induce various publics’ to pay more attention to the
organization and to search for related information.

Crisis Situation

A “crisis” has been defined in different ways by different scholars. Barton (1993) called a
crisis “a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results” (p. 2). A crisis is an
event that may severely impact an organization’s operation and reputation as well as its
stakeholders. Fearn-Banks (1996) defined a crisis as “a major occurrence with a potentially
negative outcome affecting an organization, company or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (p. 1). Coombs (1999) stated that “a crisis can be defined as an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly” (p. 2).

Although these definitions are different, they all emphasize three components of a crisis. First, a crisis is an unpredictable event. Second, a crisis has potential negative outcomes for the organization. Third, a crisis affects relevant publics.

Crises have many typologies. Based on previous crisis studies, Coombs (1999) synthesized nine types: natural disaster, malevolence, technical breakdowns, human breakdowns, challenges, mega-damage, organizational misdeeds, and workplace violence (p. 61). A natural disaster is caused by extreme weather or other environmental problem that cannot be controlled by the organization. Malevolence is a crisis caused intentionally by an external party or internal stakeholder. A technical breakdown is a crisis caused by computer, machinery, or other infrastructure problems. A human breakdown is a crisis caused by human error. A challenge is a crisis caused by dissatisfied stakeholders who confront the organization. Mega-damage is an unexpected event causing a significant environmental disturbance. Organization misdeeds are the acts taken under management’s decisions without thorough consideration. Workplace violence is a crisis caused by one employee against other employees. Rumors are false or misleading information about an organization or its products.

Based on Coombs’s (1997) typologies, crises can be divided into two categories—externally and internally contributed—depending on their causes. An externally contributed crisis is caused by outside factors such as a natural disaster. An organization is not responsible for causing an externally contributed crisis. An internally contributed crisis is caused by or
directly related to the organization itself, for example organizational misdeeds or workplace violence. The organization is responsible for causing this type of crisis.

With internally attributed crises, organizations and crisis situations often receive large amounts of media coverage. Molotch and Lester (1975) examined the press coverage of the Santa Barbara oil spill from Union Oil’s Platform A in January 1969. They found that in “the first two years after the spill, the News Press provided 860 separate news stories concerning it” (p. 239). Birkland and Lawrence’s (2002) study about the Exxon Valdez’s oil spill on March 24, 1989, found that the event “was mentioned in 577 news stories in the major national print media between the day of the spill and the end of May 1989.” Furthermore:

- It was also the subject of 22 network evening news stories between March 27 and March 31, and an additional 70 stories in April and May of 1989. Nearly 1,000 print news stories and 69 network news stories discussed the Valdez spill between June of 1989 and the one-year anniversary of the spill. (Birkland & Lawrence, 2002, p. 18)

- In Englehardt, Sallot, and Springston’s (2004) study of the crash of ValuJet Flight 592 on May 11, 1996, they found that “[b]etween May 11 and June 11, 1996, there was a combined total of 295 news/editorial items consisting of articles, editorials, stand-alone photo captions, and bylined columns in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and The Miami Herald” (p. 142) about the accident, and that “more than 50% of news coverage during the 1st month postcrash was published in the first six days” (p. 151). In the case of Merck’s recall of Vioxx medicine, which was shown to increase cardiovascular risk, Vlad, Sallot, and Reber (2006) found that the “Vioxx crisis attracted tremendous media interest” (p. 366). All of these examples indicate that organizational crises, which cause fatal, societal, and environmental problems, are put on the media agenda. These crises can attract tremendous media coverage.

Organizations in crisis are highly exposed in the mass media. The media exposure can affect the general public’s agenda. Agenda setting theory proposes that the media’s selection and
coverage of certain issues sets the public’s agenda (McCoombs & Shaw, 1972). Funkhouser (1973) found a strong relationship between the general public’s ranking of important issues and the amount of media coverage on these issues. Hallahan (2001) argues that agenda building contributes to an issue’s visibility. The media exposure of certain issues increases the visibility of these issues to different publics. Media coverage of an organizational crisis can increase publics’ attention to the crisis. An organizational crisis may motivate inactive publics to become aware publics, aroused publics, or even active publics. That is, the crisis itself or the media coverage can directly and indirectly enhance inactive publics’ motivation to seek information.

**Situational Theory**

To discuss the possibility of motivating an inactive public to become a higher level of public, we first need to understand the reasons that publics communicate with organizations and the effects of organization-public communication on different publics. Grunig (1997) develops the situational theory of publics for segmenting organizational publics by publics’ problems identification or issues responses that affect organizations or are affected by an organization’s behavior.

The theory consists of three antecedents (problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement) that affect publics’ communication behaviors and two communication behaviors--active and passive, which may also be called information seeking and processing (Grunig, 1997). Active communication behavior refers to deliberate searching out of information on a specific topic, while passive communication behavior refers to unintentional processing of information that comes in randomly (Grunig, 1997).

Situational theory suggests that communication behaviors are affected by three factors. First, problem recognition, which is highly situational, refers to people’s perception of a problematic situation. Second, constraint recognition refers to people’s perception of their
limited abilities to solve the problem. Third, level of involvement refers to people’s perception of their personal connection to a situation (Grunig, 1983, 1987, 1997). The theory states that problem recognition is positively correlated with both active information-seeking and passive information processing, while constraint recognition is negatively correlated with these communication behaviors (Grunig, 1989). Level of involvement is positively correlated only with information-seeking (Grunig, 1989).

While people engaging in active communication intentionally search and process certain information about certain issues, people who are passive communicators process the information they randomly encounter in the environment. Grunig (1989) argues that people who actively seek information on a certain topic apply more cognitive thinking, have a higher tendency to hold attitudes about a situation, and are more likely to take action.

According to the theory, people’s knowledge of a situation is based on problem and constraint recognition. People identify a problematic situation when they “detect that something should be done about a situation” (Grunig, 1989, p.5). People’s perception of obstacles in solving the problem and their perception of personal involvement with the situation affect their level of information-seeking and processing behavior (Grunig, 1989, p. 5). Therefore, people’s level of knowledge and involvement affects communication outcomes.

Grunig (1984) identifies four common groups of publics: “publics that are active on all of the issues,” “publics that are apathetic on all issues,” “publics that are active only on issues that involve nearly everyone in the population,” and “singe-issue publics” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 160). Grunig also calls these four publics “all-issue publics,” “apathetic publics,” “involving-issue-only publics,” and “single-issue publics,” respectively (Grunig, 1989, p. 7). According to Grunig’s definition, an issue is a specific topic although it may be one aspect of a more general
problem, for example a water pollution issue could be one aspect of general environmental damage. All-issue publics are concerned with every issue and have a high level of knowledge about and involvement with these issues. Apathetic publics pay little attention to any of the issues. Single-issue publics are concerned with only one aspect of a problem. Involving-issue-only publics are concerned with any ongoing issue which receives a large amount of media attention (Grunig, 1989). Hallahan’s (2000) five publics concept can be applied to Grunig’s (1989) four groups of publics. All-issue publics are active publics, who have a high level of knowledge of and involvement with all related issues of a problem. Single-issue publics and involving-issue-only publics can be aware publics or aroused publics, who have knowledge of a problem or try to take actions regarding this problem. Apathetic publics are inactive publics.

Many studies done by Grunig and others have confirmed the utility of Grunig’s situational theory. Two studies aimed at defining urban environmental publics and rural publics done by Grunig (1983) are among the first studies that test the situational theory. The results found existence of four groups of publics. Later, Grunig’s (1989) study of an activist group, the Sierra Club, tried to determine if differences exist between various publics in the likelihood of joining an activist group. The results confirm the basic premise of situational theory. The results show that “the most active publics . . . are the most likely to join an activist group and to participate actively in that group” (Grunig, 1989, p. 22). The study shows that problem recognition and level of involvement are positively related to the level of communication and interaction. Thus, publics with a higher level of knowledge about and involvement with certain issues are more likely to perform active communication behavior. According to Grunig (1989, 1997), people join activist groups for different reasons. Some research found that “issues trigger activism” (Grunig, 1989, p. 12). However, “people seldom take an interest in problems or situations that do not
involve them and seldom communicate about these problems or situations” (Grunig, 1997, p. 37). Therefore, publics’ perception of issue salience may be important in motivating information-seeking and processing behaviors.

Major’s (1989) study of public responses to a disaster prediction shows that situational theory is applicable not only to communication behavior but also to the risk assessment process. People with different levels of risk and constraint perception have different responses to disaster prediction information. Based on the findings, Major (1989) suggests that programs and messages for disaster prediction should be designed to target different publics’ perceptions and beliefs. Hamilton (1992) conducts a survey study during the Kansas state governor’s election in 1990 to test the validity of situational theory and to try to extend the theory. The results show that highly active respondents are more likely to perform information search in the media than other respondents and also more likely to vote in elections. The results indicate that the general hypotheses of the situational theory are supported. Active publics are more likely to engage in information-seeking behavior.

According to situational theory, crisis communication targeting different publics should use different communication strategies. Active publics, who are quite familiar with organizations and related issues, are more likely to engage in active communication with organizations. Crisis communication, which targets active publics, should focus more on organizational efforts in solving the problem. Inactive publics, with a low level of knowledge and involvement, may not conduct an active information search regarding the organization or crisis. They may engage only in passive communication with the organization. As Hallahan suggested (2001), organizations cannot deny the existence of certain problem and prevent inactive public from receiving information from various sources, however, they can “counteract issue activation” by shape the
information that inactive publics received from various outsider sources and reduce the negative impact the problem creates (Hallahan, 2001, p.47). Therefore, when an organization has a crisis, it needs to raise inactive publics’ level of problem recognition and involvement and reduce constrains they might face in information processing. It can minimize the negative impact that the crisis brings in on the organization’s operation, reputation and relationship with various stakeholders.

**Crisis Communication Strategies**

A crisis can seriously damage an organization’s reputation and operations. Therefore, an organization in crisis should actively engage in crisis communication. An effective crisis communication approach can minimize the negative effects on an organization’s publics and the damage to its operation. A good crisis communication strategy should target publics’ level of knowledge and involvement with the organization.

In crisis communication, public relations efforts focus on image, reputation, and relationship restoration. Based on Allen and Caillouet’s (1994) impression strategies and Benoit’s (1995, 1997) image repair strategies, Coombs (1999) defined seven types of communication strategies that an organization can take: “attack the accuser,” “denial,” “excuse,” “justification,” ingratiation,” “corrective action,” and “full apology” (p. 123). **Attack the accuser** stresses that the organization confronts the individual or group who makes the accusation. **Denial** means that the organization does not admit the existence of a crisis. **Excuse** acknowledges the existence of a crisis, but the organization uses various explanations to limit its responsibility. **Justification** acknowledges the existence of a crisis, but the organization tries to minimize publics’ perception of crisis-related damage. **Ingratiation** stresses the benevolence of the organization to its stakeholders in the past rather than focusing on the crisis or taking responsibility for the crisis. **Corrective action** tries to repair the damage caused by the crisis, and
the organization takes preventive actions to avert similar crises in the future. *Full apology* admits full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness.

Different crises situations require different communication strategies. Coombs (1999) developed a continuum for crises and communication strategies (see Figure 2). “Full apology” is the most accommodative strategy because the organization takes responsibility for the crisis, while “attack accusers” is the most defensive strategy because the organization takes an aggressive approach to deny the crisis assuming no responsibility and also attacking publics who have accused the organization. “Ingratiation is very near the middle of the continuum because it tries to offset the negatives of the crisis with positives” (p. 123). Therefore, according to the level of responsibility they wish to assume, organizations should adopt different strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defensive</th>
<th>Accommodative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Accusers</td>
<td>Denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Corrective Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak Crisis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Crisis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Rumors | Natural Disaster | Malevolence | Accidents | Misdeeds |

Figure 2-2. Matching crises and communication strategies (Coombs, 1999, p.124)

**Combining Crisis Communication Strategies with the Issues Processes Model**

Hallahan (2001) develops the Issue Processes Model for issues management, targeting the five types of publics he categorizes (Figure 1), according to the level of involvement and knowledge. He defines the term “issue” as “a dispute between two or more parties over the allocation of resources, which might be natural, financial, political, or symbolic” (2001, p. 28). According to his definition, an organizational crisis can be an issue. It is a dispute between an organization and its stakeholders that may affect the organization’s reputation and operation. The
model explains the process of issue occurrence and possible responses that organizations can use to communicate with different types of publics. Hallahan’s (2001) model is based on two key processes: “activation and response” (p. 36). Issues activation is a process that “individuals and groups are transformed from states of inactivity to activism” regarding to their reactions to certain issues (Hallahan, 2001, p.36). It occurs when an individual recognizes an unequal allocation of resources between the problem and its rectification. Issues responses are the activities that the relevant parties undertake to change those inequalities (Hallahan, 2001). Issues activation includes “problem recognition, issue identification, issue expansion, claims making, and activist-initiated advocacy” (Hallahan, 2001, p. 36). Issues activation is a process in which publics identify the existence of certain problems or issues, or they start to take preliminary actions regarding the identified problems or issues.

Hallahan (2001) explains the process of issues activation inside the five types of publics. Problem recognition, which occurs when publics find conflicts in a situation, is the first step of issues activation (Hallahan, 2001). Hallahan (2001) argues that once inactive publics recognize a problem and start to gather information or seek solutions, they move to a more active state. Hallahan (2001) posits that a variety of factors can influence inactive publics’ problem recognition, and one key factor is issue exposure. An organizational crisis, which receives media coverage, can increase issue exposure among inactive publics. Issue exposure induces inactive publics’ problem recognition. Hallahan (2001) states, “Problem recognition entails simple acknowledgement of consequences” (p. 38). However, inactive publics “might not be predisposed to engage in any organized activity to effect change without being motivated by heightened self-interest” (p. 35). Inactive publics are more likely to be motivated to actively respond to the problem if they perceive some relevance of the problem to themselves. Hallahan
(2001) identified six factors that account for a low level of involvement by inactive publics: “belief that no problem exists, failure to recognize a problem, assessment that a problem is not important enough to take action, conviction that others . . . are attending to the problem, or belief that nothing can be done” (p. 35).

According to Hallahan’s explanation, the invisibility of problem existence and the inability to solve the existing problems lead to inactive publics’ low level of knowledge and involvement. Inactive publics need to perceive more self-interest in order to engage in communication. Problem recognition is also one of the three variables that explain people’s behavior in performing active or passive communication in Grunig’s (1997) situational theory. Therefore, inactive publics’ recognition of an existing problem is an important factor to motivate them to attain a higher level of involvement or to initiate their information-seeking behavior.

How organizations respond to issues can significantly affect their relationship with various publics. Hallahan (2001) develops issues responses strategies in his model. He argues for different strategies targeted to different types of publics on separate contingency continua (see Table 1). In the model, he proposes three different types of strategies for each public: advocacy, mix of advocacy and accommodation, and accommodation.

For active publics, communication should focus on negotiation-based strategies. The proposed advocacy strategy for active publics is avoidance in which organizations try to avoid or defer contacting active publics. Although this strategy is possible, active publics, who are usually well organized and have clear claims, are unlikely to give up easily (Hallahan, 2001). The mixed strategy of advocacy and accommodation for active publics includes acknowledgement and bargaining. An organization acknowledges the claims of active publics and engages in direct negotiations with these publics (Hallahan, 2001). The mostly accommodation strategy for active
publics is concession, which means that an organization agrees with the public and changes the organization’s positions accordingly (Hallahan, 2001). The focus of negotiation-based strategies is to take active publics’ concerns into consideration and to provide remedies for those concerns.

When communication targets inactive publics, the Issues Processes Model (See Table 2-1) suggests using prevention-based strategies. Hallahan (2001) explains that this strategy is to “reduce the probability that people will pay much attention to a particular problem” (p. 46). The most used advocacy strategies are ingratiation and reputation enhancement. Ingratiation strategy “involves creating ongoing opportunities to gain favorable acceptance by communicating the benefits an organization provides to individuals such as customers, investors, donors, employees, or voters” (Hallahan, 2001, p. 47). An organization can issue a news release about its corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs which benefit the local community. The message and information used in a reputation enhancement strategy focus on particular characteristics of an organization (Hallahan, 2001), e.g., its people-orientated nature or its successes at energy conservation. The mixed strategy of advocacy and accommodation focuses its communication efforts on performance and quality assurance. The most effective accommodation strategies are poll taking and market monitoring, which monitor inactive publics’ attitudes and behaviors (Hallahan, 2001). To prevent inactive publics from being affected by negative information and outside sources, organizations must continually monitor those inactive publics to ensure that organizational performance meets their standards.

The negotiation-based strategy of Hallahan (2001) for active publics is similar to Coombs’s (1999) corrective action strategy in crisis communication because both focus on the problem and its solutions. Hallahan’s prevention-based strategy tries to prevent inactive publics from paying too much attention to certain issues or problems by providing information about the
organization’s benevolence to their stakeholders. It is similar to Coombs’s (1999) ingratiation strategy, which also focuses on the organization’s past good deeds.

Table 2-1. Alternative response strategies as forms of advocacy versus accommodation (Hallahan, 2001, p.51)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public (Strategy)</th>
<th>Mostly Advocacy</th>
<th>Mixture of Advocacy and Accommodation</th>
<th>Mostly Accommodation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active (Negotiation)</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Acknowledgment</td>
<td>Concession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aroused (Intervention)</td>
<td>Co-optation</td>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td>Monitoring Collaboration Inquiry handling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware (Education)</td>
<td>Media advocacy</td>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>Alliance building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactive (Prevention)</td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>Performance/Quality assurance</td>
<td>Poll taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reputation enhancement</td>
<td></td>
<td>Market monitoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hypotheses**

Five hypotheses based on the literature reviewed above regarding the effectiveness of different crisis strategies in motivating different publics will be tested here. Grunig’s (1997) situational theory states that active or passive communication behaviors are affected by an individuals’ level of problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement. Hallahan’s (2001) five types of publics segments publics according to their knowledge of an organization and involvement with an organization’s operation. Grunig’s (1997) situational theory states that a positive relationship exists between problem recognition and information seeking behavior. That is, the level of knowledge and involvement should be positively related to information seeking behavior.

**H1:** The level of knowledge of and involvement with an organization is positively related to the degree of information seeking about an organization’s crisis.
If an organization has a crisis, the effects of various crisis strategies on different publics will vary. Hallahan’s Issues Processes Model (2001) and Coombs’s (1999) crisis communication strategies show similarity in terms of suggesting certain crisis response strategies in correspondence to crisis types. Hallahan considers not only the crisis type but also the type of public in selecting proper crisis response strategies. For inactive publics, Hallahan (2001) suggests prevention-based issue response strategies like Coombs’s (1999) ingratiation strategy, which emphasizes the benevolent projects that an organization has done or can do for its stakeholders. For active publics, Hallahan (2001) suggests negotiation-based issue response strategies similar to Coombs’s (1999) corrective action crisis strategy which emphasizes the importance of active publics’ concerns.

Hallahan’s concept of issues responses strategies for inactive public is to minimize the negative impact of outside sources and information on shaping inactive public’s negative perception of the organization. In a crisis situation, an organization cannot and should not deny the existence of the crisis and the responsibilities they should take. Therefore, in order to prevent inactive public from paying too much attention to the crisis and its negative impact, the organization should direct inactive public to focus on the organization itself rather than the crisis. The ingratiation strategy may be the most effective approach to motivate inactive publics to get more involved with an organization and to maintain a relatively positive attitude about the organization. The corrective action strategy may be a more effective approach at targeting active publics.

H2: Inactive publics are more likely to show information seeking behavior when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy compared to when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy.
H3: Active publics are more likely to show information seeking behavior when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy compared to when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy.

H4: Inactive publics are more likely to construct positive attitudes towards the organization when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy compared to when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy.

H5: Active publics are more likely to construct positive attitudes towards the organization when they are exposed to a corrective action strategy compared to when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy.
CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

This study used an experimental design. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2003), an experiment is a research method in which “researchers manipulate the independent variable(s) and then observe the responses of subjects on the dependent variable(s)” (p.221). The experiment is a valid choice for this study because the goal of the study is to prove a link between different crisis strategies’ effects on different types of publics’ information-seeking tendency and attitudes. To test the hypotheses proposed in the previous chapter, a 2 (types of crisis communication strategy: ingratiation vs. corrective actions) x 2 (types of publics: inactive vs. active) factorial design was developed. The independent variables were the two crisis strategies and the two types of publics. A real crisis case—Gap Inc.’s child labor crisis in 2007—was used in the study. Two crisis communication strategies (ingratiation and corrective actions) were developed based on Gap Inc.’s actual crisis responses. The dependent variables were information seeking and attitudes toward Gap.

Research Stimuli

Two case scenarios about Gap Inc.’s crisis responses were created based on an actual news story of Gap Inc.’s child labor crisis. In October 2007, a British newspaper revealed that one of Gap Inc’s garment factories in India was using child labor. Other media picked up the story, and Gap Inc. has received a great deal of media coverage on this issue. The crisis strategies in the two scenarios were based on Gap Inc.’s actual responses to the crisis and the company’s past activities as shown on its Web site. The two versions of case scenarios reflected the two types of crisis communication strategies: an ingratiation strategy focusing on Gap Inc.’s past benevolence and a corrective actions strategy focusing on the company’s immediate actions regarding the child labor issue.
The ingratiation strategy described Gap’s past and ongoing efforts to build a positive relationship with its stakeholders. These efforts included providing a supportive environment for employee development, protecting the environment, helping women and children affected by AIDS, and giving back to stakeholders, communities and societies through various programs. The corrective actions described the actual actions Gap took to solve the child labor issue and prevent the problem from happening again. These actions included cancelling the product order in question, prohibiting the embroidery subcontractor from engaging in any future Gap’s production, working with a child advocacy organization and the Indian government to ensure that the children found in the facility were cared for and reunited with their families, placing the vendor on probation and suspending 50% of its future orders for a minimum of six months, and convening a summit of Gap’s North Indian vendors to reinforce the “zero tolerance” policy against child labor and the implications of non-compliance. A complete copy of the scenarios is located in Appendix A.

Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot study was to identify whether the research subjects perceived the two case scenarios focusing on a corrective actions strategy and an ingratiation strategy as stimuli that provided information about corrective action strategy and ingratiation strategy.

Procedure

Thirty public relations students at the University of Florida participated in the pilot study to ensure that the two different crisis communication strategies worked as stimuli. Fifteen students were given the scenario focusing on ingratiation information and the other fifteen students were given the scenario focusing on corrective actions information. All students were asked to answer five yes or no questions about their perceptions of the case scenario immediately after reading it. Since there are no existing questions for testing the validity of these two crisis
strategies, the questions for the perceptions of a corrective actions strategy were modified from Coombs’s definition of a corrective actions strategy, and the questions for the perceptions of an ingratiation strategy were modified from Stephens, et.al’s (2005) measurement of message strategy in a crisis: “bolstering-reminds public of existing positive aspects,” “transcendence-places crisis in a larger, more desirable context,” and “praising others-goal is to win approval of target group” (p.417).

**Corrective actions strategy check**

First, two questions were asked to determine if the scenario provides the information which shows 1) Gap’s remedies for child labor crisis and 2) Gap’s preventive actions to avert similar crises in the future. These questions were used to test whether the case scenario focusing on the corrective actions strategy was perceived as relevant to corrective actions (α = .66).

**Ingratiation strategy check**

The following three questions were used to test whether the case scenario focusing on the ingratiation strategy was considered relevant to ingratiation (α = .08). The questions asked if the scenario 1) reminds the public of Gap’s existing positive aspects, 2) places the crisis in a larger, more desirable context and 3) indicates that Gap tried to win approval of target publics. Since the three questions had low reliability, a factor analysis was run. It resulted in two factors. The second question, which asked if the scenario placed the crisis in a larger, more desirable context, was not clustered with the other two questions (questions 1) and 3)). When a reliability test was run with questions 1) and 3), the test showed higher reliability (α = .47).

**Pilot Test Result**

When comparing the mean scores of the perceptions of the corrective actions strategy between the two groups (t[28] = 4.05, p < .001), the group exposed to the corrective actions strategy condition had a significantly higher mean score (M = .90, SD = .21) than the group
exposed to the ingratiation strategy condition ($M = .40, SD = 0.43$). When comparing the mean scores of ingratiation strategy between the two groups ($t[28]= 1.73, p = .095$), the group exposed to the ingratiation strategy condition had a marginally higher mean score ($M = 0.80, SD = 0.32$) than the group exposed to the corrective actions strategy condition ($M = 0.57, SD = 0.42$). For the main study, the measurement of each manipulation question was changed to a 5-point Likert scale.

**Main Study**

**Research Design**

A 2 x 2 between-subject (types of crisis communication strategy: ingratiation vs. corrective actions, types of publics: inactive publics vs. active publics) factorial design was implemented for the main study. The main study used the same case scenarios and questions as the pilot study.

**Participants**

Undergraduate students taking a course on public relations principles were recruited as the sample for the main study. Because Gap Inc. positions itself as an apparel brand targeting young people, college students are an appropriate sample for this study. These participants were the company’s stakeholders, who could affect and be affected by Gap Inc.’s communication efforts. They were treated in accordance with the Institutional Review Board’s guidelines involving human subjects.

**Procedure**

The questionnaires were sent out through the online survey software *Survey Monkey*. Participants whose student ID number ended with an odd digit were assigned to an ingratiation strategy condition. Participants whose student ID number ended with an even digit were assigned to a corrective actions strategy condition. All participants were asked general questions regarding their knowledge of Gap and involvement with Gap. Then, participants read Gap Inc.’s child
labor crisis scenario as well as one of the two crisis strategies. This was followed by a series of questions to determine their attitudes toward Gap and their intentions, if any, to seek more information. A complete copy of the questions is located in Appendix B.

**Measurements**

**Types of inactive and active publics**

Based on Hallahan’s (2000b) typology of four key types of publics, inactive and active publics were measured (before exposure to the case) with regard to their knowledge of and involvement with the company Gap Inc. The questions assessing subjects’ levels of knowledge about Gap Inc. were constructed and modified according to Laroche et al.’s (2003) questions for testing consumers’ perceived risk. The level of knowledge of Gap Inc. was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) in response to the following four questions: I am aware of (a) Gap’s products, (b) Gap’s social responsibility activities, (c) Gap’s crisis, (d) Gap’s TV commercials (α = .66). The questions assessing subjects’ levels of involvement with Gap Inc. were constructed and modified according to Laroche et al.’s (2003) questions for testing consumers’ perceived risk. The level of involvement with Gap Inc. was assessed with eleven questions on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree); significant-insignificant, matters to me-does not matter to me, important-unimportant, valuable-worthless, essential-non-essential, useless-useful, of no concern-of concern to me, undesirable-desirable, vital-superfluous, and boring-interesting (α = .94).

**Information seeking**

The questions assessing subjects’ information-seeking behavior were constructed according to Kahlor et. al.’s (2006) information-seeking questions. The questions of information-seeking behavior were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) in response to the following statements: (a) When the child labor issue comes
up, I’m likely to tune it on, (b) Whenever the child labor issue comes up, I try to learn more about it, (c) Gathering a lot of information on the child labor issue is worth my time, and (d) When it comes to the child labor issue, I am likely to go out of my way to get more information (α = .87).

**Attitude**

Participants were asked to describe their attitudes toward Gap Inc. after reading the case scenario and one of the two crisis communication strategies. The attitudes were assessed according to Trifts and Hauble’s (2003) five bipolar adjectives on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= *strongly disagree* to 5= *strongly agree*): undependable/dependable, dishonest/honest, unreliable/reliable, insincere/sincere, and untrustworthy/trustworthy (α = .91).

**Control variables**

Four questions were asked as control variables. Participants’ awareness of Gap’s child labor crisis and information-seeking behavior before their participation in the study were measured to remove their potential effects on attitudes and information seeking after their exposure to one of the two crisis response strategies. Gender was measured because women are found to have more positive attitudes toward ingratiating corporate philanthropic activities than men (Ross, Patterson, & Stutts, 1992). Students’ majors (1 = public relations, 2 = non public relations) also were measured because public relations students might pay more attention to the topic than other students, due to its relevance to their major.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Statistical Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) 16.0 for Windows. Correlation between involvement and information seeking, and correlation between knowledge and information seeking were used to test H1, and a series of analyses of covariances (ANCOVA) were implemented to compare active and inactive publics’ information-seeking behavior and attitudes.

A total of 198 subjects participated in the main study. Among 180 valid observations, 33.9% of subjects (N = 61) were male and 66.1% (N = 119) were female. Among these subjects, 75% (N = 135) were not public relations majors and 25% (N = 45) were public relations majors.

Six subjects left most of the questions unanswered and twelve subjects heard about the case or searched for information related to it before participating in the study. Thus, the total valid sample included 180 subjects. Sixty-six subjects with odd digits at the end of their student ID numbers were exposed to a corrective actions strategy and 114 subjects with even digits at the end of their student ID numbers were exposed to an ingratiation strategy.

The respondents were divided into types of publics based on their knowledge and involvement scores. Hallahan (2000) proposes to divide publics according to their knowledge and involvement, from which he makes four different groups: active publics with high knowledge and high involvement, aware publics with high knowledge and low involvement, aroused publics with low knowledge and high involvement, and inactive publics with low knowledge and low involvement. The median score of knowledge was 3.00, with a standard deviation of 0.67 and a range of 4.00, and the median of involvement was 3.00, with a standard deviation of 0.71 and a range of 4.00. The types of publics were categorized via median split.
The subjects with both knowledge and involvement scores of 3.00 or higher (40.6%) were classified in the “active public” group; the subjects with knowledge scores of 3.00 or higher and involvement scores below 3.00 were classified in the “aware public” group (20.0%); the subjects with knowledge scores below 3.00 and involvement scores of 3.00 or higher were classified in the “aroused public” group; and the subjects with both knowledge and involvement scores below 3.00 were classified in the “inactive public” group. Thus, 48 subjects were in the inactive public group; 23 subjects were in the aroused public group; 36 subjects were in the aware public group; 73 subjects were in the active public group.

Data Analysis

Manipulation Check

For a manipulation check of the two different case scenarios focusing on ingratiation and corrective actions strategies, participants were asked the same questions as in the pilot study, but with a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

The results showed that the two case scenarios worked successfully as research stimuli. When comparing the mean scores of the perception of a corrective actions strategy ($t = 2.47, p < .05$), the group exposed to the corrective actions strategy had a higher mean score ($M = 3.58, SD = 0.67$) than the group exposed to the ingratiation strategy ($M = 3.30, SD = 0.77$). When comparing the mean scores of the perception of an ingratiation strategy ($t = -1.86, p = .064$), the group exposed to the ingratiation strategy had a marginally higher mean score ($M = 3.58, SD = 0.54$) than the group exposed to the corrective actions strategy ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.55$).

Hypotheses Testing

The first hypothesis states that levels of knowledge of and involvement with an organization are positively related to the degree of information seeking about the organization’s crisis. Knowledge was measured by a 5-point Likert scale asking about subjects’ awareness of
the company’s products, social responsibility activities, crises and commercials. The mean knowledge score was 3.50, with a standard deviation of 0.67 and a range of 4. Involvement was measured by another 5-point Likert scale with eleven items asking about subjects’ perceptions of the company. The mean involvement score was 2.90, with a standard deviation of 0.71 and a range of 4. Information seeking was measured by four 5-point Likert scale questions asking about subjects’ intentions of gathering information about the company’s crisis. The mean information seeking score was 3.14, with a standard deviation of 0.76 and a range of 4.

A Pearson correlation was conducted to test the relationship of knowledge and involvement to dependent variable: information-seeking behavior. The level of knowledge was positively correlated with information-seeking behavior and the finding was significant ($r = .138, p < .01$). The level of involvement was also positively correlated with information-seeking behavior and the finding was significant ($r = .158, p < .05$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. The results illustrate that subjects’ levels of knowledge of and involvement with Gap are positively related to their degrees of information seeking about Gap’s crisis.

The second hypothesis states that inactive publics are more likely to show information seeking behavior when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy compared to when they are exposed to a corrective actions strategy. An analysis of covariances (ANCOVA) test was conducted to compare the mean scores of information-seeking behavior between the inactive public subjects exposed to the corrective actions strategy and those exposed to the ingratiation strategy. The influences of the two crisis strategy types on the inactive public’s information-seeking likelihood were tested after controlling the effects of gender and major. Of subjects in the inactive public group, 35.4% ($N = 17$) read the case scenario focusing on a corrective actions strategy, and 64.6% ($N = 31$) read the case scenario focusing on an ingratiation strategy. The
inactive public subjects exposed to the ingratiation strategy condition had a higher mean score
\((M = 3.12, SD = 0.76)\) of information-seeking behavior than those exposed to the corrective
actions strategy condition \((M = 2.66, SD = 0.98)\). The difference was marginally significant \((F(1, 46) = 3.27, p = .077)\). Gender and major did not make significant influences on information-
seeking behavior.

Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported. These results illustrate that subjects in the
inactive public group are more likely to show information-seeking intentions about Gap’s child
labor crisis when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy than when they are exposed to a
corrective actions strategy.

The third hypothesis states that active publics are more likely to show information-seeking
behavior when they are exposed to a corrective actions strategy compared to when they are
exposed to an ingratiation strategy.

Another ANCOVA was conducted to compare the mean scores of information-seeking
behavior between the active public subjects who were exposed to the corrective actions strategy
and those exposed to the ingratiation strategy. The influences of the two crisis strategy types on
the active public’s information-seeking likelihood were tested after controlling the effects of
gender and major. Of subjects in the active public group, 37.0\% (\(N = 27\)) read the case scenario
focusing on a corrective actions strategy, and 63.0\% (\(N = 46\)) read the case scenario focusing on
an ingratiation strategy. The active public subjects exposed to the corrective actions strategy
condition had a higher mean score of information-seeking behavior \((M = 3.41, SD = 0.74)\) than
those exposed to the ingratiation strategy condition \((M = 3.11, SD = 0.73)\). This finding was
marginally significant \((F(1, 71) = 2.83, p = .097)\). Both gender and major didn’t show
significant differences on information-seeking behavior.
Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. These results illustrate that subjects in the active public group are more likely to show information-seeking intentions about Gap’s child labor crisis when they are exposed to a corrective actions strategy than when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy.

The fourth hypothesis states that inactive publics are more likely to construct positive attitudes towards the organization when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy compared to when they are exposed to a corrective actions strategy. The mean score for attitude was 3.23, with a standard deviation of 0.67 and a range of 4.

As discussed above, seventeen subjects defined as inactive public read the case scenario focusing on a corrective actions strategy, and 31 subjects read the case scenario focusing on an ingratiation strategy. An ANCOVA test was conducted to compare the mean scores of attitudes between those who were exposed to the corrective actions strategy condition and those exposed to the ingratiation strategy condition. The inactive public subjects exposed to the corrective actions strategy condition had a lower mean score ($M = 2.73, SD = 0.75$) than those exposed to the ingratiation condition ($M = 3.04, SD = 0.66$). However, the difference was not significant. At the same time, the results showed that both gender and majors didn’t have any significant influences on attitude formation.

Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported. The results illustrate that subjects in the inactive public group showed no differences in attitudes toward Gap whether they were exposed to an ingratiation strategy or a corrective actions strategy.

The fifth hypothesis states that active publics are more likely to construct positive attitudes toward the organization when they are exposed to a corrective actions strategy compared to when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy.
As discussed above, 27 subjects defined as active public read the case scenario focusing on an corrective actions strategy, and 46 subjects read the case scenario focusing on an ingratiation strategy. An ANCOVA test was conducted to compare the mean scores of attitudes between those active public subjects who were exposed to a corrective actions strategy and those exposed to an ingratiation strategy. The active public subjects exposed to the corrective actions strategy condition had a higher positive mean score ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.65$) than those exposed to the ingratiation strategy condition ($M = 3.47, SD = 0.57$). However, the differences were not significant. At the same time, the results showed that both gender and majors didn’t have significant influences on attitude formation.

Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported. These results illustrate that subjects in the active public group show no differences in attitudes toward Gap whether they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy or a corrective actions strategy.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Summary of Results

This study was designed to test the effect of different crisis strategies on different types of publics with a focus on active and inactive publics, as defined by Hallahan.

Hypothesis 1 stated that subject’s levels of knowledge and involvement were positively correlated with their degrees of information-seeking behavior. It was supported. Results showed that the correlation exists, though it was not a strong one. The findings indicated that subjects with higher levels of knowledge of Gap displayed higher degrees of information seeking about Gap’s child labor crisis. Subjects with higher levels of involvement with Gap also displayed higher degrees of information seeking about Gap’s child labor crisis. The results also indicated that subjects with higher levels of knowledge of an organization are usually more involved with the organization ($r = .71, p < .05$).

Hypotheses 2 and 3 stated that inactive publics with low levels of knowledge and involvement would react better to an ingratiation strategy and seek more information about an organization’s crisis, while active publics with high levels of knowledge and involvement would react better to a corrective actions strategy. The findings moderately supported Hypotheses 2 and 3. Subjects categorized as members of Gap’s inactive public were more likely to show information-seeking intentions toward Gap’s child labor crisis when they read the ingratiation case scenario. Subjects categorized as members of Gap’s active public were more likely to show information-seeking intentions toward the child labor crisis when they read the corrective actions case scenario. The results indicated that an ingratiation strategy works better to encourage inactive publics to search for information, while a corrective actions strategy works better to motivate active publics to search for information.
Hypotheses 4 and 5 stated that inactive publics are more likely to show positive attitudes toward the organization when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy, while active publics with high levels of knowledge and involvement would favor a corrective actions strategy. The findings did not support these two hypotheses. Subjects in Gap’s inactive public and active public showed no differences in attitudes toward Gap whether they read the ingratiation case scenario or the corrective actions one.

**Implications for Public Relations Theory and Practice**

One of the important goals of public relations research is to understand different types of publics and their motivations to communicate with organizations. Most of the previous research focused on active publics or activist groups, such as Grunig’s situation theory. Based on varying publics’ knowledge and involvement, Hallahan developed a Five Publics Model (2000b). This model includes inactive publics as one of the key stakeholders of organizations. However, his theories have not been empirically tested in a crisis situation. This study conducts an experiment focusing on inactive and active publics, which applies Hallahan’s theories in a real situation. This experiment proves that there is a positive relationship between knowledge and information seeking and between involvement and information seeking. It also shows that there is a positive relationship between knowledge and involvement. Therefore, publics with higher levels of knowledge and involvement are more likely to seek information about the crisis or the organization. At the same time, attitude is positively correlated to both knowledge ($r = 0.32, p < .05$) and involvement ($r = 0.50, p < .05$). Although the findings only suggest moderate correlations, they indicate that publics with higher levels of knowledge and involvement are more likely to show positive attitudes towards the organizations. However, attitude does not correlate to information-seeking behavior, which indicates that the intention of seeking more information about the crisis or the organization may not lead to a more positive or negative attitudes about the crisis or the organization.
Crisis communication and management are key areas of public relations research. Coomb’s theory of crisis communication elaborates different types of crisis strategies in response to different types of crises. His theory focuses on the organizations in crises. However, different types of publics may respond variously to the same crisis strategies or different types of strategies. This study applies Grunig’s situation theory and Hallahan’s Issues Responses Model to a crisis situation to test the effects of corrective actions and ingratiation crisis strategies on active and inactive publics’ information seeking and attitudes. These two theories provide a solid theoretical basis for understanding publics’ attitudinal and behavioral responses in different situations.

This study shows a significant relationship between an ingratiation strategy and inactive publics’ information-seeking behavior and between a corrective actions strategy and active publics’ information-seeking behavior. It proves that the effects of ingratiation and corrective actions strategies are different in motivating inactive and active publics’ information-seeking behavior toward a crisis topic. The findings of this study are consistent with the hypotheses predicted in Grunig’s situational theory. Grunig’s theory states that a positive relationship exists between problem recognition and information-seeking behavior. The problem recognition refers to people’s perception of a problematic situation (Grunig, 1997), which is similar to Hallahan’s definition of knowledge. In this study, subjects with higher levels of knowledge and involvement display higher degrees of information seeking about an organization’s crisis.

The findings of this study have important practical implications. Crises can bring great damage to an organizations’ relationship with its stakeholders if not handled well. Therefore, it is important to understand the effects of crisis strategies on different publics. This study uses a real crisis as research stimulus, which increases the validity of practical application.
The finding that inactive publics are more likely to seek information when they are exposed to an ingratiation strategy seems due to their low levels of knowledge and involvement. Because inactive publics are not very engaged with an organization’s crisis, a corrective actions strategy—which mainly provides information about the organization’s responsive actions—may not catch the attention of inactive publics. Inactive publics’ low knowledge of and low involvement with a topic affect their abilities and motivations to process unfamiliar messages (Hallahan, 2000a). However, an ingratiation strategy focusing on an organization’s benevolent efforts may send out a confusing message to inactive publics seeing crisis on one side and positive information on the other side. These contradicting messages may motivate inactive publics to search for information about the crisis and the organization.

This study finds that an ingratiation crisis strategy is not more effective than a corrective actions strategy on the construction of positive attitudes in inactive publics. This also seems to be due to their low levels of knowledge and involvement. Hypothesis 4 predicted that inactive publics would construct positive attitudes after exposure to an ingratiation strategy; however, it did not consider the factor of exposure time. To motivate inactive publics to engage in information processing, three factors—“motivation,” “ability,” and “opportunity”—need to work together (Hallahan, 2000a). Hallahan states that “repeating messages frequently” is one of the key techniques for enhancing inactive publics’ opportunity of message processing (2000a, p. 469). An ingratiation strategy may work to motivate inactive publics to seek more information about a crisis or an organization, however, one-time-exposure to a crisis strategy message does not provide enough opportunities for inactive publics to develop specific attitudes. A short-term exposure to the organization’s crisis reactions or benevolent information may not have clear
effects on inactive publics’ attitudes toward the organization. Inactive publics with minimum or no knowledge of the organization need more information or a longer time to develop attitudes.

In a crisis situation, an organization’s actions and communication should engage inactive publics in active communication, which increases their levels of knowledge and involvement. The inactive publics may become aware or aroused publics—even active publics, if they have more information about the crisis and are able to perform deeper information processing. Therefore, an organization should react quickly to a crisis. At the same time, it should expend efforts to provide more positive information about the organization by repeating messages and key points.

This study finds that active publics are more likely to seek information when they are exposed to a corrective actions strategy. This seems to be true because of their high levels of knowledge and involvement. Before being exposed to different types of crisis strategies, active publics have a good knowledge of the organization and its activities. An ingratiation strategy may not provide any new information to them. A corrective actions strategy, which provides new information about the organization’s activities, can catch active publics’ attention and encourage them to seek more information.

At the same time, this study finds that active publics’ attitudes are not more affected by a corrective actions strategy than an ingratiation strategy in a crisis situation. This also seems to be due to their high levels of knowledge and involvement. Active publics are less likely to be affected by exposure to corrective actions or ingratiation strategies. Generally, active publics are more likely to construct positive attitudes toward the organization than inactive publics whether they read corrective actions or ingratiation strategies. Between subjects in the inactive and active publics exposed to the corrective actions strategy, active public subjects had a higher attitude
mean score ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.65$) than inactive publics ($M = 2.72, SD = 0.75$). This finding was significant ($t = 4.52, p < .001$). Between subjects in the inactive and active publics exposed to the ingratiation strategy, active public subjects again had a higher mean score ($M = 3.47, SD = 0.57$) than inactive publics ($M = 3.04, SD = 0.66$). This finding also was significant ($t = 2.98, p < .01$). The findings indicate that active publics tend to be more affected by corrective actions and ingratiation crisis strategies than inactive publics.

As suggested in Grunig’s Sierra Club Study (1989), publics with high levels of knowledge and involvement “are most likely to communicate actively about the situational issues…and to engage in individual behaviors related to those issues” (p.22). Active publics tend to pay more attention to and react quickly to the organization’s activities and operations. Therefore, they are more likely to show positive attitudes when exposed to organizational information.

Because information is exchanged so quickly in today’s world, an organization in crisis should react quickly to minimize damages to its reputation and operation. Active publics, which rank high in knowledge and involvement, may initiate their own communication regarding the crisis (Hallahan, 2000a). Therefore, when an organization’s crisis strategy is targeting active publics, the messages should focus on actions to remedy the crisis and prevent it from recurring; at the same time, they should remind active publics of the organization’s benevolence.

This study suggests that different types of publics have different reactions towards an organizational crisis and different types of crisis strategies. An organization under crisis should prepare different crisis communication programs for targeting different types of publics.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. The first one is that it uses only one company’s crisis. Although it is a real case, it is inappropriate to generalize to other crisis situations from this
single case. Replication with other types of crises from different companies or industries is needed.

The second limitation is related to the stimulus materials. Although the case scenario and crisis strategies were created based on real media reports and information from Gap’s Web site, they were not exact company materials for the crisis. Future research can use materials released by organizations having crises, which would provide a more realistic setting for research.

The third limitation is related to the questions used in the manipulation check. Since no previous research testing the effects of crisis strategies on different publics has been conducted, there were no pre-existing questions available to check the validity of different crisis strategies. The questions used in the manipulation check were created based on the definitions of different crisis strategies. However, neither set of questions had high reliability coefficients. Further research should develop a more reliable set of questions for manipulation checks.

The forth limitation is related to the ingratiation case scenario. Because both of the manipulation checks in the pilot study and the main study showed that the groups exposed to the ingratiation strategy only had marginally significant higher mean scores than the groups exposed to the corrective actions strategy. It indicates that the manipulation for the ingratiation case might not be successful and elicit other perceptions rather than ingratiation. For example, the scenario used in this study might remind the participants of Gap’s corrective action rather than its past good deeds. Future study should develop scenarios which have a more precise focus on ingratiation and replicate this study with the improved scenarios. At the same time, since this study didn’t have an equal number of participants per condition and per public group, future study may use equal number of research subjects for each strategy and each public group, which also may increase the internal reliability.
Finally, the method of measuring attitudes could be improved. Because attitudes were measured right after participants read the case scenarios, long-term effects were not analyzed. Analysis over a longer time frame would be helpful to understand inactive publics’ attitude formation or attitude changes. Further research could expose inactive publics to an ingratiation strategy messages for a longer period of time, then analyze attitudes to test the effects of the ingratiation strategy over a prolonged time period.

Although Gap is a famous clothes brand for young people, a child labor crisis happened in India does not seem to have strong connections with college students in the US. A civilian crisis that can affect students’ daily life may have stronger effects on students’ attitudes formation or changes. Future study may also use a crisis that is more connected to the college students’ personal life, such as campus violence which can have significant influence on their daily life.

Conclusion

This study explored crisis communication strategies’ effects on motivating inactive publics to engage in communication with organizations. This study combined theories on public segmentation and crisis communication to test two communication strategies’ effects on inactive and active publics’ information seeking behavior and attitudes in a real crisis situation. This study found that publics’ levels of involvement and knowledge were positively related to their degree of seeking information. It also found that inactive publics were more motivated by ingratiation strategies to seek relevant information; while active publics were more motivated by corrective actions strategies to seek relevant information. These findings may contribute to public relations research on understanding inactive publics’ motivation of communications during an organizational crisis. This study also provides practical suggestions to public relations practitioners for preparing communication strategies when organizations are having crises.
However, this study only tests two crisis communication strategies—ingratiation and corrective actions with a focus on inactive and active publics. To have a thorough understanding of crisis communication strategies’ effects on different types of publics, it requires more research. Future research can explore different communication strategies’ effects on four different types of publics. This study uses an internally attributed crisis; however, publics’ reactions to organizational communication may be different when there is an externally attributed crisis. This study illustrates only one possibility for connecting crisis communication strategies with different types of publics. More research is needed to understand publics’ reactions to crisis communication strategies.
APPENDIX A
EXPERIMENT STIMULI

Case Scenario Focusing on Corrective Action Strategy


The reporter, Dan McDougall, said the children were working without pay as virtual slaves in filthy conditions with a single, backed-up latrine and bowls of rice covered with flies and they slept on the roof.

McDougall also videotaped the situation. His video material showed that children, all appearing to be between the ages of 10 and 13, stitched embroidered shirts in a crowded, dimly lit workroom. The video clearly showed a Gap label on the back of each garment.

Later, Gap admitted that it might have unknowingly used child labor in the production of a line of children's clothing in India.

Gap Inc. responded within hours of the news breaking in London on October, 28th, 2007. They ordered a full investigation into the allegations and re-iterated its policy never to use child labor in the production of its clothes.

Gap took immediate actions following their investigation. Firstly, they cancelled the product order in question and ensured that the garment would never be sold. The embroidery subcontractor involved was immediately prohibited from any future Gap Inc. production.

Gap also worked with a child advocacy organization, BBA, and the Indian government, who ensured that the children found in the makeshift facility, were cared for and reunited with their families.

Gap placed the vendor on probation and suspended 50 percent of its future orders for a minimum of six months. At the same time, Gap convened a summit of their North Indian vendors on November 2, 2007 to reinforce their “zero tolerance” policy against child labor and the implications of non-compliance.
Case Scenario Focusing on Ingratiation Strategy


The reporter, Dan McDougall, said the children were working without pay as virtual slaves in filthy conditions with a single, backed-up latrine and bowls of rice covered with flies and they slept on the roof.

McDougall also videotaped the situation. His video material showed that children, all appearing to be between the ages of 10 and 13, stitched embroidered shirts in a crowded, dimly lit workroom. The video clearly showed a Gap label on the back of each garment.

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They have been exerting every effort on giving back to their stakeholders, communities and societies where they do business. They have been working closely with garment factories in different countries to ensure a safe and healthy working environment, at the same time, they have been partnering with many organizations around the world to address industry-wide issues.

Gap has been trying to reduce their impact on the environment through reducing energy consumption or creating covetable products through innovative, sustainable design. At the same time, they have been working closely with local communities and conducting different programs to help local people change the course of their lives and take personal ownership of their future and their potential. In order to help women and children affected by AIDS in Africa, Gap established the Gap (PRODUCT)RED Collection. Half of the profits from its sale are contributed to the Global Fund.
APPENDIX B
QUESTIONNAIRE

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:
The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of crisis communication strategies.

What you will be asked to do in the study:
First, you will be asked to answer 15 questions about your knowledge of Gap. Then you will read a case scenario, and you will be asked another 11 questions.

Time required:
About 10-15 minutes

Risks and Benefits:
You will experience no more than minimal risk in this research. There is no direct benefit to you for participating in the study.

Compensation:
You will be given 5 extra points in the third exam for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:
Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to the number will be kept in a locked file in my faculty supervisor's office. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study:
You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:
Xiangxin Bao, Master Student, Department of Public Relations, Weimer Hall, phone 352-8717532

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:
IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.

Agreement:
I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure.
1. I accept to participate in this study.
   ☐ I accept ☐ NO
2. Please write down your UFID
   UFID
3. Major
   ☐ Public relations ☐ Non public relations
4. Gender
   ☐ Male ☐ Female
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Please read the case scenario in the next page

The reporter, Dan McDougall, said the children were working without pay as virtual slaves in filthy conditions with a single, backed-up latrine and bowls of rice covered with flies and they slept on the roof.

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Please answer the questions in the next pages.
(Case Scenario Version 2: Ingratiation Strategy)


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Please answer the questions in the next pages.
7. I think the scenario provides the information that shows Gap’s remedies for child labor crisis.
   □ Strongly agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree

8. I think the scenario provides the information that shows Gap’s preventive actions to avert similar crises in the future.
   □ Strongly agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree

9. I think the scenario provides the information that can reminds public of Gap’s existing positive aspects.
   □ Strongly agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree

10. I think the scenario provides the information that places crisis in a larger, more desirable context.
    □ Strongly agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree

11. I think the scenario provides the information that indicates Gap tries to win approval of target publics.
    □ Strongly agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Strongly disagree

12. Have you heard about this case before?
    □ Yes □ No

13. Have you searched information about this before?
    □ Yes □ No
14. When the child labor issue comes up, I’m likely to tune it on.
   - Strongly agree  - Agree  - Neutral  - Disagree  - Strongly disagree

15. Whenever the child labor issue comes up, I try to learn more about it.
   - Strongly agree  - Agree  - Neutral  - Disagree  - Strongly disagree

16. Gathering a lot of information on the child labor issue is worth my time.
   - Strongly agree  - Agree  - Neutral  - Disagree  - Strongly disagree

17. When it comes to the child labor issue, I am likely to go out of my way to get more information.
   - Strongly agree  - Agree  - Neutral  - Disagree  - Strongly disagree

18. I think that Gap is

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Thank you very much for completing the survey!
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Xiangxin Bao was born in China. She graduated from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in 2005, earning a B.E. in International Trade and Economies (International Trade) and a B.A. in English (Cultures and Communication Studies). After graduation, she worked two years for a nonprofit organization. Then, she went to University of Florida to continue her graduate study specializing in public relations. She completed her Master of Arts in Mass Communication at the University of Florida in 2009.