

Situational Crisis Communication Theory and The British Royal Family

Addison L. Shaw

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Sheri Dean Parmelee, Ph.D.  
Thesis Chair

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Bruce M. Kirk, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

---

David E. Schweitzer, Ph.D.  
Assistant Honors Director

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Date

**Abstract**

This thesis will analyze the public relations of the British Royal Family as seen through the lens of Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Coombs' (2007) theory provides a theoretical framework and guidelines for crisis response strategies when organizations experience a crisis. This thesis will particularly evaluate the public relations of the British Royal Family during the aftermath of Princess Diana's death by examining primary artifacts such as newspaper articles and public statements made by the organization and the public. Furthermore, this thesis fills in the research gap regarding the evolution of the public's perception of an organization with the release of new information about the crisis.

*Keywords:* Timothy Coombs, situational crisis communication theory, crisis response, crisis communication, British Royal Family, public relations

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the British Royal Family**

The echoes of the British monarchy can be heard from all around the world. For centuries, the British monarchy has stood, shaking and forming the world around it. However, with grand influence and a blinding spotlight, come unbearable scrutiny and the demand for speedy and precise communication in the face of catastrophe. The several events that have required superior public relation tactics from the royal family are moments such as Princess Diana's death, Oprah's telling interview with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, and the scandalous allegations towards Prince Andrew regarding his association with Jeffrey Epstein. It is these defining moments for the British royals that will either make or deteriorate the reputation of the monarchy. Particularly, the event of Princess Diana's death and the public relation tactics of the British Royal Family thereafter will be evaluated throughout this thesis as seen through the lens of Timothy Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Field of Crisis Communication and Defining Terms**

In their textbook co-edited together, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay (2010) conducted a comprehensive study on the field of crisis communication and its relative disciplines that led to the development of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. This emerging field of crisis communication has been broadening in recent years and lends itself over to multiple disciplines in management and public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Analyzing the field of crisis communication and its parallel discipline of crisis management, provides a backdrop for this newly-developed theory.

Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as “an unpredictable event” that causes any level of physical, financial, or psychological damage to its stakeholders, aka the public, and poses a threat against the reputation of the company (as cited in Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 19). This definition assumes that what negatively impacts the well-being of an organization’s stakeholders will consequently form a reputational threat towards an organization. However, crisis management informs organizations on how to prepare for, prevent, and react in a crisis to lessen the potential damages done by such an event (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Conversely, crisis communication deals primarily with the communication messages that are carried out throughout the crisis management process (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

### **Overview of Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

Coombs and Holladay (2010) posited that the field of crisis communication has been infiltrated with case studies that suggest best practices in crisis response but has lacked any real theoretical foundation. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory was developed in order to bridge this gap and offer evidence-based theory to crisis managers (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). As Coombs describes, organizations would prefer to rely upon tested and tried theory rather than mere speculation when dealing with a public relations crisis (ASBCast, 2009). The first publication by Timothy Coombs introducing the concepts that would later form the Situational Crisis Communication Theory was his article, “Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the ‘Appropriate’ Crisis-Response Strategies,” written in 1995. It was here that he introduced a new aspect, new research, into the world of crisis management. Coombs expressed that, though research had been done on preventative and reactionary crisis management, “an underdeveloped area of crisis management is what organizations say to publics

(crisis-response strategies)” following the crisis (Coombs, 1995, p. 447). This proposal initiated the crisis-response strategy component that is central to Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

The central concern that the Situational Crisis Communication Theory seeks to engage is protecting the organization’s reputation when there is a crisis through post-crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). Coombs describes his theory as “audience oriented” in that it focuses on the audience’s response to a crisis and the communication messages used by the organization to combat it (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 38). Therefore, much of what SCCT lends itself to is assessing the various factors that impact the organization’s reputation and then choosing the best response strategies that will minimize damage done by the crisis. Next, a few terms will be defined as to what impacts the reputational threat of a crisis.

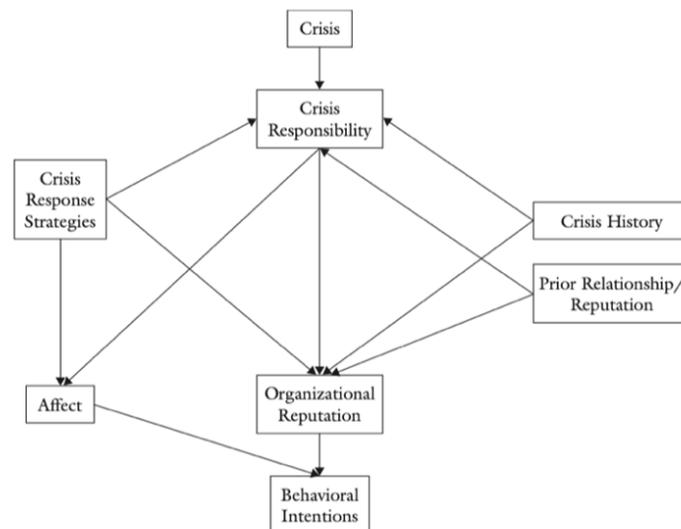
### ***The Components of Situational Crisis Communication***

First, SCCT has many roots in Attribution Theory, which outlines how an individual tries to make sense of a situation, event, or behavior by attributing responsibility to either dispositional (internal) or situational (external) factors (McLeod, 2012). The theory assumes that not only will a person assign responsibility for the event but will have an emotional response such as anger or sympathy (Coombs, 2007). Either it is assumed that the crisis could have been avoided and there is a sense of anger and frustration, or the organization is seen as the victim in the crisis and the public has sympathy towards the organization (Coombs, 2007). Thus, the Attribution Theory is the theoretical link between the many factors in SCCT that assumes people attribute responsibility when a crisis occurs (Coombs, 2007).

In tandem with the Attribution Theory, SCCT shows that there is a further piece of the puzzle. Not only do stakeholders attribute responsibility for a crisis and exhibit respective emotions, but the crisis responsibility directly correlates to the level of reputational threat against an organization. Therefore, the level to which stakeholders attribute responsibility will subsequently estimate the organization's reputational threat following the crisis before any response strategies are put in place. The three factors that constitute the "crisis situation" and calculate the reputational threat of a crisis are the initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and previous relationship reputation (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). Once crisis managers have evaluated these three components to assess crisis threat, they will be able to identify the best response strategy that will "maximize reputational protection" (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). Figure 1 illustrates the concepts of SCCT and the theoretical connection between each component.

### Figure 1

#### *Theory Model*



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The two-step process utilized to assess the crisis situation begins with calculating initial crisis responsibility as measured by the specific “crisis type” (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). Coombs describes that the crisis type acts as a frame that molds the public’s perception of who is at fault for the incident (Coombs, 2007). The three crisis types are the victim cluster, accidental cluster, and the intentional cluster (Coombs, 2007). Each crisis type corresponds to how much the organization is held responsible for the crisis in the eyes of the stakeholders. In a victim cluster, the organization is seen as the victim and therefore very little attribution, or initial crisis responsibility, is assigned to the organization (Coombs, 2007). In an accidental cluster, the event spawned in a very unlikely scenario and thus is considered “unintentional or uncontrollable” (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). However, in the intentional cluster, the crisis is seen as avoidable and falls on the shoulders of human error (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, the organization is held much more liable, and the initial crisis responsibility increases. The higher the level of crisis responsibility assigned, based on the crisis type, directly correlates to a greater reputational threat.

The second step of the process involves evaluating what Coombs (2007) describes as the “intensifying factors” of crisis history and prior relational reputation (p. 168). Though the crisis type outlines how much the public will initially assign blame, the presence of these intensifying factors inflates the initial responsibility attributed to the organization (Coombs, 2007). If there is a history of similar crises happening or the organization has a poor prior reputation in the eyes of the stakeholders, the reputational threat increases since the stakeholders begin to attribute more responsibility to the organization. In both crisis history and prior relational reputation, if either are negative, it will directly impact how stakeholders attribute the crisis responsibility to the

organization and therefore the reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, all three factors of the crisis situation - crisis type, crisis history, and prior relational reputation - must be considered when establishing the degree of reputational threat and determining the best response strategy to utilize.

The three different crisis response strategies that can be utilized by crisis managers are “denial, diminish, and rebuild” (Coombs, 2006 as cited in Coombs, 2007, p. 170). Each have their own factors and limitations and are dependent on the situational crisis factors. First, the denial crisis response strategy focuses on removing all association with the accusations. This may include denying that there is a crisis altogether or claiming that the organization had nothing to do with it. These strategies, like crisis types, form a frame around the crisis and thus need to be handled with care and close examination (Coombs, 2007). On the other hand, diminish strategies attempt to make the crisis seem not as bad as it really is. In other words, the organization assumes association with the crisis but avoids taking on all of the responsibility for the event. Finally, rebuild strategies seek to rebuild the reputation and relationship with its stakeholders by taking full responsibility for the crisis and administering compensation for any harm done. There are various sub-strategies within each one of these three. However, the message and accountability in each remains the same.

### **Theory Gaps and Contributing Research**

What Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay (2010) acknowledge is the theory’s insufficient guidance of the aftereffects of the response-strategy used by an organization. In the book, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, Coombs and Holladay (2010) wrote, “There are two related research topics that I would like to highlight... (1) understanding reactions to crisis

response strategies and (2) the role of culture in crisis communication” (p. 722). SCCT is described as a developing theory with additional factors that may not have been specified that shape the crisis threat. The theory clearly states that crisis response can change people’s perceptions of the organization, but it doesn’t identify a system of weighing those reactions (Coombs, 2007).

Filling this gap, Coombs and Holladay (2014) conducted research that addressed this missing piece in SCCT, which is how the *public* then responds to the organization’s crisis response efforts. This research analyzed the public’s response on various media platforms following the announcement that Lance Armstrong would be stepping down from the organization he founded, Livestrong Foundation, due to doping allegations (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Comments from users were reviewed on the Livestrong Foundation’s blog site, as well as on a Huffington Post article written about the crisis. Reviewing these comments on the various news outlets revealed that the public can act as “informal crisis managers” as they communicate their reactions to the crisis response (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, para. 1 & 4). Social media being a user-controlled platform means that, as the public shares criticisms, support, and information about the crisis, they shape the narrative of the event just as much as the formal statements given by the organization. Therefore, the research concluded that organizations must review these public arenas to gauge the success of their crisis response strategies and adjust their response as needed based on the public’s reactions (Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

However, what previous research is still missing is what this research seeks to expound upon. At the end of their article, Coombs and Holladay (2014) explained that future research

could elaborate on how stakeholder responses to the initial crisis response strategies could evolve “over time with each new revelation” about the crisis, such as when Lance Armstrong admitted to the doping allegations years later in an interview (para. 51). This new information could change the way that stakeholders affirm and deny support for the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Not only do organizations need to evaluate how their stakeholders are responding to their current response strategies, but they also need to clarify how new information continues to evolve their stakeholders’ view and shape their current response strategies. Thus, this thesis seeks to research this missing gap by first evaluating the crisis response strategies of the British Royal Family during the death Princess Diana. Then, it will assess how the new information that surfaced during Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2021 shapes current stakeholder perceptions and crisis response strategies. This also addresses the question to how media coverage impacts the public’s view of crisis response strategies and how prior crisis response strategies connect to the present. How have their crisis response strategies shifted in recent events, given the scrutiny they have received by recent media coverage and the failures and successes of past public relations?

Though SCCT gives a theoretical foundation for crisis response and further research has indicated the importance of analyzing social media to adapt crisis communication, no research has revealed how prior crisis response strategies connect to the current ones being used by an organization. This research gleans insight into this untapped area of study and shows the universal application of Timothy Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

### **Methodology**

Using SCCT, this paper will analyze the success of the public relation tactics in the British Royal Family's response to Princess Diana's death. This thesis will execute this by examining the response strategies as seen in press releases and traditional media used by the royal family and the public's response to those strategies as seen in printed newspaper articles during that time. Then, this paper will make an argument for how new information regarding past crises response strategies used by the royals impact the public's perception of the institution and their present day public relations. This section of the paper will analyze the response strategies used to handle the recent public relations crisis involving Prince Harry and Meghan Markle and their interview with Oprah Winfrey. Evaluating the use of press releases, traditional media, and social media, SCCT will be applied to each factor and the success of the British Royal Family's public relations strategy.

### **Analysis**

#### **Crisis: Princess Diana's Death**

##### ***The Incident***

On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1997, the Princess of Wales, better known as Princess Diana, was riding in a car with her partner, Dodi Fayed. A high-speed chase with paparazzi ensued down the streets of Paris just after midnight. Traveling 120 miles per hour, the vehicle plummeted into the 13<sup>th</sup> pillar of the Alma tunnel. The seven photographers chased closely behind, only stopping to take pictures of the crash scene (Real Royalty, 2021, 17:50). Other individuals in the car were the driver Henri Paul, and Diana's bodyguard, Trevor Rees-Jones. Rees-Jones was the only survivor of the otherwise fatal car crash (17:02). Though Henri Paul and Dodi Fayed, died immediately,

Princess Diana died around four o'clock on the morning of August 31<sup>st</sup> as a result of internal injuries.

The news of Princess Diana's death became the crisis of the decade, ringing through the streets of London and throughout the rest of the world. Hundreds of thousands of people were seen mourning around London, leaving countless flower bouquets outside of the Queen's residence, Buckingham Palace, and Princess Diana's former residence, Kensington Palace (Real Royalty, 2021, 5:55). Even to this day, people who were alive at the time of Princess Diana's death can identify where they were when they heard the news. Some may even remember it to have been a personally emotional experience, given their attachment to the princess. Nonetheless, the death of Princess Diana was and will forever be a British royal crisis that has had lasting impacts on the world, as well as the academic fields of communications, psychology, and history.

It was shocking to see how many people were distraught by the death of Princess Diana and the outburst of emotion around the world. After all, Princess Diana and Prince Charles, Queen Elizabeth's son and next to inherit the throne, had divorced not too long before the accident. She was no longer considered a member of the royal family and had distanced herself from all royal duties. However, the world fell in love with her heart and authentic nature and ability to relate with the people she had once played a role in governing (Morton, 2017). Though she had lost her rights to the use of "Her Royal Highness" following the divorce from Prince Charles, she had remained beloved by her country and those who connected with her warm demeanor (Morton, 2017). She had a spirit that the stark British monarchy could not rival, in her death as much as in life.

*The Royals' Initial Response*

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke at 10:18 am the morning of August 31<sup>st</sup>, just hours after news of Diana's death was known. With a solemn demeanor and pausing every few moments to gather his thoughts, Blair stated, "I feel like everyone else in this country today, utterly devastated. Our thoughts and prayers are with Princess Diana's family, particular her two sons" (AP Archive, 2015, 0:15). Blair made a few more remarks, including stating that Diana was the "People's Princess" and would forever be, before he made his way into St. Mary Magdalene's church (2:16). Meanwhile, on the evening of August 31<sup>st</sup>, Prince Charles made a statement by flying to Paris to retrieve the princess' remains, appearing to be more of a grieving widower than her divorced husband. Prince Charles was accompanied by Princess Diana's sisters, Lady Jane Fellowes, and Lady Sarah McCorquordale (Robathan, 1997). This trip made personally by the Prince of Wales was an astonishing tribute to Princess Diana in the eyes of the British people, while the Queen would remain silent for four more days.

As millions mourned the death of Princess Diana, crying on public streets, the Queen and the majority of the British Royal Family remained silent. One of the greatest displays of public hysteria in Britain was happening, yet the Queen made neither a public statement nor an appearance for more than five days. Instead, the royals remained in Scotland at Balmoral Castle, under great scrutiny from the public as each day dragged on without a word. The Queen was spotted briefly on the morning after Princess Diana's death while attending a Sunday church service (Real Royalty, 2021, 5:08). However, there was no comment or acknowledgement in church of what had happened just the previous night. One woman in an interview dating back to the week of Princess Diana's death exclaimed, "Nobody's going to say, 'ooh, what's the matter

with her, why is she crying?’ Because everybody feels exactly the same” (4:17). Another woman even said, “they are the most cruel people on earth” due to their screeching silence (4:30).

In Andrew Morton’s (2017) intimate biography on the Princess of Wales, he described the immense difference between the character of Diana that many clung to before and after her death, compared with the coldness of the British monarchy. People had connected with her kindness and compassion that contrasted the customary rigid demeanor of the royals. Morton describes this difference as exemplified in their response to her death, “her openness, their distance; her spontaneity, their inflexibility, her modernity, their stale ritual; her emotional generosity, their aloofness...” (‘The People’s Princess’ section, para. 33). It was clear that the royal family was handling this in a British “stiff upper lip” attitude compared to the emotional response of the grieving masses.

The tabloids also went rampant with the lack of response from the Queen. Headlines of British newspapers such The Sun and The Mirror read, “Your People Are Suffering – Speak to Us Ma’am” and “Where is Our Queen? Where is Her Flag?” (Real Royal, 2021, 4:22). The queen’s flag over Buckingham Palace wasn’t flying at half-mast due to the Queen’s absence, as it only flies when the Queen is present in the palace. Other headlines such as from The Express read, “Show Us You Care” (4:22). The people were sorrowful and confused. Falling under the immense grief of their loss, their grief soon turned to anger at the crisis response of the Queen. As earlier explained, the Attribution Theory gives the theoretical link in Situational Crisis Communication Theory where the public, or the stakeholders, will attribute responsibility when a crisis happens, and subsequent emotions will follow. In this case, the more the British Royal

Family was unwilling to speak about the death of Princess Diana, the more negative the emotions of the crowd grew as they felt they deserved an answer.

Finally, on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1997, The Queen addressed the British citizens for the first time, following a stroll in front of Buckingham Palace where she had viewed thousands of flowers piling one on top of another. Fully clothed in black, the Queen stood in the Chinese Dining Room looking directly at the camera. She immediately addressed the audience personally stating, “so what I say to you now, as your Queen and as a grandmother, I say from my heart” (British Royal Family, 1997, para. 2). She described the Princess of Wales as an “exceptional and gifted human being” who left an impact on the world and would never be forgotten (British Royal Family, 1997, para. 2 & 3). The Queen also addressed the Princess’ two sons, Prince William and Prince Harry, as trying to cope with their mother’s passing as they remained at Balmoral Castle. Finally, the Queen thanked the public for their outpouring of love and declared a call-to-action for the British people to be united during this time of grief.

The royals had decided to give Princess Diana a royal funeral despite her divorce from Prince Charles before her death. Though the royals declared that her funeral would be “a unique funeral for a unique person,” the Prime Minister added that “it should not just be a gathering for the great and the good” but one that all the people of Britain could take part in to remember their late princess (Hardman, 1997, para. 11). The public outcry and hysteria demanded action from the British royals. This included allowing the flag over Buckingham Palace to fly at half-mast and doubling the distance of the route the funeral car would take (Morton, 2017). Furthermore, the Queen went on a walkabout to show her appreciation for the thousands of flower bouquets decorating the streets (Morton, 2017). Additionally, the Queen bowed her head at the funeral

procession as it drove by, carrying Princess Diana's remains (Morton, 2017). This was quite a statement, as the Queen, in all her years of royalty, never bowed to anyone. This gesture was a symbol of admiration and utmost respect for Princess Diana.

### *The Public's Response*

The response from the public and from the media was a mix of emotions following the Queen's address at Buckingham Palace. One article published September 7, 1997, scrutinized the royal's traditional protocols and stone-cold emotions in the wake of the princess' funeral. The author wrote that the people "demanded human sorrow, spontaneity, warmth and real tears from their rulers yesterday" but the royals "were unable to deliver" (Power, 1997, para. 8).

Those who were truly getting the blame and backlash of the public's anger was the British press, most notably for their exploitation of Princess Diana through the paparazzi's feverish stalking of the princess. A Gallup Poll conducted just one week following Princess Diana's death recorded the responses and opinions of British and American citizens, revealing the true feelings of who was to blame for the accident. Forty-three percent of British citizens blamed the photographers for the death of Princess Diana, whereas thirty-three percent believed it was only the driver of the vehicle's fault (Saad, 1997). Fifty-four percent of the British reported that they believed the impeding privileges of the British tabloids would be best stopped through passing stronger laws (Saad, 1997). The reputational threat was more directed towards the British press than it was towards the British Royal Family, expressing outrage towards the media even while news reporters were attempting to get interviews of mourners outside of Buckingham Palace. The news media sector of England's business economy was pressed on all sides to make various changes following the death of Princess Diana. Nevertheless, the royals

were still met with criticism at their delayed response and rumors of conspiracy theories began to circulate that still raise the ears of their listeners even today (Real Royalty, 2021, 1:49).

### **Discussion**

The Queen's response and public address following Princess Diana's death was in line with the culture and precedent of the British monarchy, though it was not well received by her audience. In evaluating the response of the British Royal Family with that of SCCT, the crisis of Princess Diana's death would fall under the crisis type of a victim cluster, as the royal family would be seen as the victim in this situation, having nothing to do with the crisis. However, some of the conspiracy theories that accused the British Royal Family of planning Princess Diana's death leave for a questionable conclusion on how the public viewed the event.

### **Evaluating the Queen's Response as Seen Through SCCT**

What framed this crisis was the fact that the world viewed Princess Diana's death as a victim crisis type where the British Royal Family was seen as the victim of the incident. As described previously, this means that the public attributed little to no blame of the passing to the British monarchy. Therefore, according to Timothy Coombs' (2007) theory, the initial reputational threat towards the institution in the eyes of the stakeholders (the public), was minimal. Though there had been conspiracy theories circulating at the time of her death about whether the monarchy had something to do with the death, this research assumes what the majority of the public assumed and what would later be confirmed: that Princess Diana's death was indeed an accident. Therefore, the first component in SCCT's formula for calculating reputational threat, initial crisis responsibility, was low.

The next step in weighing the success of the royal's public relation strategies according to SCCT would be to calculate the "intensifying factors" of crisis history and prior relational reputation as mentioned earlier. In regard to crisis history, the modern royal family had never witnessed a catastrophe to this degree that would require this magnitude of crisis communication. However, there had been several other crises that demanded a response from the Queen and the family institution. These events include the incident of the Hillsborough Stadium collapsing, which killed nearly 100 people in 1989, and the *Marchioness* cruiser sinking in 1989, where 51 people lost their lives (Lawrence-Jones, 2019; Morton, 2017; Tikkanen, 2022). Both incidents demonstrated the same kind of initial lackadaisical response from the British monarchy (Morton, 2017). Thus, though the British Royal Family had not had the same event happen in the past, their previously poor public relations weakened the relational reputation between the royals and the public. According to Coombs' formula, this weakened prior relational reputation would have increased the reputational threat against the royals in the current crisis. Therefore, though the event was a victim crisis type, the poor prior reputation when it came to crisis responses increased the reputational threat towards the British monarchy.

According to SCCT, immediate action and communication should have been taken in order to protect the reputation of the organization and the future of the monarchy. Coombs (2007) wrote, "diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises) coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation" (p. 173). However, the initial crisis response strategy utilized by the Queen and the royals was denial. Again, the denial strategy according to Coombs can be either denying responsibility or denying that there is a crisis altogether (Coombs, 2007).

Though the monarchy didn't give a formal response, this sort of denial response strategy utilized by the Queen was an unspoken and silent declaration to the people of Britain that communicated that there was really no crisis at all. Coombs (2007) wrote that communication is necessary to protect against the reputational threat posed by the crisis, and lack of communication would only threaten the reputation of the institution that much more. Nonetheless, this is the primary response strategy utilized by Queen Elizabeth and the rest of the British monarchy for the week following Princess Diana's death.

However, as discussed earlier and exemplified by British mass media, this denial strategy did not perform well for the British people. Coombs and Holladay's (2014) research is applied here when examining this particular sequence of events. Their receiver-oriented approach to analyzing the public's response to crisis response strategies aids in the evaluation of the success of British royals' crisis communication as seen through the eyes of the public. Evaluating if the crisis response strategies have led to positive reactions from the stakeholders and a decreased reputational threat determines the success of crisis communication. According to the tabloids and public outcry, this response strategy indeed proved to be harmful to the public relations of the monarchy. The crisis was now not only the death of Princess Diana, but the failed initial crisis response strategies used by the British Royal Family.

Thus, there came a shift on September 5<sup>th</sup> when the Queen gave her formal address to the world from Buckingham Palace. This message from Queen Elizabeth II signaled a transition in the crisis response strategy from denial to justification and diminish, as she sought to justify her absence and comfort her people. The Queen utilized the frame of the "victim" crisis type, to describe the situation that the royals were facing with the death of Princess Diana. It was sure

that this event was something that had happened *to* the British Royal Family instead of something that they could have prevented. Addressing the public, “as [their] Queen and as a grandmother,” the Queen explained that the family had been consoling Diana’s two sons over the past week as they mourned the loss of their mother (British Royal Family, 1997, para. 2). These were uses of diminish response strategies as she tried to justify and affirm that her silence was not because of a lack of caring for her people, but because she was first and foremost a grandmother to two hurting boys. Queen Elizabeth II’s remarks on the admirable qualities of Diana and the tribute that the Queen carried out for her stately funeral, were all ways that the Queen acknowledged her people and her poor initial response, as she sought to restore the reputation of the British monarchy.

### **Current-Day Ties to Previous Crisis Response Strategies**

Nearly twenty-five years later, after all the dust of one of Britain’s greatest crises and near public relations fails settled, new information regarding the British Royal Family broke out from one of their own. Prince Harry opened up in an Oprah Winfrey interview with his wife, Meghan Markle, about the lifelong struggles that came with being raised in the British Royal Family. Where others have spent incredible amounts of time and energy trying to get personal information from the royal family, it was now being broadcast on national television and streamed all over the internet. This interview between the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and Oprah was one of the most transparent moments a member of the royal family had ever had with the media. The couple shared about many of their experiences within the royal household and the shocking experiences that ensued during their time in England.

Though this interview gave a lot of telling insight into the British Royal Family, this thesis is mainly concerned with how previous crisis response strategies impact present-day crisis communication. The question that burns is whether the information that Prince Harry shared about the death of Princess Diana and the experience he had in the aftermath of this event changes the perceptions of stakeholders. The royal family released a public statement in February of 2021 confirming that Prince Harry and Meghan Markle had officially stepped down as working members of the monarchy (Buckingham Palace, 2021, para. 1). Prince Harry revealed that his “biggest concern was history repeating itself” (MsMojo, 2021, 6:33). Of course, he was speaking on the paparazzi’s infringement on the personal life of his wife that, in the same way, largely caused the misery and contributed to the ultimate death of his mother. Furthermore, the couple shared about the “invisible contract” between the British media and the British Royal Family where the British press reports more favorably on the family if they are allowed more access to their private lives (3:42). Prince Harry admitted that “there is a level of control by fear that has existed for generations” within the royals’ relationship with the British press and the monarchy (4:06). These new revelations, specifically pertaining to news coverage and communication, could influence the way that the public views the organization and potentially even form a new reputational threat.

Furthermore, the Oprah Winfrey interview was not the only avenue that the Duke and Duchess used to share about their experiences and their own personal perceptions of the British monarchy. Prince Harry revealed honest emotions in the Apple+ documentary, *The Me You Don’t See* (Vanderhoof, 2021). He discussed with Oprah Winfrey how his mental health was greatly impacted by losing his mother and how he was unable to properly grieve her death

(Vanderhoof, 2021). There has been a lot of scrutiny with how the young princes were made to walk behind the carriage carrying their mother's body in front of millions of viewers at such a young age. Prince Harry's personal accounts affirm some of the criticism the royals have received in the past and may reignite those old, heated emotions that were originally dismantled by the crisis response strategies used by the firm. This leads to the question of whether new information that is revealed about a crisis demands new current-day responses from an organization. It has already been discussed that crises have current-day effects, yet this could further the research that past crisis response strategies may need to evolve in order to handle the new information that comes out pertaining to the situation.

These questions and assumptions can be answered by evaluating how the public is responding to this new revelation on channels, such as social media and other media outlets. Furthermore, different public polls have been able to gauge the public opinion of the British monarchy and that of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. According to a YouGov poll (Nolsoe, 2021), most people over the age of 65 dislike the Duke and Duchess, whereas the younger generation favors them, despite their overall favorable ratings decreasing following the Oprah interview. This research shows that a change in perceptions of the monarchy varies across age groups and even genders (Nolsoe, 2021). Thus, demographics should even be considered when evaluating the perceptions and potential reputational threat formed by new information emerging. Nonetheless, it is clear the previous crisis can still have present-day consequences and organizations should monitor for any new allegations or information that may put the reputation of their company at risk.

### **Conclusion**

Situational Crisis Communication Theory was developed to give an evidence-based approach to crisis communication and research approved guidelines for an organization's communication messages following a crisis. The versatile theory identifies a crisis as anything that causes "physical, financial, or psychological" hardship to its stakeholders and creates a threat towards the reputation of the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 19). The threat is a result of the various factors that surround the crisis situation, such as the degree to which the organization is initially found responsible (initial crisis responsibility), the presence of past crisis (crisis history), and the prior reputation the organization had before the crisis. Greater intensity of the initial crisis responsibility, as well as the presence of the two intensifying factors, will generate greater assumed crisis responsibility on the organization which leads to a higher reputational threat. With greater assumed responsibility by stakeholders, higher emotions of anger also contribute to the reputational threat and, eventually, how stakeholders plan to interact with the organization in the future (behavioral intentions). It is due to this reputational threat that SCCT suggests guidelines to help organizations minimize the negative outcomes of a crisis. Through carefully selecting one of SCCT's crisis response strategies, organizations will hopefully be able to "shape attributions of the crisis, change perceptions of the organization, and reduce the negative affect of the crisis" (Coombs, 1995 as cited in Coombs, 2007, p. 171).

By analyzing the crises that have impacted the British Royal Family, SCCT can be applied to evaluate the degree that the royal family was successful in their crisis response. Not only has the evaluated crisis been analyzed through the scope of the SCCT, but it has also been surveyed for connections between crisis response strategies and the evolution of stakeholders' perceptions of the organization, given new information coming forward about the crisis. This

was specifically evaluated with the death of Princess Diana and the new and emotional public statements given by her son, Prince Harry, roughly 25 years following her death. This thesis has demonstrated how the Situational Crisis Communication Theory can be universally applied and how its guidelines are relative for any organization, culture, and generation.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Because the subject of this paper is the British Royal Family, a monarchy that has been established for centuries, rather than a business firm, there are a few other components that could contribute to the dependent factors of SCCT. The British Royal Family is a political governing body as well as a group of public figures and therefore, factors that contribute to crisis responsibility and reputational threat may look different than for a corporation. Furthermore, stakeholders of the monarchy are national citizens that carry national bias and political opinions that influence their view of the royals no matter what crisis response strategies are utilized. Moreover, if it is true that there is an “invisible contract” between the British press and the royal family, the personal bias of reporters creates an added medium that frames the crisis. This additional frame could further influence the perceptions of stakeholders. Therefore, though evaluating the royals’ public relations through the lens of SCCT is certainly relevant, more factors unique to a country contribute to the success of crisis communication.

Further research that could be conducted in the future is how conspiracy theories that surround a crisis frame the situation and affect the stakeholders’ view of the crisis responsibility. In the case of Princess Diana’s death, there was a prominent group of individuals who were circulating ideas that the British monarchy and Prince Charles himself were behind the death of the Princess. Though there had been substantial evidence that these allegations could be true,

these rumors were debunked. Therefore, this thesis paper analyzes the crisis type as a “victim” crisis and not an “intentional” crisis. However, further research could explain the effect that conspiracy theories have on the stakeholders and on their support and perceptions of the organization and the impact this has on the crisis response strategies used by the institution.

Finally, as Coombs and Holladay (2010) stated regarding SCCT, future research could be done on the impact of culture on crisis communication. Though the extent of this thesis paper did not elaborate on the differences that the British culture may have had on crisis communication, this could certainly be an avenue researchers could explore in the future, particularly in conducting interdisciplinary research with the field of psychology and sociology.

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