

Crisis Communication and Image Repair Strategies: Audience Attitude and Perceptions  
of Toyota in an Online Environment

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## ABSTRACT

Crisis communication research studies identify effective ways for organizations to manage a crisis, as well how such strategies affect external publics (Coombs, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2007). Benoit's (1995, 1997) image repair strategies serves as the model for the foundational research study that analyzed Toyota's image repair strategies following the recall and product malfunction crisis in 2010. This research study examines consumer perceptions and attitudes of Toyota's image repair strategies and crisis communication efforts. A series of publically posted blogs and forum conversations were analyzed by means of content analysis. The coding for the analyses emerged from the data, using the guidelines set forth by thematic analysis (Owen, 1985) and further expanded by Dochterman and Stamp (2010). A comparative analysis was conducted to provide a comprehensive analysis of Toyota's overall crisis communication efforts and image repair effectiveness.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Crisis Communication and Image Repair Strategies

Crisis communication and identity restoration theories have undergone extensive changes, additions, and improvements for the past two decades in applied communication research (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995, 1997; Bradford and Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2007; Howell & Miller, 2006; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). A crisis can occur at various levels within an organization or business and can be caused by internal and external factors.

Organizational crisis can be defined as, “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goals,” (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998, p. 194). In other words, crises are events that damage the reputation of and threaten the positive face of an organization (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Crisis communication research has been traditionally grounded in studies identifying effective ways for organizations to manage a crisis, as well as the effect those strategies have on their external publics. However, there is a clear need for the expansion of crisis communication research and its application to audience perceptions and attitudes.

The ways in which organizations can restore their public image after a crisis have been developed extensively. Crisis management first involves an attempt to eliminate organizational structural failure and secondly the development and implementation

of communication systems to avoid and manage crisis events (Barton, 2001). Littlejohn (1983) first contributed to the field of crisis management by developing a set of six steps including structure, team design, training, auditing, planning, and the actual crisis management effort itself. Allen and Caillouet (1994) developed a list of 20 impression management techniques organizations can use following a crisis event. Later, the research of Benoit (1995, 1997), led to the development of the five main categories of image restoration typologies to rebuild public image, including: (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) reducing the offensiveness, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification.

Closely related to image repair theories are theories of crisis communication. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was revolutionized by the developments by Coombs (1998, 1999), positing that there are particular Crisis Communication Strategies (CCSs) that should be avoided or implemented according to the context of the organization's crisis (Howell & Miller, 2006). According to Coombs (1998), "a crisis manager should select one or more CCSs in accordance with the configuration of elements in the crisis situation," (p. 181). Later, Coombs (1998) developed the SCCT. Based on the research of prominent identity management and crisis communication scholars, Coombs (2007) developed a set of ten common crisis communication strategies. These strategies are best understood when seen as a group of four clusters of strategies that are organized by whether the intent of the organization post-crisis is to change the public perception of the actual crisis, or to change the public perception of the organization itself (Coombs, 2007).

In addition to Benoit's (1995) theory of image restoration and Coombs' (1998) SCCT, it is important to look at research regarding face and face-work when examining

how people manage both personal and organizational image. Because face is ultimately a metaphor for one's self-image (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007), it is critical to use the works of Goffman, (1967) when studying how people use facework with hopes of restoring damaged reputation. According to Holtgraves (1992), face is the public existence of the self, based on their use of internally developed facework. Face-threatening acts such as crisis and conflict, results in the need of restoring positive face. The works of Goffman (1967) and the development of face theory and Brown and Levinson (1987) and the use of politeness theory have been used to research face negotiation in web chats (Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006), face threats in romantic relationships (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Zhang & Stafford, 2008), and most recently is conflict and intercultural conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1997, 1998, 2007).

When large corporations, such as Toyota Motor Corporation, are accused of manufacturing dysfunctional products and misleading consumers, their public image is threatened. Myers (2011) assessed Toyota's image repair strategies and crisis communication efforts following the mass recall of over 2 million vehicles in 2009 and 2010. The initial analysis used Benoit's (1995) image repair strategies as a conceptual framework for conducting a discourse analysis of Toyota's congressional testimony revealing how Toyota performed image repair (Tables 1 & 2 in the Appendix).

The purpose of this study is to examine the audience and consumer perception of Toyota's image repair strategies and crisis communication efforts following the mass recall and governmental violations in 2009 and 2010. A series of publically posted blogs and forum conversations were analyzed through a constant comparison method analysis. That is, coding for the analyses emerged from the data, using the guidelines set forth by

thematic analysis (Owen, 1985) and further expanded by Dochterman and Stamp (2010). Based on the image repair strategies employed by Toyota and the analyzed audience perceptions of Toyota's image repair strategies, a comprehensive analysis of Toyota's overall crisis communication efforts and image repair success and recommendations for future image repair success is proposed.

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Benoit's Image Restoration Strategies

Benoit (1997) identified five categories of image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Denial can be analyzed in two different forms: shifting the blame and simple denial. When a company engages in simple denial, they claim that they did not perform the accused act. Shifting the blame occurs when the organization claims that an outside person either performed the act itself or caused the act to happen (Benoit & McHale, 1999).

Evasion of responsibility can occur in four ways: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intention (Benoit, 1997). Provocation occurs when an organization claims that their action was a response to another offensive act. Defeasibility occurs when a person within the organization claims that a lack of information was given to them or that they had an inability to control the events caused by the act. Accidents are the notion that the mistake happened inadvertently and were uncontrollable by the organization. Finally, mistakes made with good intention suggest that the organization be held less accountable for the damages because they did not intend for them to occur (Benoit & McHale, 1999).

Reduce offensiveness is the third major strategy of image repair discourse, and has six general types. Bolstering is used to increase the amount of positive feelings the

audience has towards the organization in an attempt to diffuse the negative feelings. Minimization occurs when the accused party attempts to reduce the perceived damages from the act. Differentiation distinguishes the act from other similar but more offensive acts. Transcendence is an attempt to place the event in a more favorable context to improve the enactor's image. Attacking the accuser occurs when an organization provokes an attack on the accuser's credibility. Lastly, compensation reimburses a victim of the behavior as a way to diminish the original negative effects of the action (Benoit, 1997).

Corrective action is the fourth strategy and has two types. An organization may offer to correct the damage, or the organization may offer to take small steps to prevent the act from happening in the future. Both of these types can occur together or separately.

The last type of strategy is mortification. Mortification occurs when the accused persons admit to the behavior, apologize for it, and ask for forgiveness. This strategy can work positively and negatively for the organization. It is possible for the audience to accept their apology and move positively forward. However an apology can provide an outlet for lawsuits towards the organization.

The five types of image repair discourse were used as the primary framework for an analysis of Toyota's image repair strategy in crisis communication (Myers, 2011). It is important to note the large body of research conducted using Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies to research crisis events that reference Tylenol™, (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987), AT&T, Inc. (Benoit & Brinson, 1994), Hugh Grant, (Benoit, 1997), US Airways, Inc., (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997), and Texaco, Inc., (Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Additionally, an analysis of Northwest Airlines, Inc.'s

(NWA) use of issue advertising as its form of crisis management in relation to the pilot's strike of 1998 can also be used to see how large corporations handle image management issues (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002). According to, Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) organizational crisis may be defined as, "a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high-priority goals" (p. 194). The quote suggests that crises ultimately threaten to degrade an organization's public legitimacy. The findings in the NWA study unveiled the rhetorical methodology behind their advertising campaigns and image restoration (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002). First, corrective action was taken as the initial step for the campaign. Second, compensation was given to the passengers in the event of the strike. Simple denial was then used to counteract the pilot's claims of NWA failing to pay them adequately for their profession. Shifting the blame was the next method used to diffuse public offense to the strike by claiming that it is the pilots' faults by refusing to negotiate prior to enacting the strike. The notion of provocation was also used to claim that the pilots were to blame for the issues advertising campaign instead of NWA as a whole.

#### Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Coombs (1998) developed the SCCT and based on the research of prominent identity management and crisis communication scholars, a set of ten common crisis communication strategies were developed (Coombs, 2007). As seen in Table 1 (see Appendix), these strategies are best understood when seen as a group of four clusters of strategies that are organized by whether the intent of the organization post-crisis is to change the public perception of the actual crisis, or to change the public perception of the organization itself (Coombs, 2007). For example, the denial strategies aim to remove any

blame and association with the organization involved in the crisis whereas the diminishment strategies aim to remove only the negative effects the crisis has on the organization. The rebuilding strategies are used to produce change in the public's perception of the organization both during and post-crisis. Bolstering strategies listed in SCCT are ideally to supplement all three of the other strategy categories. Bolstering can aid in the removal of negative effects, feelings, and associations with the organization and assist rebuilding of the relationships between important stakeholders and customers to the company.

Coombs (2006) examined how the crisis response strategies defined by SSCT are perceived by important stakeholders of an organization. The reason for this research was to examine how the ten existing crisis response strategies would cluster according to the three options of deny, diminish, or deal with the situation at hand. Coombs (2006) conducted a study asking 78 undergraduate students to rate each of the ten crisis response strategies on their ability to protect victims in a crisis and organizational acceptance for responsibility for the event. Results showed the "deal" strategies are equivalent to accepting full responsibility for the event, its cause, and all of its effects on victims and stakeholders alike. On the other hand, Coombs (2006) determined that the "deny strategies" allow the company to claim no responsibility for the crisis event and is the riskiest response of the three clusters. The diminish strategies were believed to be used most often in accidental events and have a low level of impact on both stakeholders and victims that are involved.

## SSCT and Crisis Management

Crisis management is an area that communication scholars have been studying heavily since the 1970s (Coombs, 1995). Massey and Larsen (2006) examined the crisis response efforts of the Metrolink Commuter Rail System (Metrolink) after two of their trains collided in April 2002. It is absolutely necessary for all organizations to have an elaborately designed crisis management and image restoration team. According to Massey and Larsen (2006) the most effective way to manage a crisis event is to first develop a crisis communication plan, create crisis management teams, and to apply image restoration accounting in order to manage external messages from the organization. Metrolink successfully implemented their strategic plan. Metrolink took a proactive approach to the issue by creating a crisis communication plan and a crisis management team. The primary goal was for Metrolink to ensure future passengers that though the crash occurred, and three people were killed as a result of the event, their services were still safe to use. This goal was reached due to their successful crisis management skills and ridership went back to normal within days of the crash.

As a high-risk field, the automotive industry posits an area of crisis communication research that is lacking publication. Miller and Horsley (2009) conducted a study regarding the high risk industry of coal mining and how such organizations perform crisis communication skills. The coal mining town in West Virginia made headlines in 2006 when an explosion trapped 13 miners. The public was first notified that all of the men had made it out alive; however, they were misinformed. In actuality, only one miner survived the event. Within the following months, several miners died in West Virginia, thus the governor called for an immediate halt in mining practices until safety

checks could be performed for each company. Due to the great amount of public exposure the events received from the media outlets, changes needed to be made in high risk organizations and their crisis management plans. By using sense-making theory, Miller and Horsley (2009) highlight how organizations can effectively manage a crisis through the phases of enactment, selection, and retention. The enactment phase requires members of the organization to pay attention to environmental cues that could indicate trouble or crisis before it occurs. The retention phase ultimately helps the organization to create a set of procedures and policies to enact when undergoing crisis events as defined through the selection and enactment phases.

Miller and Horsley's (2009) study is important to the theoretical foundation of the current research study. The largest difference lies in the crisis management strategies for this type of organization lie mainly in stakeholder relationships. Restraining stakeholders from information that deems important to the future of the organization in crisis can result in greater damage to public image. Miller and Horsley (2009) provide an important foundation to this current research because of the similarity of circumstances and organizational type.

Many times organizations can undergo intense public scrutiny when some of the products that they manufacture are recalled. Howell and Miller (2009) conducted a study about the crisis management styles of Maple Leaf Foods, Inc., during a large product recall in 2008 involving Chinese milk products. Their response to the recall and the implied image threat to the company were analyzed using Coombs' (1998) SCCT (Howell & Miller, 2009). The data analyzed in this research study included publicly released documents from Maple Leaf Foods and online media coverage of the events

regarding the mass recall. Findings suggested that Maple Leaf Foods first identified the key factors and intensifying factors of the crisis and then used the rebuilding strategy identified by SCCT to decrease negative effects on their reputation.

Also important to this study is Weiner's (2000) Attribution Theory. This theory focuses on emotional responses to crisis events, as well as the need to assign responsibility of the crisis management act to someone, or a group of people that can also be described as the crisis response team. Maple Leaf Foods accepted full responsibility and fault for the recall. They then used corrective action to supplement the image restoration. Finally, a full apology for the recall was given by Maple Leaf Foods. In turn, the organization used the rebuilding strategy as their form of crisis management. Conclusively, Howell and Miller (2009) found that Maple Leaf Foods followed SCCT's three objectives by acting appropriately to the crisis, shaping attributions, and changing the public's negative perception of the organization. The importance of this study highlights how an organization can use SSCT to effectively recover from a crisis.

#### The Development of Face and Face-work

Brown and Levinson (1987) developed the Theory of Politeness, using Goffman's face-work as its primary theoretical underpinning. They also used Durkheim's (1915) concepts of positive and negative to divide face into two politeness categories: (1) negative face, which is the desire to have autonomy aside from others; and (2) positive face, which is the desire to have public approval (Holtgraves, 1992). Negative face is threatened when autonomy is disrespected, and positive face is threatened when one is denied inclusion when inclusion is desired (Zhang & Stafford, 2008). Consistent with Goffman, Brown and Levinson believe that face is not the same as self-identity, but it is

an important part of it. When dealing with face-threats, the degree of offensiveness is primarily based on the social context. Other factors included on the degree of threat are the degree of imposition, relational power, and the degree of social distance (Holtgreaves, 1992).

Politeness Theory has been used in various research studies. Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham (1996) conducted a study applying face and politeness theory to compliance training in corporations and organizations. Wagoner and Waldron (1999) used face-work and politeness when analyzing personal effects when someone is delivered bad news. Most closely tied to the current topic of research for this study was face-work's application to crisis negotiation (Rogan & Hammer, 1995).

Another extension of face theory was made by Cupach and Metts (1994) discussing the two primary types of face-work, and add an additional type pertaining to intimate relationships. Preventative face-work is done when an individual avoids face-threatening attacks by changing the topic of discussion or pretending not to notice when a face-threatening statement has been made. This can be tied to Brown and Levinson's (1987) development of politeness, which is used to minimize negative face-threatening acts. Politeness strategies include humor, avoidance, apologies, accounts, justifications, and physical remediation. As developed by Hewitt and Stokes (1975), disclaimers are also used with the same intent. There are five disclaimers: (1) hedging, which indicates uncertainty about a topic; (2) credentialing, which give appropriate reason for the behavior; (3) sin license, which excuses the behavior due to special event; (4) cognitive disclaimer, which excuses irrational behavior as being cognitively under control; and (5)

appeal for suspended judgment, which is a request to withhold judgment and decision making until after the statement is completed (Cupach & Metts, 1994).

The theory of face negotiation is used in many conflict research studies (Rose, Suppiah, Uli, & Othman, 2007). Conflict is an inevitable part of human existence and will occur in many different aspect of life. Whether it is personal relationships, professional relationships, or simply petty disagreements, conflict is ultimately unavoidable. In relation to professional organizations, “Individuals who never experience conflict at the workplace are living in a dream world, blind to their surroundings, or are confined to solitary confinement” (Boohar, 2001, p. 22). Additionally, crises have become almost an every-day event for organizations, and there little knowledge about different strategies organizations can use during and particularly after times of crisis (Choi, Sung, & Kim, 2010). There is an obvious need for being able to understand the reasons why people in the workplace may use different conflict and crisis management tactics. Face management theory can be used to explain and understand different conflict management styles in different cultures.

#### The Accusations against Toyota

In January 2010, Toyota announced its plan to recall nearly 1.8 million vehicles. This was due to complaints associated with malfunctioning accelerator pads in various Toyota models produced between the years of 2007 and 2010. In addition to the 1.8 million vehicles, Toyota also announced its decision to recall the Prius model for problems with the anti-lock brake systems in the cars. On March 26, 2010, Toyota announced that they would halt the production of all of its vehicles until the manufacturing issues were resolved.

Aside from the recalls themselves, Toyota was under heavy scrutiny tied directly to the company's ethical boundaries and poor management decisions on legal matters. In February 2010, Dimitrios Biller, who is a previous lawyer for Toyota, claims to have proof that Toyota systematically hid or destroyed legal evidence acknowledging that they were aware of the accelerator problems in various models (Ockham, 2010). Over 6,000 documents were subpoenaed for further investigation. This type of allegation could potentially destroy Toyota's image permanently unless dealt with in a tactical manner. Personal lawsuits also posed as a large problem for Toyota executives. According to the Associated Press, nearly 100 personal suits were filed, which could potentially total \$3 billion dollars in losses for Toyota (Anderson & Bluestein, 2010). In April 2010, the U.S. Government sought to collect \$16.375 million from Toyota for failure to notify the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration of the defective accelerator pedals in a timely manner. Toyota agreed to pay that fine shortly after the order was given (Blogger, 2010). Not only has Toyota been accused of hiding documentation regarding the accelerator pad malfunctions, they also allegedly have hidden the existence of other safety tests and claimed that key information was not attainable from their headquarters in Japan (Anderson & Robbins, 2010). Toyota has also been accused of refusing to release electronic data stored within the vehicles themselves, dealing with roof sustainability and interior strength. If in fact Toyota was found guilty of destroying and hiding evidence, they would have to pay much more than they already have to insurance companies world-wide. Negative press and publicity has put Toyota's previously good name in jeopardy. In order to preserve company dignity and credibility, a substantial image repair strategy must come into action.

## Toyota's Crisis Communication and Image Repair Strategies

Myers (2011) analyzed the communicative and image repair efforts enacted by Toyota in response to the allegations and mass recalls on many popular automobiles. The theoretical underpinnings and developments for crisis communication and image repair are rich and popularly used in communication research. Benoit's (1995) image repair strategies, SCCT (Coombs, 1998), and face management (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1988, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2007) collectively create conceptual framework for analysis of Toyota. An earlier draft of these results was presented at Southern States Communication Association conference in early 2011.

An analysis was conducted that covered two Congressional campaign addresses. One addressed by Akiyo Toyoda, President of Toyota Motor Corporation on February 24, 2010, and Yoshimi Inaba, President and Chief Operating Officer of Toyota Motor Corporation on March 2, 2010. Transcripts of these addresses were coded using Benoit's (1995) five image repair strategies. A data chart was created using the five image repair strategies and its sub-categories (see Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix).

The analysis of the coded data obtained from the transcript of the Congressional hearing held February 24, 2010, by Akio Toyoda revealed that there were three primary strategies used most often by Toyota. As shown in Table 1 (see Appendix), they were: reduce offensiveness by bolstering, corrective action, and mortification. Evasion of responsibility by indicating good intentions was also slightly indicated.

The analysis of the coded data obtained from the transcript of the Congressional hearing held March 2, 2010 by Yoshini Inaba revealed that there was one dominant strategy that themed the complete document. There were also two secondary strategies as

well as two tertiary strategies used within the document's components. As shown in Table 2 (see Appendix), the primary strategy is corrective action. The secondary strategies were reduce offensiveness by bolstering and mortification. The tertiary strategies were reduce offensiveness by compensation and evasion of responsibility through good intentions.

Comparing the testimony of both Toyoda and Inaba revealed both strengths and weaknesses in Toyota's image repair strategies. The following summarizes those statements' effectiveness.

### Strengths

The primary consistencies between the two congressional hearings were that mortification, corrective action, and bolstering were the three strategies of image repair discourse used the most. These strategies were strongly exemplified throughout the documents. Toyota's President, Akio Toyoda, focused on reducing offensiveness by bolstering in the first congressional hearing on February 24, 2010. Due to the vast amount of negative media being circulated at the time of this hearing, reducing the offense was focused on by Toyoda. Toyota recognized that they as vehicle manufacturers have historically upheld a high standard of producing quality products. A linguistic pattern was created around this fact. It was important to focus audience attention on the positive qualities when undergoing a time of extensive scrutiny. For Toyota, focusing on vehicle excellence, company morale, and the time span of which they manufactured dependable vehicles was the first key to repairing their damaged public reputation. It was suggested that Akio Toyoda successfully exemplified the notion that Toyota is proud of its company and will continue to strive to please its customers.

Another strength of Toyota's image repair discourse was through the consistent use of mortification. Mortification is used in both congressional hearings. Mortification was a wise choice of strategy for many reasons. First, by publically accepting fault, Toyota has shown that it does not plan to hide the fact that they have made many mistakes. This is important to their image repair because they have been previously accused of destroying important documentation and participating in company mandated veiling of legal materials alluding to improper testing strategies as well as knowingly releasing defective automobiles. This was their way of being open and honest to the public, which is absolutely necessary to recover from negative press. Not only did Inaba and Toyoda acknowledge on behalf of the corporation that they made mistakes, but they also made multiple attempts to publically apologize for them. By doing this, they add important emotional credibility, such as ethos, to the statements.

The strongest and most effective strategy used throughout the documents was corrective action. Though it is important for an organization to admit when they have made mistakes and remind the public that they have historically upheld a positive public image, it is most pertinent to offer a way of correcting those negative actions. Both Congressional hearings have multiple statements announcing that Toyota will be making important changes to their production systems. Toyoda's address to Congress focused more on this form of corrective action. It was important for the first hearing to use this form of corrective action because it set the stage for further report and action by Toyota. Inaba's address to Congress focused more on the second form of corrective action, which is offering specific steps the organization will take to correct their mistakes. It was important to display this form of corrective action because it proved that Toyota took

time to develop specific programs and specialized positions to pinpoint the current problems and actively correct them. These specifics were given in a combination of the two documents (see Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix). This was the most effective strategy because it showed that Toyota is not only accepts their mistakes, but that they have enough pride in their company and care for their customers to rebuild its flaws from the ground up.

### *Weaknesses*

Though there were many strengths to Toyota's image repair strategies, there are multiple weaknesses that are necessary to identify. The most substantial weakness is through the under use of mortification and over use of bolstering. Though both Toyoda and Inaba made efforts to produced statements of remorse and apologia, they were done in an inefficient order. Mortification was prevalent in the first congressional hearing made on February 24, 2010. However, these statements were overshadowed by the use of bolstering. This puts forth the image that Toyota has more pride in their company than remorse for what they have done wrong. This may give the audience a negative connotation towards their effort to properly display mortification. The strategy of mortification would have been more effective if used more heavily in the first congressional hearing, rather than bolstering the company's previously positive image. In the congressional hearing on March 2, 2010, mortification is again overshadowed by bolstering. This could have been an opportunity for Toyota to correct the mistake of allowing bolstering to diminish mortification in the first congressional hearing, but the same mistake was made. Bolstering is important to rebuild an organization's image; however bolstering should be performed after mortification is efficiently used. According

to Myers, (2011), Toyota did not sufficiently achieve mortification prior to using their bolstering strategy.

Another weakness of Toyota's image repair strategy is the use of reducing offensiveness by means of proving good intentions. This strategy is an alternate way of creating excuses for making mistakes. Rather than explain how Toyota made manufacturing mistakes, both congressional hearing used language that evaded explanation. For example, Toyoda stated that because Toyota strives to expand their business rapidly they were not able to, "stop, think, and make improvements as much as we were able to before" (see Table 1 in the Appendix) Diminishing inspection mistakes that cost people their lives, money, and a multitude of heartache and frustration is inexcusable. The choice of diction in such remarks takes away credibility to the statement as a whole. Despite all of Toyota's "good faith efforts" (see Table 1 in the Appendix), they still made crucial mistakes that have wreaked havoc on their previously positive reputation. Rather than make excuses for this negligence, Toyota should have only focused on mortification, bolstering, and especially corrective action.

As a whole, Toyota did indeed use effective image repair strategies represented by the linguistic patterns in the two congressional hearings analyzed. Through the use of corrective action, mortification, and bolstering, Toyota embarked on an effective method of strategy for their image repair discourse. Though the previous analysis suggests that Toyota did in fact initiate successful image repair and crisis communication strategies, more research is necessary to adequately draw conclusive data upon the issue. Future implications for the study suggested that the level of crisis communication success that an organization achieves cannot be measured solely from their efforts and strategies enacted.

Attempting to discover the effect the crisis communication and image repair strategies were received and interpreted by an audience is essential. In order to draw more conclusive data regarding Toyota's image repair success, research must be conducted targeting the responses from past, present, and future consumers of their products.

### Mistakes in Crisis Communication

Although Toyota made some mistakes in their crisis communication, they are not the first to make such mistakes. In order to discover how to effectively exert crisis management and identity restoration strategies, it is necessary to understand the mistakes that can be made, but easily be avoided during crisis management. Bernstein (2006) identified eleven mistakes that an organization should avoid during a crisis event: (1) "playing ostrich" and hoping that no one finds out about the crisis event; (2) working on crisis management after the event is publicized; (3) assuming that their previously established public reputation will speak for itself; (4) treating the media like they are the enemy is detrimental because they can cause them to revolt against the organization by controlling what is released and what is not; (5) failing to transition from reaction mode; (6) using language or industry jargon that is not understood by the general; (7) assuming that the truth about the crisis will become public on its own without the company doing anything to help; (8) using only facts and ignoring the public's feelings; (9) making only written statements regarding the issue; (10) using "best guess" methods of assessing the damage caused by an event is a grave mistake; and (11) doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Understanding the possible and common mistakes that organizations can make during a time of crisis as identified by Bernstein (2006) is crucial to the current body of

research being studied. Understanding which strategies and mistakes to look for when translating data can cause the results to change drastically.

Understanding how an organization can respond to crisis events can be seen by first identifying the challenges associated with the response phase of crisis communication and management strategies. According to Hale, Dulek, and Hale (2005), crisis managers must respond to events that may save lives and dissolve the effects of a crisis. Hale, et al. conducted a study that provides insight into the complexities of the response stage when managing crisis situations. By conducting a series of interviews and observing data, a linear model of crisis response was created. According to the study, communication was triggered through the process of observation, interpretation, choice, and dissemination created by Hale, et al. (2005).

During the observation stage, data must be collected that explains the time line of events causing the crisis. Data must be collected in a timely manner and organized for easy accessibility. During the interpretation phase, the data that was collected and organized in the observation stage is set into the context of the event that occurred. The interpreted data must be understood without variation to everyone that uses it to proceed to the next step of the response stage. Choice is the next step of the response phase, where those involved must use the data collected and interpreted to make a decision as to how to act according to the overall picture of the crisis. This must happen quickly and the decision as to how to act must be made with accuracy by the crisis management team. In the final step of dissemination, the choice to act is implemented.

Olive (2010) identifies the role of risk management particularly for automobile manufacturing companies. Prior to the crisis in 2010, Toyota's public image has

predominantly been formed around the idea that their vehicles are known for their stellar production quality. Olive (2010) explains that though risk management is an important part of organizational function and structure, the element is missing from some of the most well-known companies world-wide. For example, Lora Bentley, an analyst for IT Business Edge, Inc. discovered that only 50% of companies have risk management protocols in their strategic planning documents. Only 27% of the companies that do include risk management as a part of their strategic planning uses it for setting objectives and assessing performance management.

The information reported by Olive (2010) revealed a possible reason for the occurrence of Toyota's massive crisis event involving product quality and safety. An assumption can be made that the crisis may have been averted if risk management had been a part of Toyota's overall strategic planning. Mistakes in planning can cause mistakes in crisis communication. Mistakes in crisis communication may ultimately affect the way consumers and audiences perceive image management strategies set forth by Toyota.

### Crisis Communication and Media Environments

The extent that media outlets have on managing a crisis effectively can be substantial. If an organization in crisis does not address the issue publically, media outlets will find other means of gathering information to share with the public audience. According to Holladay (2009), company spokespeople should be readily available in the early stages of a crisis to avoid media practitioners finding outside means of information. Organizations must establish a positive relationship with journalists and media outlets so

that the organization can ultimately use the power of publicity to help save the face of the company rather than cause further harm.

Holladay (2009) conducted a study that analyzed two chemical crisis accidents and publicized media reports. Each accident was represented by either newspaper or television media outlets. Each media report was coded and categorized using 14 image repair strategies by combining strategies created by Benoit (1995), Coombs (1995; 2007), and Allen and Caillouet (1994). They included attack the accuser, denial, scapegoating, suffering, excuse, deny volition, justification, compensation, apology, repentance, rectification, bolstering, transcendence, and ingratiation. The strategies were coded by the source they were obtained from including organizational spokespeople, government officials, first responders, industry experts, and other respondents.

According to the results of the study (Holladay, 2009), only 3.3% of the statements from organizational representatives were classified as repair strategies. Transcendence, deny volition, and integration were the strategies used. In most cases, organizational representatives used media outlets to give information rather than perform any type of face-saving strategies. First responders were most often coded as being information adjusters rather than utilizing specific strategies or giving new information. First responders were also the most frequently cited sources from the data. As discussed in the study, the content analysis indicated that many organizations failed to perform effective crisis communication strategies. The organizational representatives and spokespeople were quick to respond; however, they did not practice effective media relations.

## Consumer Attitudes and Crisis Communication

Though there is exhaustive research that has been conducted on crisis communication and image repair efforts of an organization post-crisis, there is little published research assessing audience perceptions and interpretations of the communicative efforts. Organizations must understand the effect that audience perception and development of attitudes regarding the organization in crisis could have on the future generation of revenue for the company. Losing important stakeholders and large amounts of consumers would devastate an organization's future. The bottom line is that though an organization's image repair and crisis communication efforts may seem to be effective according to the standards identified by theories such as Benoit (1995), Coombs (1998), Cupach and Metts (1994) and Ting-Toomey (1988, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2007), they may not be perceived that way to the public. If communicative efforts are not positively interpreted by stakeholders and consumers for the organization, the strategies would prove to be ultimately ineffective. Therefore it essential to analyze audience effects and interpretations of crisis communication efforts made after the organization enacts a set of public face-saving strategies.

Kim (2009) conducted a study that analyzed the relationship between an organization's responsibility for a crisis and consumers' purchasing attitudes towards the organization. In other words, the study sought to analyze how the magnitude of the crisis situation affects consumer attitudes towards the company. Secondly, Kim (2009) cross-identified the company's crisis communication strategies with the magnitude of the event, and attempted to measure if consumers would be less likely to purchase items manufactured by the company. Kim (2009) showed that consumers are more likely to

develop negative attitudes towards companies who manufacture goods with high attributes such as computers and technology. Negative attitudes associated with the company are likely to produce diminished intention of product purchase by the consumers. On the other hand, the data showed that people tend to develop less negative attitudes towards companies that produce goods that maintain well-being such as food and health products.

Kim's (2009) results revealed the applicability of this project to industrial and economic contexts such as sales and consumer attitudes. For example, based on the results from Kim (2009), Toyota would be classified as an organization that manufactures goods with high product attributes because they manufacture cars. However, one could argue that Toyota also manufactures goods that involve overall human well-being because ultimately, people rely on vehicles to be safe and reliable. If the methods Toyota chose as part of their crisis and image management process failed to yield positive attitudes from consumers, overall product purchase intention will be affected and their image repair discourse may be deemed as ineffective.

### Research Questions

The literature discussed above shows a rich theoretical underpinning for crisis communication and image restoration research in an organizational context. The developments of image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1995, 1997), SCCT (Coombs, 1998, 1999, 2007), Face and Facework (Goffman, 1967, 1971, 1976, Ting-Toomey, 1997, 1998, 2007) illustrate the crisis communication and image restoration strategies used by Toyota in 2010.

Further research into image restoration and organizational crisis communication provides a justification for the expansion of the previous research by analyzing audience perceptions and attitudes formed based on Toyota's crisis communication strategies. An examination of publications involving mistakes in crisis communication (Hale et al. 2005; Bernstein, 2006; Olive, 2010), crisis communication and online environments (Holladay, 2009), and consumer affects post-crisis (Kim, 2009) support a rationale to examine audience perceptions of Toyota. This data was obtained from online blogs and forums postings.

The purpose of the current research study is to examine the audience and consumer perception of Toyota's image repair strategies and crisis communication efforts following the mass recall and governmental violations in 2009 and 2010. A series of publically posted blogs and forum conversations were analyzed by performing thematic content analyses through a constant comparative methodology. The coding for the analyses emerged from the data, using the guidelines set forth by thematic discourse analysis (Owen, 1985) and further developed by Dochterman and Stamp (2010). Based on the results by Myers (2011) which identified crisis management and image repair strategies used by Toyota following the recall and accusations of unethical behavior, research was conducted in order to identify audience perception and attitudes in online environments. The following research questions (RQ) were developed.

RQ1: What attitudes do consumers have towards Toyota and their products as a result of their crisis communication efforts?

RQ2: What types of responses were posted regarding Toyota's crisis management and image repair strategies in forum conversations and blogs via the Web following the recall in 2010?

## Chapter III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Qualitative Research

Polkinghorne (2005) posits that, “qualitative research is inquiry aimed at describing and clarifying human experience as it spears people’s lives. Researchers using qualitative methods gather data that serve as evidence for their distilled descriptions” (p. 137). Qualitative methods are capable of explaining phenomena in a way that quantitative methods cannot. Ultimately, qualitative research enables researchers to gain insight to human experience in the most individualistic ways. Again, according to Polkinghorne (2005), “methods of data gathering, such as short-answer questionnaires with Likert scales that only gather surface information, are inadequate to capture the richness and fullness of an experience” (p. 138). According to Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2011), qualitative research should be conducted to better understand behavior, beliefs, opinions, and emotions.

Audience perception and consumer attitudes of Toyota’s image repair strategies are analyzed in this study. This study seeks to uncover the beliefs, opinions, and overall perceptions of Toyota’s image repair efforts following their product crisis in 2010. Based on the results obtained from the study’s analysis, researchers may be able to better identify consumer buying behaviors after an organization has a product crisis. The current research study uses publically posted online blogs and forums as observational phenomena. Perceptions are drawn from the emergent themes present in the posts to

discover how Toyota's crisis communication efforts were interpreted.

Thematic analysis serves as the primary function of analysis for the research project. Owen (1985) developed a conceptual framework for analyzing relational communication through themes. Themes are ultimately concepts that people use to connect ideas and communicative events. According to Owen (1985) themes can be identified through recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. By analyzing discourse, researchers are able to derive coding schemes based on thematic occurrences embedded within the text being analyzed (Owen, 1985; Dochterman & Stamp, 2010). Repetition of words and phrases create coding categories for analysis. Words and statements that are stated with force and emphasis are also entities that can be used to create discursive codes. Coding schemes allow researchers to examine texts in ways that create meaning and communicative relationships across multiple sources. The units of analysis consist of publically posted responses obtained from Toyota blogging on both Toyota websites and consumer reports websites ([consumerreports.org](http://consumerreports.org); [toyotarecall.org](http://toyotarecall.org)). Responses were chosen from these websites because of the popularity and overall web credibility.

### Research Paradigm

In order to be able to identify public attitudes and perceptions of Toyota's crisis communicative efforts, research was conducted based on an interpretive qualitative paradigm. Hennink et al. (2011) posit that qualitative research should be conducted to better understand behavior, beliefs, opinions, and emotions. An interpretive paradigm is used as the theoretical underpinning for this project because of the objective of the researcher to understand the subjective experiences and expressions to Toyota's crisis and image management strategies of an audience in online blogging environments. Using

the interpretive paradigm of qualitative research, researchers are better able to understand people's perceptions by gaining an inside perspective on specific issues. Ultimately, interpretive qualitative research emphasizes the importance of observation and audience interpretations.

A thematic content analysis was performed using data obtained from multiple online environments. Owen (1985) developed a framework for analyzing relational communication, thus providing the groundwork for analyzing the effect that Toyota's crisis communication and image repair strategies had on a particular audience. A constant comparison method was used to analyze audience perception with the results obtained from the foundational study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The works of Dochterman and Stamp (2010) inspired the research design for data collection and coding categorization for the thematic content analysis. Results from Dochterman and Stamp (2010) were also used to determine the web credibility for the websites used to obtain blog and forum posts to be used as data for the research study.

#### Data and Coding

A series of publically posted blogs and forum conversations were analyzed through content analysis in order to examine the audience and consumer perception of Toyota's image repair strategies and crisis communication efforts following the mass recall and governmental violations. The coding for this study was developed by the researcher, using the guidelines set forth by thematic discourse analysis (Owen, 1985) and Dochterman and Stamp (2010). Codes were identified as they emerged from the data. Data was obtained from public and anonymously posted responses to Toyota recall and crisis communication events published on the official Consumer Reports

([www.consumerreports.com](http://www.consumerreports.com)) and Toyota Recall ([www.toyotarecall.org](http://www.toyotarecall.org)) websites. User names were used to identify the authors of each response; however, the usernames provided no information that allowed any of the authors to be identified. For the purpose of further anonymity, user names were removed from each post leaving only the date and time of the response to classify each unit. Each unit comprised the corpus to conduct analysis.

A total of 189 responses were analyzed that provided data saturation for the purpose of the research study. The responses were collected from six different blog and forum prompts: three from the Consumer Reports website and three from Toyota recall websites. Five responses were eliminated from the analysis because of response duplication and contextual factors (i.e., advertising posts embedded within the blog conversation thread). A total of 275 statements, phrases, and words from the 189 separate posts were coded and categorized for analysis. A general coding scheme first identified the responses into simple categories based on the nature of the responses. First, the responses were coded as being Toyota owners (O), non-Toyota owners (N), and undisclosed product owners (U). Next, the responses were given codes indicating the nature of the messages as being either positive (P), negative (N), or informative (I) posts. Positive messages indicate the use of rhetorical patterns in favor or support of Toyota's crisis communication efforts. Negative messages included rhetorical patterns that indicated undesirable attitudes towards Toyota based on their crisis communication. Informational messages did not indicate a positive or negative connotation within the rhetorical patterns and instead simply gave information about Toyota and the crisis event and where to find other sources of information.

Upon subsequent readings of the responses, a thematic coding scheme was applied to further analyze and categorize the 189 responses (see Table 3 in the Appendix). Four primary categories emerged within the initial basic categorizing scheme. These categories include: Positive Response (PR), Negative Response (NR), Informative Response (IR), and Media Influence (MI). PR messages include word patterns and statements indicating a positive perception of Toyota following the 2010 crisis. NR messages include statements indicating a negative perception of Toyota following the 2010 crisis. IR messages were responses posted solely to give more information about Toyota as a company, the recall, and how they are handling the issues. MI messages indicate that the respondents assessed the media as negative towards Toyota and the recall crisis.

From the four primary coding schemes, 12 secondary categories emerged from the content of the blog and forum messages. The 12 categories are sub-divided into the four primary categories in the following structure. There are four subcategories for PR messages: (1) Satisfaction (S), (2) Ethical (E), (3) Moving Forward (MF), and (4) Brand Reputation- Positive (BRP). Satisfaction messages indicate words including “trust,” “loyalty,” “overcome,” and “admitted.” Satisfaction statements indicate an approval of the ways in which Toyota has handled the recall and product crisis. Ethical messages were posts in which the primary focus of the content was that Toyota has acted within ethical boundaries in the ways in which they have handled the crisis. Words and phrases typically used in E messages include “acted upfront and honestly,” “historically good products,” “consumer care,” and “efficient.” MF messages indicate audience perception that Toyota is in fact moving forward and emerging from the negative event based on

their crisis communication efforts. MF messages on most occurrences actually included the term “moving forward”. They also included “hopeful,” “will rise from,” and “will emerge in-tact.” Brand Reputation-Positive responses indicate an overall perception that Toyota has a positive image to consumers and the public, despite the crisis situation in 2010. BRP posts often included elements of each of the other three PR characteristics, indicating an overall positive, hopeful, and loyal attitude towards Toyota.

There are four subcategories that were apparent for NR messages: (1) Disappointment (D), (2) Unethical (UE), (3) Fear (F), and (4) Brand Reputation-Negative (BRN). D messages indicate an overall dissatisfaction with Toyota, despite their crisis communication and image repair efforts post-2010 crisis. Words and statements apparent in D messages include “poor job,” “unimpressed,” “no effort,” and “did not address the issues.” UE were responses in which the primary focuses of the posts were that Toyota acted beyond ethical boundaries during the crisis management phase of image repair. UE messages included statements such as “government forced,” “did not own up to,” “non-voluntary actions,” and “reacted slowly.” F messages were posted responses indicating an attitude of fear towards using and owning Toyota’s products. F messages contained words such as “terrified,” “nightmares,” “kill/death,” and “dangerous.” BRN messages indicate an overall dissatisfaction and discontentment with Toyota as a company, despite their crisis communication and image repair efforts. BRN messages incorporated characteristics of each of the other three NR categories, indicating an overall attitude that Toyota’s CM and IR strategies were unsuccessful.

There are two subcategories for IR messages: (1) Informational Recall (IRC) and (2) Informational Crisis Management (ICM). IRC messages contain information

regarding the 2009 and 2010 recalls for Toyota. These messages give information ranging from vehicles involved in the recall, what parts were involved in the recall, how to make a claim with Toyota, and links to articles explaining the nature of the accusations against Toyota. ICM messages are posts that give information regarding Toyota's efforts to contain the recall and production crisis. These messages include links to press releases, interviews, and even personal experiences with Toyota and how they are managing the crisis.

There are two subcategories for MI messages: (1) Media Influence- Positive (MIP) and (2) Media Influence-Negative (MIN). All MI messages indicate that the respondents identified the presence of negative media reporting towards Toyota during and after the massive recall crisis in 2010. MIP posts indicate that the user recognized the presence of negative media exposure, but has a positive attitude towards Toyota and their products despite the negative exposure. MIN posts indicate that the user recognized the existence of negative media exposure and has developed a negative attitude towards Toyota and their products as a result of the media.

## Chapter IV

### RESULTS

The results obtained from the blog and forum message analysis revealed the following information on audience perception of Toyota post-crisis: A total of 76 blog responses indicated ownership of a Toyota product. Twenty-one blog respondents indicated that they were non-Toyota owners. There were a total of 87 responses that were undisclosed as to being Toyota owners or non-Toyota owners. There are a total of 81 Positive Response (PR) messages, 124 Negative Response (NR) messages, 49 Informative (I) messages, and 21 Media Influence (MI) messages emergent from the data.

The 81 PR messages were further categorized based on attitude and perceptive characteristics emergent from the data. The results showed that there were a total of 26 Satisfaction (S) messages. S messages indicated that the audience perception of Toyota's crisis management and image repair strategies were yielded positive attitudes towards the organization. There were a total of five Ethical (E) messages within the PR categorized responses. E messages indicated that respondents in the blog data recognized Toyota's crisis communication efforts as being morally sound. A total of 19 Moving Forward (MF) messages emerged within the PR responses. MF messages indicated that the participants had a positive perception of Toyota in that the organization would arise from the crisis in good form. Lastly, there were 31 Brand Reputation-Positive (BRP) messages analyzed from the blog data. BRP messages indicate an overall satisfaction and optimistic attitude

towards Toyota's image repair strategies and crisis communication post-2010 crisis. PR responses accounted for 29.45% of the 275 units analyzed.

The 127 NR messages were categorized based on attitude and perception of the audience who posted them. The results yielded 43 Disappointment (D) messages. D messages indicated that the audience perception of Toyota post-crisis were not positive regarding their image repair and crisis communication tactics. There were a total of 28 Unethical (UE) responses. UE posts indicated that the audience perceived Toyota's image repair strategies as being dishonest and lacking overall organizational morale. A total of 17 Fear (F) messages emerged from the data. F messages indicated that the bloggers developed fearful and distrusting attitudes towards Toyota's products. The data yielded 36 Brand Reputation-Negative (BRN) responses within the blog messages. BRN posts indicate an overall unsatisfactory attitude towards Toyota's image as a whole based on their crisis communication strategies as a response to the 2010 crisis. NR responses accounted for 49.09% of all categorized data.

There were a total of 49 Informational (I) messages. Further coding revealed that there were 22 Informational Recall (IR) blog posts. IR posts showed that the respondents posted no indicator of a specific attitude or perception towards Toyota's image repair strategies. Rather, IR messages provided other bloggers with information regarding the Toyota recalls, which allowed the audience to gain knowledge about the way the crisis was being managed. The results yielded 27 Informational Crisis Management (ICM) posts. ICM posts indicate no particular attitude or perception of Toyota's crisis management strategies. However, ICM messages provided bloggers with information

about the strategies Toyota used to manage the crisis and repair their image.

Informational messages accounted for 21% of the 275 coded responses.

Lastly, a total of 21 Media Influence (MI) messages emerged from the data, suggesting that the bloggers were exposed to media coverage of Toyota and perceived the coverage as being negative. Media influence was not a coding category the researcher was expecting to discover, however coding revealed that respondents expressed Media Influence-Negative (MIN) perception in 12 responses. MIN posts suggest that respondents felt like they were exposed to negative media coverage of Toyota at some point in time and they developed a negative perception of the company. The type of media each respondent was exposed to was not revealed to the researcher through the data. Nine occurrences of Media Influence-Positive (MIP) messages emerged from the data. MIP messages suggest that bloggers were exposed to media coverage of Toyota and that they perceived the coverage as being negative. In MIP messages, bloggers indicate positive perceptions of the organization despite their perception of media coverage to which they were exposed.

Overall, Negative Response (NR) messages accounted for the largest amount of attitudes and perceptions of the blogs analyzed at 49.09%. Respondents indicated that the most dominant perception of Toyota's image repair strategies and public crisis communicative efforts were disappointing, unethical, fearful, and had negative brand association with the organization due to the crisis in 2010. Positive Response (PR) messages accounted for the second largest indicator of attitudes and perceptions of Toyota at 29.45%. Respondents indicated through blog posts that they believe that Toyota's crisis communicative efforts were satisfactory, ethical, that the company is

moving forward, and has positive brand association with the organization. Informational Response (IR) responses accounted for the third highest category of messages at 21% of the total data. Participants who posted IR responses did not indicate specified attitudes toward Toyota, however they provided information regarding the recalls and Toyota's crisis management strategies being used throughout the crisis. IR messages possibly provided other people with information allowing them to develop positive or negative attitudes towards the organization. Media Influence (MI) posts accounted for the smallest portion of all messages analyzed. Though the researcher was not expecting media influence to emerge as a coding category, it is important to note that they occurred. MI messages suggest that respondents were exposed to media coverage about the Toyota crisis that they perceived as being negative and developed either a positive or negative attitude towards Toyota based on their perceptions.

## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION

A comparison between the crisis communication strategies that Toyota used to attempt to repair their image reported by Myers (2011) and the results from this analysis of blogger responses can offer an explanation of how effective Toyota may have been, as well as identifying relationships between the two studies. The results from Myers (2011) indicated that Toyota enacted a series of successful image repair strategies after the recall and manufacturing crisis in 2010 (see Table 3 in the Appendix). According to the findings of this study, the image repair strategies that Toyota effectively used were corrective action, mortification, and reducing the offense by means of bolstering. Myers (2011) suggested that Toyota used image repair strategies effectively according to image repair discourse (Benoit 1995, 1997), situational crisis communication (Coombs, 1995, 1998, 2006, 2007) and facework (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Cupach and Metts, 1994); however, the results yielded from the audience perception data suggests such strategies may not have been effectively used. An organization's image repair success can be most effectively measured by evaluating the way in which such strategies affected consumers.

#### Comparative Analysis

A total of 127 Negative Response (NR) messages emerged from the bloggers' responses. Corrective action and mortification were used by Toyota (Myers, 2011). However, according to the results, the strategies were used ineffectively because the audience perceived Toyota in a negative way. Forty-three Disappointment (D)

messages emerged from the blog. An example from the blog data exemplifying this attitude can be seen through the following statement: “Toyota has done a poor job of owning up to the problem and providing a real fix” (see Table 3 in the Appendix). Based on the majority of the blogging participants on the two sites perceived that Toyota ineffectively used the image repair strategies of corrective action and mortification. These two strategies were indicated as being effectively used strategies in the congressional testimony texts (Myers, 2011), but not emergent in the bloggers’ responses.

A majority of the blog responses indicate that not only did the audience feel as though Toyota didn’t properly own up to their mistakes and legitimately apologize to the public, but they also expressed that they were unclear as to how Toyota would be offering corrective action. A total of 49 Informational (I) messages were apparent in the response data. Twenty-seven of the I messages provided information regarding Toyota’s crisis communication strategies to the respondents in the blog and forum communities. This indicates that many people did not have an understanding of exactly how Toyota was handling the recall and vehicle malfunction crisis, despite corrective action being indicated as being an effectively used strategy in the Congressional testimonies (Myers, 2011). In other words, if Toyota would have performed an adequate job of communicating their corrective action strategies with the general public, consumers would have been able to better develop positive attitudes towards their crisis communicative strategies. On the other hand, it is also possible that many of the bloggers were not listening to the Congressional testimonies, causing them to have developed negative perceptions about Toyota simply because they were not exposed to their crisis communication and image repair efforts.

Though corrective action was identified as being one of Toyota's image repair strategies, some of the audience perception responses did not believe that it was effectively used. A total of 17 Fear (F) messages emerged from the blog posts. An example of fear can be seen in the statement, "I have grave concerns with the safety of my car regardless of fixes in place to correct any problems" (see Table 3 in the Appendix). This further suggests that the consumers whose responses were coded for the purpose of the research study did not effectively perceive the image repair and crisis communication strategy used by Toyota following the 2010 crisis.

Another inconsistency was revealed by comparing Toyota's use of reducing the offense by bolstering and the NR-Unethical (UE) responses obtained from the blog data. As identified in an analysis of the Congressional hearings, Toyota's representatives used language intended to remind the audience that Toyota has a long history of being a trusted company that sells high quality vehicles (Myers, 2011). This was done in an effort to overshadow the negative light that Toyota was being placed in because of the recall and accusations of improper manufacturing behavior. Though the previous research identified bolstering to be an effectively used strategy, the responses coded from the blog data suggests otherwise. Twenty-eight responses indicated that not only did the audience perceive Toyota in a negative way, but that they also felt as though the company acted in an unethical manner. An example of this can be seen in this response obtained from the blog data, "It is unfortunate and sad to think that Toyota knew for years about these brake and acceleration problems...and chances are their reputation will be forever tarnished" (see Table 3 in the Appendix). Another issue that emerged from the audience perception data is that many respondents indicated that the reason why they felt Toyota acted

unethically is because they did not halt their vehicle manufacturing voluntarily. Instead, they recognized that the company was forced to do so by the government. An example of this type of response can be seen through this message, “It appears that Toyota was pressured by the U.S. government to comply with the law” (see Table 3 in the Appendix). The existence of UE messages in the responses used for data analysis refute the previous results that Toyota effectively used bolstering as an image repair strategy.

Results from the UE messages help to better understand the importance as well as the impediments of crisis communication and image repair discourse. As suggested by Benoit (1995, 1997) and Coombs (1995, 1998, 2006, 2007), it is imperative that organizations take responsibility for the cause of a crisis and set forth corrective action to repair the damages caused by the crisis event. Bernstein (2006) identified 11 mistakes in crisis communication and, based on the audience perception of Toyota’s image repair strategies, results suggest that Toyota committed three of them: (1) “playing ostrich,” (2) working on the crisis after it has been publicized, and (3) failing to react. Based on the bloggers’ UE messages, they perceived Toyota as failing to accept responsibility for the accelerator malfunctions and offering any type of corrective action only until the media publicized the recalls and the U.S. Government was forced to take action. It is suggested based on the results of this study that organizations that fail to take action and are seemingly forced to offer corrective action produce ineffective image repair and crisis communication strategies.

Toyota also attempted to use the strategy of bolstering and mortification. A total of 21 audience responses indicated user exposure to media reporting, and that they perceived it in a negative way. The majority of the MI messages suggested that the

audience developed negative attitudes towards Toyota as a result of the negative media perception of the media outlet they were exposed to. However, no specific media outlets were identified in the bloggers' responses. Though these findings unexpectedly arose from the blog data, it may be suggested through further research that media coverage may have a profound effect on audience perception of an organization in crisis. This may expand our understanding of media effects and consumer attitude.

A total of 36 BRN messages indicated an overall negative perception of Toyota. Collectively, NR messages accounted for the largest percentage of the analyzed data at 49.09% of the 275 audience responses. These responses strongly suggest that those respondents did not feel as though Toyota effectively used the image repair strategies of corrective action, bolstering, and mortification identified by Myers (2011) as being effective components of Toyota's crisis communication in their congressional testimonies.

Out of the 81 PR messages, 26 were coded as indicating satisfaction with Toyota's crisis communication strategies. These results suggest that Toyota's image repair strategies were not completely ineffective towards audience perception and attitude development. Satisfaction with such strategies would suggest that the same respondents also developed positive attitudes towards the company based on their image repair efforts. An example of an S message is, "Toyota has reacted to a problem. This may hurt them in the short run. I feel they have done the right thing, so good for them!!! Go Toyota!" (see Table 3 in the Appendix). This is one of the 26 statements that suggest that mortification was effectively used to some extent. Satisfaction was also indicated with corrective action. An example of this can be seen in the response, "they fixed the problem

quite quickly and without any fuss” (see Table 3 in the Appendix). Statements like these suggest that consumers’ attitudes towards Toyota’s corrective action strategy were positive and that they image repair strategy was effectively used in the perception of some consumers.

There were 19 blogger responses of the 81 PR messages. Messages such as “I am hopeful that Toyota will overcome this because soooo many people drive their vehicles and have trusted them for years” (see Table 3 in the Appendix). MF statements indicate slight effectiveness on audience perception based on the identified image repair strategies used by Toyota for a few reasons. Bolstering Toyota’s historically positive reputation reminds consumers that they have been trusted more than they have not been trusted to make quality vehicles. Moving forward became Toyota’s slogan for their new advertising campaign immediately following the recall crisis and the idea of moving on past the negative allegations was stressed in the congressional testimonies of both Inaba and Toyoda (Myers, 2011). MF statements revealed in blog responses suggest that consumers remembered this “moving forward” slogan and perceived it in a way that led to a more positive attitude towards Toyota. The MF responses suggest that Toyota effectively used their “moving forward” strategy to this particular group of consumers.

Overall, 31 bloggers indicated through PR messages that they have Brand Reputation-Positive (BRP) attitudes towards Toyota post-crisis. Though many bloggers indicated that they had an overall negative perception of Toyota, many people also indicated having a positive perception. BRP responses expressed that Toyota used responded to the crisis ethically, were satisfied with their communication with the public, and that Toyota is moving forward from the negativity. This suggests some extent of

image repair success through the methods of mortification, corrective action, and bolstering. Example of BRP messages include, “They stand by their product and they are as human as you and me, so give them a break” (see Table 3 in the Appendix) and “I’m pretty confident that their image will emerge in tact” (see Table 3 in the Appendix). Based on the results of this study, Toyota may not have effectively utilized image repair strategies to the majority of the audience whose responses were used in the analysis, but they proved to have acted responsibly for some.

### Media Influence

Media influence was a coding category that unexpectedly emerged from the bloggers’ responses. The findings reported by Myers (2011) did not identify media influence as being an image repair strategy used by Toyota in the congressional testimonies. Because of this, no cross-comparison can be performed to analyze the MI messages that emerged from the bloggers’ responses; however the importance to discuss its existence should not be overlooked. MI may be able to be linked to Toyota’s use of mortification if further research is conducted.

An example of MIP messages can be seen through the statement, “I have heard enough through the media about the Toyota recall and the controversy surrounding it all. I have concluded that Toyota is being intentionally smeared...” (see Table 3 in the Appendix). This is one statement suggesting that though some of the respondents may have perceived negative media exposure for Toyota, they were not necessarily negatively affected by it.

The primary reason Toyota used mortification as an image repair strategy was to prove that they were being open and honest with the public (Myers, 2011). A total of 21

MI messages emerged from the blog data, suggesting that those respondents were exposed to a non-specified media outlet's coverage about Toyota's crisis and perceived the reporting to be negative. Twelve MI responses suggested that the bloggers developed negative attitudes of Toyota and their products and that they were exposed to media coverage they interpreted to be negative. Toyota intended to generate a positive outlook towards their company through the image repair strategy of mortification by admitting their fault for the vehicle malfunctions through Congressional testimonies (Myers, 2011). Therefore, it would be helpful to conduct further research enabling a relationship to be identified between audience perception and media coverage. MI blog responses suggest that the media could be a factor for creating negative consumer attitudes towards organizations in crisis. However, one cannot conclude that media reporting had a profound effect on consumers' attitudes towards Toyota in this study because media was not originally identified as an image repair strategy (Myers, 2011).

There could have been factors leading to the results presented in this research and therefore, a discussion of the limitations of the study and further research questions are warranted. The results obtained and used in a comparative analysis in this study also yielded further research questions for future implications.

#### Limitations

A total of 275 messages embedded within 189 separate blog responses were coded for analysis of consumer attitudes and perceptions regarding Toyota's image repair and crisis communication strategies. The generalizability of the findings of this study is limited to the bloggers that posted on the Toyota recall and Consumer Reports websites. Instead, we have a contextual understanding of the cross comparison of the results. The

findings reflect the bloggers' attitudes. Further data collection across other sites may yield other opinions and themes, increasing the ability to offer a holistic view of Toyota's crisis and response. Toyota is still currently dealing with the recall and product malfunction crisis. Therefore, more blog posts may be analyzed in the future months or even years. Hence, the number of responses analyzed, the context, and audience could be considered a limitation to this study because of the constraints of the scope and ability to generalize other blogs and crises.

The coder for the study was the researcher using a thematic analysis allowing the categories to emerge from the data. No pre-existing categories were created prior to the multiple readings of the blog messages. In this regard, the study was grounded in an "emic" (Hennink et al., 2011) context, in that the results are limited to the audience and these attitudes expressed in their blog posts. Qualitative methods are subjective ways to analyze phenomena and researcher bias is a limitation in itself because of this fact. A different researcher may have recognized different and even additional categories during the coding process.

The most viable limitation to the study is the nature of the respondents and the context in which the blogs were posted. It is possible that some people may take the initiative to share negative comments rather than positive perceptions. Another possibility is that people may be more likely to express negative criticism about an organization undergoing a public crisis rather than praise and recognize their crisis communication efforts. This may have led to a generally negative bias amongst the Toyota recall blogosphere, possibly impacting the results.

#### Future Research Implications

The conclusions from this study suggest more research is warranted in organizational crisis communication, image repair, and consumer perception. The next step in developing this line of study would be to analyze consumer attitudes and perception of Toyota's image repair strategies by conducting a series of focus groups, meeting face-to-face with both Toyota and non-Toyota owners. In depth interviewing also may yield different results, making the research study well-rounded and further explaining crisis communication.

Future research possibilities also include performing more online studies in order to analyze a greater amount of blog responses over a longitudinal timespan. Toyota is currently still in the midst of a crisis. Therefore, conducting a series of thematic analyses looking at blog responses beginning when the crisis started through when it officially comes to an end may provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer attitudes and image repair perception.

Future research could also be designed to address the ways media influences consumer attitudes and perceptions towards Toyota. Bloggers' assessment of the media was a rather unanticipated theme that emerged from the data during the course of the research study leaving much warranting research on the subject. A future study should be conducted measuring the influence of both positive and negative media reporting bias has on consumer attitudes and purchasing likelihood after a crisis occurs by identifying the negative or positive nature of media messages and by measuring the affect that those messages have on consumer perception and attitude.

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## APPENDIX

Tables 1-3

Table 1  
Toyota's Image Repair Discourse: Prepared Testimony of Akio Toyoda,  
President of Toyota Motor Corp

Strategy	Example
Reduce Offensiveness -Bolstering	A. "...how seriously Toyota takes the quality and safety of its vehicles"
	B. "I love Toyota as much as anyone"
	C. "Toyota's basic philosophy regarding quality control, the cause of the recalls, and how we will manage quality control going forward."
	D. "We always stop, strive to understand the problem, and make changes to improve further. In the name of the company, its long-standing tradition and pride, we never run away from our problems or pretend we don't notice them. By making continuous improvements, we aim to continue offering even better products for society. That is the core value we have kept closest to our hearts since the founding days of the company."
	E. "We have been actively engaged in developing people who share and can execute on this core value"
	F. "Toyota's priority has traditionally been the following: First; Safety, Second; Quality, and Third; Volume"
	G. "I have personally placed the highest priority on improving quality over quantity, and I have shared that direction with our stakeholders"
	H. "For me, when the cars are damaged, it is as though I am as well. I, more than anyone, wish for Toyota's cars to be safe, and for our customers to feel safe when they use our vehicles"
Mortification	I. "our customers have started to feel uncertain about the safety of Toyota's vehicles, and I take full responsibility for that"
	J. "I myself, as well as Toyota, am not perfect. At times, we do find defects"
	K. "I am deeply sorry for any accidents that Toyota drivers have experienced."
	L. "I would like to extend my condolences to the members of the Saylor family, for the accident in San Diego."
Corrective Action	M. "continuously making improvements"
	N. "I will also strive to devise a system in which we can surely execute what we value."
	O. "a step will be added in the process to ensure that management will make a responsible decision from the perspective of "customer safety first."
	P. "devise a system in which customers' voices around the world will reach our management in a timely manner"
	Q. "we will form a quality advisory group composed of respected outside experts from North America and around the world to ensure that we do not make a misguided decision"

	R. “we will invest heavily in quality in the U.S., through the establishment of an Automotive Center of Quality Excellence, the introduction of a new position– Product Safety Executive”
	S. “I intend to further improve on the quality of Toyota vehicles and fulfill our principle of putting the customer first”
Evasion of Responsibility -Good Intentions	T. “Toyota has, for the past few years, been expanding its business rapidly. Quite frankly, I fear the pace at which we have grown may have been too quick.”
	U. “These 2 priorities became confused, and we were not able to stop, think, and make improvements as much as we were able to before , and our basic stance to listen to customers’ voices to make better products has weakened somewhat.”

Table 2  
Toyota’s Image Repair Discourse: Prepared Testimony of Yoshimi Inaba,  
President and C.O.O of Toyota Motor North America

Strategy	Example Testimony of Yoshimi Inaba, President and C.O.O of Toyota Motor North America
Corrective Action	A. “Toyota engineers have developed effective and durable solutions for the vehicles we have recalled”
	B. “we have established a Special Committee for Global Quality, led by Toyota’s President. It will thoroughly review our operations and make changes to ensure problems of this magnitude do not happen again”
	C. “we will ensure that our customers’ voices will be heard and acted upon in a timely manner”
	D. “Toyota will be one of the first full-line automakers to make brake over ride systems standard on all our new models sold in North America”
	E. “we have commissioned a comprehensive, independent evaluation of our electronic throttle control system by a world-class engineering and scientific consulting firm”
	F. “we are redoubling our commitment to always put our customers – and their safety – first”
	G. “ fundamental changes in the way our company operates in order to ensure that Toyota sets an even higher standard for vehicle safety and reliability, responsiveness to customers and transparency with regulators”.
	H. “we are assembling a blue ribbon panel of distinguished, independent experts to confirm that the enhanced quality controls we are putting into place conform to best industry practices.”
	I. “we will investigate consumer complaints more aggressively by deploying “SWAT teams” of technicians to make on-site inspections of unintended acceleration reports as quickly as possible”
	J. “establishing the new position of Regional Product Safety Executive,”
	K. “we will establish a new Automotive Center of Quality Excellence in the U.S.”
	L. “We also are installing brake override on seven existing models”
	Reduce Offensiveness -Bolstering
N. “Toyota team members... are united in their determination to provide even safer, high quality vehicles in the future.”	
O. “We are proud of our heritage and deeply appreciate the loyalty of Toyota drivers, so many of whom continue to tell us how much they love our cars.”	

	P. “Their dedication to our values has helped establish Toyota’s record for quality and dependability”
	Q. “Toyota continues to produce many of the best vehicles in the world”
	R. “we will revitalize the simple principle that has guided Toyota since 1937 – to build the highest quality, safest and most reliable automobiles in the world.”
Reduce Offensiveness - Compensation	S. “extended additional, complimentary services to owners concerned about driving their vehicle before the repair is completed.”
Evasion of Responsibility -Good Intentions	T. “we have not lived up to the high standards our customers and the public have come to expect from Toyota, despite all of our good faith efforts”
Mortification	U. “It is clear to us that we did not listen as carefully as we should – or respond as quickly as we must – to our customers' concerns”
	V. “we sincerely regret that our shortcomings have resulted in the issues associated with our recent recalls”
	W. “we recognize that the public seeks additional reassurance”

Table 3  
Thematic Coding Scheme

<b>Category</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example from Data</b>
Positive Response (PR)	Satisfaction (S)	Responses indicate overall satisfaction with Toyota’s crisis communication strategies. Responses include words such as <i>trust, loyalty, admitted, and overcome.</i>	“Toyota has reacted to a problem. This may hurt them in the short run. I feel they have done the right thing, so good for them!!! Go Toyota!”
	Ethical (E)	Responses indicate the belief that Toyota handled the crisis using ethical strategies.	“Toyota held their hands up and admitted to the problem.”
	Moving Forward (MF)	Responses indicate feelings of a hopeful future for Toyota. Messages include words such as <i>hopeful, confident, and moving-on.</i>	“I am hopeful that Toyota will overcome this because soooo many people drive their vehicles and have trusted them for years.”
	Brand Reputation-Positive (BRP)	Responses indicate positive brand association with Toyota. Messages indicate an overall satisfaction with image repair strategies.	“I’m pretty confident that their image will emerge intact.” “They stand by their product and they are as human as you and me, so give them a break.”
Negative Response (NR)	Disappointment (D)	Responses indicate dissatisfaction with CM and IR strategies, mostly accusing of a lack of action.	“Toyota has done a poor job owning up to the problem and providing a real fix.”
	Unethical (UE)	Responses indicate belief that CM and IR strategies were not ethical; mostly accusing of government-induced action and knowingly selling defective products.	“It is unfortunate and sad to think that Toyota knew for years about these brake and acceleration problems...and chances are their reputation will be forever tarnished.” “It appears that Toyota was pressured by the U.S. government to comply with the law.”
	Fear (F)	Respondents afraid to use Toyota’s products;	“I have grave concerns with the safety of my car

		includes words such as <i>terrified, death-trap, and unsafe.</i>	regardless of fixes in place to correct any problems.”
	Brand Reputation-Negative (BRN)	Responses indicate attitudes of negative brand association. Messages indicate overall dissatisfaction with CM and IR strategies.	“For me, it’s the last straw. Never again will I consider a Toyota product as this poor judgment and total lack of accountability is a part of their agenda.”
Informative (I)	Informative Recalls (IR)	Responses give information regarding safety and recalls to other bloggers.	“Perhaps it’s worth noting that the floor mat and sticky accelerator problems appear to be two separate problems with two different recalls involved.”
	Informative Crisis Management (ICM)	Responses give information regarding CM and IR strategies used by Toyota.	“If you have a complaint that you want to address with Toyota, call the Toyota Customer Experience Center at 1-800-331-4331.”
Media Influence (MI)	Media Influence Positive (MIP)	Responses indicate recognition of negative media bias towards Toyota, but attitudes were not negatively affected.	“I have heard enough through the media about the Toyota recall and the controversy surrounding it all. I have concluded that Toyota is being intentionally smeared...”
	Media Influence Negative (MIN)	Responses indicate recognition of negative media bias towards Toyota and attitudes were negatively affected.	“After the recall, they advised me the Media was making more out of it. Still they did nothing about the acceleration.”