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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; Kioussis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007; Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006; Ragas, Kim, & Kioussis, 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-

zations should enact these strategies according to the crisis they face which could be an accident, a preventable crisis, or a situation in which the company itself has been a victim of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2004, 2007). Further, preventable crises represent the highest threat to organizations because stakeholders are more inclined to attribute a high degree of responsibility to the organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2004, 2007).

With regard to preventable crises, the SCCT contends that companies should address the physical and the psychological needs of their affected stakeholders. Addressing the physical needs implies helping and compensating the affected victims as well as communicating transparently and honestly to ensure that the crisis does not impact additional stakeholders. Further, organizations should address the psychological needs of their stakeholders by providing enough information about the crisis so as to reduce uncertainty and by sincerely apologizing for the damage caused (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2004, 2007).

The crises analyzed in this study were both preventable and, therefore, according to the SCCT likely to trigger high responsibility attribution and tarnish the reputation of the two companies. The present study ascertained what aspects of the two crises the media covered and used the SCCT constructs for this purpose. Specifically, it was considered that, by covering various aspects of the companies' crisis response to the detriment of others, the media, while aiming to report objectively, will exert influence on the extent to which the readers and the companies' stakeholder groups will attribute responsibility to the company for the crisis. The analysis assessed the themes that prevailed in the media coverage and that focused on the negative aspects of the crises (responsibility attribution and negative consequences) and the less negative aspects such as rebuilding strategies (corrective action) and ingratiation (the company as a victim of the crisis, and renewal/recovery).

Based on the SCCT, this study asked:

RQ2: What was the presence of the negative and less negative themes in the media coverage of GM's and Toyota's crises?

3. Methods

This study made use of the two major crises from the car industry, namely GM' 2014 ignition switch recall and Toyota's 2010 accelerator crisis. These case studies were considered unique and potentially revelatory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) because of their magnitude. Specifically, by October 2014 GM had 74 recalls that impacted 26.5 million of its vehicles (Jensen, 2014, para. 4) while Toyota's recalls amounted to 5.3 million cars by January 2010 (Valdes-Dapena, 2010, para.1). GM's crisis started in 2005 when complaints from dealers and customers warned the company of stalls. Despite 87 deaths, GM labelled the warnings as a matter of customer convenience that only reached top management in 2014 (Valukas, 2014) when GM initiated major recalls and compensated the victims' families. While at GM the information about the faulty cars did not reach the leadership team, in Toyota's case investigations pointed to the management's purposeful avoidance of recalls despite warnings and 93 deaths (Bunkley, 2010; para. 7) all of which, in turn, enabled the company to save 100 million dollars (Whoriskey, 2010). Finally, the company compensated the victims' families and paid a fine of \$48.8 million (Tabuchi, 2011; para. 9).

For the purpose of this study the two companies were selected based on the similarities of their crises. More precisely, from the perspective of the SCCT (Coombs, 2007), the crises can be classified as preventable and, therefore, likely to trigger high responsibility attribution. In addition, the selection of these crises enabled the study of gender-specific senior leadership responses since Toyota's crisis communication revolved around the company's president, Akio Toyoda, while General Motors' female CEO, Mary Barra played a paramount role in addressing her company's recalls. The sample of analysis consisted of newspaper articles from two elite media outlets in the United States, namely The New York Times and The Washington Post. The two newspapers were selected based on the intermedia agenda setting (Lim, 2011; Roberts & McCombs, 1994) according to which, elite newspapers like The New York Times and The Washington Post set the agenda for the rest of the media and, therefore exert further influence on the issues that get covered. Hence, it was considered that, the two major newspapers would be representative of the rest of the media coverage in the US.

The units of analysis represented newspaper articles that covered GM and Toyota and were selected from the Lexis-Nexis data base by searching for the following keywords: General Motors recall; Mary Barra; General Motors investigation; Toyota recall; Akio Toyoda; Toyota investigation. The period of analysis was twelve months; starting from the day each crisis first received coverage. Hence; the period of analysis for Toyota was January 21; 2010–December 21; 2011 and for GM February 4; 2014–January 4; 2015. A preview of the sample determined that Toyota's CEO delegated some of the company's crisis response to two of its senior leaders; namely Shiniki Sasaki; executive Vice President in charge of quality; and Yoshini Inaba; executive chairman and that he responded directly to the crisis in fewer occasions. It was decided that in Toyota's case all the newspaper articles that dealt with the crisis responses provided by the three Toyota executives should be taken into account since they would not jeopardize the findings: Toyota's discourse still revolved around male communication. The newspaper articles that did not tackle citations from the CEOs and the two Japanese senior executives (Mary Barra for GM and Akio Toyoda; Shinichi Sasaki and Yoshini Inaba for Toyota) were excluded from the final sample. The final sample of analysis consisted of a total of seventy newspaper articles (N=41 for Toyota and N=29 for GM).

The news articles were analyzed by conducting a thematic analysis (Aronson, 1995). This research methodology was deemed appropriate due to its potential to shed light on the subtle meanings within the text and to enable the researcher to make inferences based on emergent themes that, if assessed on their own, would not have led to a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study (Leininger, 1985). The method implied an inductive-deductive approach that involved three stages (Aronson, 1995). First, the news articles were analyzed in order to ascertain the general themes in the text. Second,

the data were categorized so as to determine which patterns in the text fell under the themes that emerged in stage one. Third, the news articles were analyzed for the emergence of sub-themes. In addition, the themes and sub-themes were rank-ordered based on past recommendations for the study of agenda-setting effects (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012). Because a thematic analysis implies that the interpretation of the themes relies heavily on the researcher's perspective and there is no interrater reliability, it behooved the researcher to rigorously determine "the coherence of ideas" as well as the extent to which they "fit together in a meaningful way" (Leininger, 1985).

Each unit of analysis was coded for: (1) the emergence of gender-specific communication themes and sub-themes in the executives' crisis response, and (2) the presence of SCCT themes in the rest of the news article. Specifically, the coding process involved assessing the themes in the executives' crisis response to ascertain the presence of female/weak-inclined communication (forms of speech that denoted emotion, concern for others, and tact) and male/strong-inclined communication (blunt, forceful and dominant forms of speech). Finally, each newspaper article was analyzed for the presence of SCCT themes and subthemes in the rest of the coverage, namely the parts of the articles that did not quote from the executives. Consequently, the analysis determined the emergent themes, subthemes and patterns present in each newspaper article and the extent to which they made reference to the companies' corrective action, responsibility attribution, negative consequences, covered the company as a victim of circumstances, and/or made reference to the companies' recovery or renewal.

4. Results/discussion

4.1. General Motors' crisis communication

The analysis of Mary Barra's crisis response revealed the emergence of two major themes: exigency and regret. The predominant theme was that of exigency and revolved around statements regarding the company's aggressive focus on corrective action. Exigency entailed three main patterns: addressing the crisis externally and internally as well as focusing on the current business practices. For example, the CEO stressed the company's full cooperation with the National Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the congress and mentioned that she had ordered an unvarnished external investigation into the company's practices that would become available to the general public. In terms of addressing the crisis internally, she emphasized the fact that her leadership team was not waiting for the final investigation to make changes in the company's structure, bureaucracy, and culture but rather, such changes were underway. Further, the CEO argued that she and the executive team were responsible for making things right and they were committed to doing so. A focus on GM's current business operations represented the third pattern within the exigency theme, as the CEO asserted that, while addressing the crisis, the company continued to focused on its financial growth.

Further, the analysis revealed the emergence of reputation as a subtheme of exigency. Specifically, the CEO's crisis response made reference to the fact that the company's reputation would not be determined by the crisis itself but by how the latter was addressed and that immediate action needed to be taken without hesitation. She further contended that there was much work ahead of the company so as to ensure that similar crises would not reoccur.

The second most employed theme was that of regret as the CEO apologized and asserted that both she and the company deeply regretted the harm caused. Regret emerged in two patterns as the crisis response made reference to both the victims and their families as well as to GM's customers more generally. For example, in addition to expressing regret and apologizing to the victims' families and the rest of the consumers, the crisis response entailed details about compensation plans. Finally, the analysis revealed the presence of reputation as a subtheme. While reputation also appeared within the theme of exigency, the meaning conferred in the former differed from the one present within the regret theme. In this case, reputation emerged in relation to the fact that recalling defective cars that had led to loss of life was the right thing to do and that recalls themselves would not harm a company's reputation.

In sum, exigency and regret were the predominant themes in GM's crisis communication. From the perspective of the genderlect theory, these themes denote a female-specific communication style (Tannen, 2013). Specifically, the exigency theme entailed information about the immediate need to take action and the specifics of the company's crisis response, all of which represent tactful communication (Tannen, 2013). Further, the details of the crisis response that the CEO provided were a proof of her transparent communication style as she discussed her determination to address the crisis internally and externally and to ensure that the results of the investigation she had ordered would be available to the general public. The transparency and directness with which she addressed the exigency of the crisis denote a concern for maintaining/rebuilding trust, a main ingredient of relationship management and a primary attribute of female-specific communication (Tannen, 2013).

An additional tenet of the genderlect theory posits that for women, decisions are rooted in relationships and that the process of decision making revolves around a general concern for how a specific decision would affect others. The exigency theme extant in GM's crisis communication signaled concerns for the affected stakeholders to the detriment of the company itself. This is more evident in the subtheme of reputation and in the CEO's statements according to which reputation is derived by how the crisis is addressed and how things would move on from that moment on. Further, regret is a predominant characteristic of female-specific communication and a main ingredient for successful relationship management as the person showing remorse focuses on those affected by an event and seeks to maintain or restore a relationship. The emphasis on regret extant in GM's crisis communication can be viewed as female-specific communication as the CEO expressed her

deep regrets and apologized multiple times to the affected consumers and the general public. Most importantly, the crisis response within the subtheme of reputation revealed once more the concern for the affected consumers despite the fact that this incessant focus could negatively impact the image of the company.

4.2. *General Motors' crisis coverage*

The analysis of the news articles revealed the emergence of five major themes in the coverage that GM received. The major theme was that of corrective action, followed by responsibility attribution, negative consequences of the crisis on the company and its consumers, chance for a renewal of business operations and, finally, GM as a victim of the crisis.

The prevailing theme was that of corrective action and journalists covered extensively and in detail GM's steps to address the crisis as well as the specifics of each of the company's recalls. The Valukas report, an internal investigation conducted at the CEO's request represented the major pattern within the corrective action frame. For example, the news articles mentioned not only the details of the report but also its impact on the company's culture and operation practices. Further, two subthemes emerged within this pattern: safety as a value that the company aimed to commit itself to and the company's focus on compensating the victims and their families.

The second most employed theme was that of responsibility attribution. From the perspective of the SCCT, since GM's crisis was preventable, stakeholders would be inclined to hold the company accountable. The fact that this theme emerged second after that of corrective action shows that the coverage was more inclined toward the less negative aspects of the crisis. The theme of responsibility attribution entailed a single pattern, namely that of inaction as the coverage pointed to the company's slow reaction to the crisis. However, to a certain degree the crisis was also discussed with regard to the company as a victim of its culture of silos.

The third most employed theme in GM's crisis coverage discussed the negative impact of the recalls. Two main patterns emerged within this theme. First, the coverage tackled the negative impact on the victims and their families as journalists covered the crisis from a human interest perspective. Second, the negative impact theme was present in relation to the consequences of the crisis on the company which had already been struggling on the European market.

Despite the fact that the negative impact of the crisis received extensive coverage, its presence was followed closely by that of renewal as news articles pointed to GM's chance to become a better and a stronger company. The fact that the ignition switch crisis represented an opportunity for GM to revise its business practices and emerge as a stronger company was the fourth most employed theme. The analysis revealed the presence of one pattern that dominated the coverage of renewal, namely consumer confidence. Further, two major subthemes were present in this pattern, specifically current surges in GM sales and recalls. With regard to the first subtheme, the coverage made reference to the fact that the crisis represented an opportunity for further improvement in terms of safety for a company whose sales in 2014 were the best since 2008, the year of GM's bailout. The second subtheme dealt with the recalled cars and provided specific information on each model while emphasizing that these cars were no longer in production. Several articles mentioned that, since the car models being recalled were produced in the past, there was a high likelihood that the company would not lose its consumers' trust.

Finally, the fifth most employed theme was that of the company as a victim of the crisis. The presence of this theme is a surprising result since GM had been facing a preventable crisis that was addressed almost a decade after the first consumer complaints had surfaced. The articles made reference to two main subthemes, namely external factors that triggered the crisis and the company as a victim of its own culture. The first theme entailed information about NHTSA and federal regulators that failed to intervene and conduct a thorough investigation after the first complaints had emerged. Further, when giving details about the effects of the faulty ignition switch on the engine and the airbags, the coverage mentioned the companies that had provided GM with these products.

4.3. *Toyota's crisis communication*

The analysis of Toyota's senior leadership crisis response revealed the prevalence of two major themes, namely defense and future action. Further, two subthemes emerged: shifting responsibility to external authorities and addressing the crisis. The theme of future action displayed the patterns of quality and safety and the subtheme of a promise for a future consumer focus. The following paragraphs describe the results in more detail.

Toyota's leadership communication revolved mostly around defending the company by: 1. shifting the blame to government agencies such as NHTSA and 2. providing explanations with regard to why the company was slow in taking corrective action. These findings were coded as subthemes and considered defensive strategies as they revealed an attempt to dominate the conversation around the crisis through a forceful approach. The second subtheme within defense comprised statements that made reference to how Toyota addressed the crisis. Two patterns emerged within this subtheme, namely the precise measures the company took during the crisis management process as well as the company's stance on external accusations about being slow and dishonest in its crisis response. The pattern of the measures taken entailed statements made by the company's president, Akio Toyoda with regard to the establishment of a global committee meant to oversee the quality of the cars at an international scale. Moreover, the company had designed a program that enabled concerned drivers to communicate directly with Toyota's president via phone. In addition, the company's senior leaders argued that they identified the defects in cars, recalled the faulty vehicles, and fixed the issues in new models. However, while the preceding statements were meant to describe the company's corrective action, they appeared within a defensive context.

There were several arguments the company's leadership team made when discussing the delayed recalls. These defensive strategies outweighed the statements regarding the exact steps the company took to address the crisis. For example, the president defended the company by stating that it had focused so much on numbers that it became unable to train employees and ensure quality. Further, while not directly admitting to any wrongdoing, he issued an ambiguous apology for his late appearance and defended the company's inaction by stressing that it was a done fact: "That's done and I am sorry. But now I am here." The same inaction surfaced in other statements that lacked a direct apology or acknowledgement of wrongdoing. For example, the senior leadership team argued that they were "somewhat slow" in analyzing and acting upon the customer complaints.

The second theme that dominated Toyota's discourse was that of future action. It entailed the patterns of quality and safety as the company's discourse focused on the future delivery of reliable cars. One subtheme prevailed within future action and was represented by the statements that entailed promises of a future consumer focus. The majority of these statements entailed promises of improvement in terms of customer service, quality, and safety. These arguments emerged within the context of previous statements according to which additional cars had not been considered for a recall as the company could not tell if losing control of the steering wheel was caused by a problem with the tires, brakes, or other factors.

The quality pattern was more prevalent than that of safety as the company's president stressed his desire to restore Toyota to the company it had been before the crisis, namely one known for its high quality vehicles. This is a surprising result because, although it can be inferred that quality would equal safety in the car industry, in the aftermath of a crisis that involved loss of life, clear communication about the future implementation of safety programs would reduce the consumers' anxiety and prevent them from switching to a different brand.

In sum, Toyota's leadership communication revolved predominantly around defense and the promises of future action. Based on the genderlect theory (Tannen, 2013) the use of defensive strategies in communication are a means to face direct conflict and a strong form of communication that characterizes male speech. Specifically, male communication is defensive to the extent to which it enables the rhetor to gain status and recognition. Further, defensive strategies focus on "the self" while excluding "the other" from the conversation and represent a form of dominant and forceful communication as the rhetor aims to protect his image and dominate the discourse so as to win or put an end to a conflict.

Further, Toyota's crisis discourse referencing future action as opposed to GM's focus on corrective action can be explained through the lens of justice as an abstract concept as opposed to justice as rooted in relationships. More precisely, men's communication that revolves around justice was shown in gender-related studies to be abstract and independent of context. Unlike women, men engage in a decision making process that is based on facts and one that is not enmeshed in the relationships that might be impacted by a decision. Hence, justice as an abstract notion can explain why Toyota's response in terms of corrective action was future-oriented leaving room for improvement in terms of an immediate concern for the affected stakeholders.

4.4. Toyota's crisis coverage

The major theme in the coverage of Toyota's crisis was that of responsibility attribution, followed by negative consequences, corrective action, the company as a victim of the crisis, and renewal. Responsibility attribution and negative consequences dominated the coverage and were present to an almost equal extent. Based on the tenets of the SCCT, Toyota received a significant amount of negative coverage since the corporation was held responsible to a greater extent than it received coverage on corrective action or renewal. Responsibility attribution was covered mostly in reference to Toyota's slow recalls as both The New York Times and The Washington Post discussed the fact that the company's recalls had been triggered by external investigations and argued that the company had been hiding information from the US government.

Further, Toyota was accused of enacting double standards with regard to how it handled its recalls in Europe compared to its actions in the US and Canada and of labeling the faulty cars an issue of "customer satisfaction". In this respect it is important to note that GM's crisis was similar since the issue of the faulty ignition switch was labeled as one of customer convenience. Moreover, similarly to Toyota, GM recalled cars that were no longer in production. However, despite the similarity between the crises and the late recalls, GM received less coverage of responsibility attribution.

Negative consequences comprised the second most prevailing theme in Toyota's crisis coverage and entailed two major themes: the negative impact of the crisis on the company's profit and the consequences of the company's poor crisis communication on the brand's credibility and reputation. Specifically, the articles discussed the company's dwindling sales in Europe, its cost cuts and layoffs, the plants idled in France and the UK, and the 16% slump in sales in the US.

Yet, the majority of the coverage pertaining to the negative consequences theme tackled the negative impact of the crisis on Toyota's reputation. The coverage entailed details from experts who predicted that customers would be skeptical about the company's vehicles and would question their quality. The third most employed theme was that of corrective action. However, the coverage implied that addressing the crisis was an impression management gimmick that could lead to further reputational damage. The fourth most present theme in Toyota's crisis coverage was that of the company as a victim of the crisis as articles pointed to the federal government's and NHTSA's delay in compelling the company to issue a significant recall. Finally, the least present theme was that of renewal and the articles discussed Toyota's reputation for quality in the years preceding the 2010 crisis.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed differences in the communication styles enacted by GM's and Toyota's executives, differences that, based on the genderlect theory, can be classified as female and male-specific communication strategies. Further, the analysis assessed the valence of the media coverage and revealed that GM, whose crisis communication response was female-specific received more positive coverage than Toyota, whose crisis communication was male-specific. Yet, the direct correlation between gender-specific communication styles and media coverage cannot be determined through the present study and needs to be further investigated via statistical analyses. The sample of analysis for the current study was small because it comprised of newspaper articles that entailed direct quotes from the executives and, hence, did not allow for a statistical analysis. Nonetheless, the analysis represents a first attempt to apply the genderlect theory to crisis communication and to inform future research studies that can enlarge the sample to ascertain via quantitative research methods the extent to which gender-specific communication exerts influence on media coverage. Such studies are important to inform best practices of crisis communication that combine female- and male-communication styles with the ultimate purpose of rebuilding trust with a company's stakeholders and reducing further reputational damage.

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