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# Crisis management at General Motors and Toyota: An analysis of gender-specific communication and media coverage

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### ABSTRACT

This study applied the genderlect theory to analyze General Motors' and Toyota's senior executive crisis communication. The discrepancies in the two companies' crisis responses were explained through female vs. male-specific communication. Further, the study applied the situational crisis communication theory to analyze the news valence in the media coverage of the crises. While a direct correlation between gender-specific communication and news valence was beyond the purpose of this study, the current analysis can serve as a basis for future research on best crisis communication strategies as informed by gender differences.

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## 1. Introduction

Public relations studies that revolve around crisis communication determined the best ways to respond to crises (Anagondahalli, 2013; Benoit, 1995, 1997; Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002; Coombs, 2013, 2014; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; Harlow, Brantley, & Martin Harlow, 2011; Huang, Lin, & Su, 2005; Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007), the impact of social media platforms on crisis responses (Brummette & Sisco, 2015; DiStaso, Vafeiadis, & Amaral, 2015; Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013; Veil, Reno, Freihaut, & Oldham, 2015), as well as the publics' reaction to crisis communication strategies (Austin, Fisher Liu, & Jin, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2013).

Currently, there is a lack of studies in the realm of public relations that aim to address the difference in the crisis communication style between female and male executives. The present study is an analysis of senior executive communication and media coverage valence in the aftermath of two major crises in the car industry, namely General Motors' (GM) 2014 ignition switch recall and Toyota's 2010 unintended accelerator crisis. Analyzing crisis communication discourse by taking into account the variable of gender can shed light on the emergent gender-specific communication styles that can further inform best practices in crisis management. First, the study introduces the theories used in the analysis and then discusses the methodology, results, and implications.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Agenda setting

In order to assess the media effects of gender specific communication, this study referred to the agenda setting theory according to which media select to cover issues and events considered of high relevance to the detriment of others. In turn, by covering these issues, journalists set the public's agenda (Muddiman, Jomini Stroud, & McCombs, 2014). The transfer of issues from the media's agenda to that of the public's constitutes the first level of agenda setting (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012). Further, issues are covered by the use of specific attributes or connotations and the frequency with which these attributes correlate with those of the public's represents the second level of agenda setting (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012). Past studies on corporate public relations (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Carroll, 2004, 2010; Kiouisis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007; Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006; Ragas, Kim, & Kiouisis, 2011) found evidence of first and second level agenda setting effects in terms of information subsidies as well as media coverage and public awareness.

The current study considered GM's and Toyota's crises as issues and focused on assessing the attributes or themes within the coverage, namely the second level of agenda setting. It analyzed what themes were more predominant in the crisis coverage and to what extent they were present. It was considered that the second level of agenda setting was an important tenet in analyzing the results and discussing their implications. Specifically, by looking into gender-specific communication, the analysis aimed to shed light on whether gender communication might influence the salience of the themes extant in the media coverage.

### 2.2. Genderlect

To assess the presence of gender specific communication in crisis responses, this analysis made use of the genderlect theory. Namely, past studies on the difference between female and male communication looked into the sender's communication style and the receiver's stereotyping of the former (Lakoff, 1975, 1977; Tannen, 2013; Zahn, 1989) and found that female and male communication styles were so different that they could be labeled as "genderlect" or a dialect of genders (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 2013). Specifically, women's communication style stems from the former's innate penchant for bonding and creating relationships and is therefore symmetrical and meant to build rapport and connections while male communication is triggered by an innate desire to gain respect and status, which makes it asymmetrical, monologic and aimed at delivering information, commanding attention and winning arguments (Tannen, 2013).

Further, female communication was found to be tactful, gentle, sensitive and, hence, effective in delivering emotional and polite speeches, while men's communication blunt, dominant and forceful (Zahn, 1989). In addition, research studies determined that female talk was emotional because of the women's use of a weak communication style, characterized by hedges, tag questions, disclaimers, and overly polite forms (Tannen, 2013). These elements of weak talk enable women to relate to others by showing excessive concern for the interlocutor and putting the latter's needs first. Conversely, men's communication is void of such elements and aimed at achieving a goal, whilst female's communication revolves around building and maintaining relationships (Tannen, 2013). Finally, studies recommended that both men and women be trained in the two gender dialects: men should understand the sensitivity extant in female communication while women should get a sense of the assertiveness that characterizes men talk (Tannen, 2013).

Researchers who looked into gender discrepancies in communication have long been debating whether women's weak communication style is less effective than men's (Zahn, 1989). For example, Gillian (2003) argued that, when making decisions and solving conflicts, men are fair while women tend to perceive concepts like justice as context-dependent. Specifically, women are concerned about being sensitive to those around them, are more loyal and prone to self-sacrifice and peace making. Conversely, for men justice is impersonal (Gillian, 2003) and fairness not enmeshed in the relationships with others. Further, Tannen (2013) contended that, because women are more relationship-oriented than men, they tend to avoid conflict and perceive it as a threat to their rapport with others. On the other hand, men enjoy addressing a conflict as it provides them with an opportunity to gain/maintain respect and status (Tannen, 2013).

In the public relations field, female and male communication appeared in relation to leadership and the challenge that female leaders face when they need to balance a male-like managerial style with the societal expectations in terms of gender (Bettors-Reed & Moore, 1995; Bronznick & Goldengar, 2008; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Drawing from the literature on gender specific communication, this study asked:

RQ1: Based on the genderlect theory, what were the emerging themes, subthemes, and patterns in the crisis response provided by the CEOs of GM and Toyota?

### 2.3. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT)

In this study the presence of the emergent themes in the media coverage was assessed by using constructs from the realm of crisis communication, mainly from the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). The SCCT proposes several strategies for effectively addressing and managing crises, the ultimate result of which is to decrease the likelihood of reputational damage. The strategies range from defensive ones such as attacking the accuser, crisis denial, to more accommodating ones like justification, ingratiation, corrective action and full apology (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2004, 2007). Organi-

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