

Relationship, trust and crisis communication on social media with millennials and generation Z

by

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Abstract

This study examined crisis communication on social media applying relationship management theory. There are few credibility checks on social media platforms, and some say publics no longer believe messages through this type of media (Domonoske, 2016; Ho, 2012). However, many people get news from social media platforms and trust the information they read (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). Crisis theories suggest strong relationships are less affected by crisis situations, and relationships are heavily based on trust (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Coombs, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Ledingham, 2003). Through a survey, this study found a statistically significant positive relationship between perceived organization-public relationship, trust and, credibility in crisis communication on social media within the Millennial and Generation Z groups. These generations are the most active on social media, and this study challenged the claim that they do not believe information online (Richards, 2017; Statista, 2016).

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Social Media, Relationship Management Theory, Generation Z, Millennials

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

As a practice, public relations evolved quickly and in many areas. Crisis communication remains one of the most sought-after roles for a PR professional (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Crisis communication scholars utilize relationship management theory to keep crises contained by fostering and maintaining organization-public relationships (Broom et al., 1997; Coombs, 2000; Ledingham, 2003). A positive relationship creates less negative impact from a crisis situation and makes it easier for organizations to repair any damage done during a crisis because publics already have a positive perception of the company (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Relationship management theory makes establishing pre-existing relationships the main crisis strategy (Ledingham et al., 1999). For example, as discussed above, people with positive pre-crisis relationships have a less negative view of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

However, the ways in which we communicate during a crisis have evolved with the profession as a whole. Social media has changed the game (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Companies need now more than ever to maintain control over their messages on social media (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). For example, PRSA (2016) explains one of the pitfalls of Chipotle's crisis communication strategy when dealing with the E.coli crisis was Chipotle's inability to control the viral user-generated content online. This can be difficult, however, when social media platforms create a public need for constant information. Because there is endless opportunity for the public to find information, there is no longer time to gather and stick to a strategy without losing the crisis to someone else's message (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Young & Flowers, 2012). For example, random user-generated content can go viral in a matter of seconds to fill the need for entertainment and information, creating a dialogue the company does not control (PRSA, 2016; Young & Flowers, 2012). Social media messages surrounding the crisis that come

from audiences can harm the company quickly (Bratu, 2016). The use of social media continues to grow and with each generation the integration into everyday life increases (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Using social media as a way to communicate official information from the company improves chances of comprehension in publics (Bratu, 2016). Social media networks provide a chance to share valuable information quickly with important publics and opinion leaders, and these types of crisis strategies enable organizations to drive crisis communication in a constructive manner (Bratu, 2016).

If a company can maintain control its efforts may be wasted. There is one claim that the majority of Americans do not trust information on social media; furthermore, some scholars and professionals question companies' presence on social media because social media is meant for human-human interaction (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Ho, 2012; Porter, Anderson, & Nhotsavang, 2015). Additionally, many scholars argue that companies are not using social media correctly or to its full potential, stressing the power of one-on-one conversation (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Porter et al., 2015). However, younger publics cannot tell fact from fiction; according to NPR, many young people cannot differentiate news from fake, or incomplete, information online (Domonoske, 2016; Ho, 2012;). This suggests they believe and share information on the internet regardless of source (Domonoske, 2016).

In addition, as the Millennial generation continues to enter into the economy as consumers, it is necessary to observe their ever increasing social and digital media habits. Millennials are 21-36 years-old and they are the largest generation since the Baby Boomers. Companies need to reach them with necessary messages (Smith, 2011; Statista, 2016; Tanyel, Stuart & Griffin, 2013;). Though Millennials spend more time-consuming information from digital media than traditional media, they are turned off by invasive digital advertising, such as popups, etc. (Tanyel et al., 2013).

Millennials respond much better to likes, recommendation, peer validation and very targeted messaging (Smith, 2011).

As Generation Z enters high school and college they become the next audience, yet there is no academic literature on their media usage habits. However, trade publications, such as Richards (2017), are beginning to look at Generation Z as a new public group. According to Richards (2017), Generation Z values transparency and trust when communicating with brands. This study looks at individuals from Generation Z that are 18-20 years-old.

Therefore, this study will use relationship management theory to add to both crisis and social media literature. More specifically, this study intends to assess the extent to which Millennials and Generation Z trust crisis communication on social media. Social media crisis communication is defined in this study as corporate responses to crisis in forms of Facebook or Twitter posts as well as corporate response to public comments on those platforms. Based on the cultural shift to social media and the increasing amount of time on social sites, there might be a positive relationship between time spent on social media and trust of crisis communication on social platforms. Wang (2016) found when implementing crisis communication strategies on social media the damage to the company was significantly reduced. Similarly, a positive pre-existing relationship will likely have a strong influence on publics' trust of social media crisis communication (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). For example, if an individual perceives a strong relationship with a company, he or she might be more likely to believe crisis communication on social media.

The study surveyed undergraduates in a Midwestern university. The questionnaire was delivered by email. Students were reminded of a recent crisis. They were given examples of Facebook and Twitter communication and then asked a series of questions. Posts from Facebook

and Twitter were taken from the crisis timeline and included a variety of types of crisis communication. For example, participants saw comments and tweets from the brand in response to public questions or statements.

These questions assessed the participants' relationship with the company and to what extent they trust the crisis communication. The study considered message and source credibility, age, gender, and time spent on social media.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Extensive literature has examined crisis communication, social media, and social media crisis communication. In this section, this study will first examine relationship management theory as applied in crisis communication literature, followed by crisis communication, then trust literature, followed by social media communication and credibility literature, and finally Millennials and Generation Z.

Theoretical Framework

Relationship Management Theory. Within public relations, relationship management has existed since the mid-late 1980s (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Since Ferguson (1984) first presented the idea of organization-public relationship as a management function, relationship management has become a priority for the study and practice of public relations. The theory gained more traction during the 1990s when Bloom et al. (1997) sought to define relationship management for the profession. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) then began looking at dimensions of organization-public relationships to discover ways in which good organization-public relationships are initiated, developed, and maintained. In the 2000 study, they looked at trust, openness, involvement, commitment and investment (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Trust involves the perceived trustworthiness of the company. Universally, trust is acknowledged as multidimensional and based on an individual's judgment (Butler, 1991; Heath et al., 1998). A company's openness about issues, management, processes, and mission helps contribute to the overall trustworthiness. Involvement focuses on involvement with the consumer and within the community. Finally, commitment and investment refer to commitment and investment in quality and customer happiness (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). They found that managed communication, meaning planned and strategic communication, can influence the

perception of the organization-public relationship and can indicate behavior intent with the company, such as whether to leave, stay, or purchase (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

Relationship management theory (hereafter RMT) introduces public relations as a management function, therefore it focuses on creation and maintenance of the organization-public relationship and less on a step-by-step public relations process (Ledingham et al., 1999).

Research concerning relationship management falls into three categories: models of the organization-public relationship, relationship dimensions as indicators of relationship effects, and applications of the relational perspective to various aspects of public relations practice (Ledingham et al., 1999).

These categories provide three ways in which scholars and practitioners view communication as a crucial link between an organization and its publics in (Ledingham et al., 1999). Additionally, since public relations scholars and practitioners are increasingly pressed to provide proof-of-value, the relationship management paradigm allows public relations professionals to use management processes, principles, and measures to provide a picture of PR contribution to organizational goals (Ledingham et al., 1999). To do so, public relations professionals must understand the needs of each relationship (Bruning, 2002; Bruning & Ledingham, 1991; Waters & Bortree, 2012).

There are multiple characteristics on which to measure relationships: communication, trust, time, openness etc. (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Waters & Bortree, 2012). Therefore, scales and measures were created to make theory application viable (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Hon & Grunig, 1999). It was found that relationships are multidimensional, and those dimensions are measurable through scales, the scales include professional, personal and community (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). Each type of relationship has different needs and

dimensions. For example, professional relationships are formal and must be conducted in a businesslike manner. Personal relationships should focus on representatives forming trust to foster a commitment of time and emotion. Finally, community relationships are focused on organizational openness with the community and events within the community (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999).

Relationship Management Theory (RMT) as a Strategy. RMT has been examined in a variety of public relations contexts (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Ledingham (2003) seeks to explain RMT as a public relations theory, not a communication theory. As discussed above, one category of RMT is applications of the relational perspective in public relations practice (Ledingham et al., 1999). This means, regardless of dimension, the purpose of this theory is to enhance the professional field. That said, it is necessary to look at dimensions within organizational-public relationships and RMT to fully understand their impact on organizational goals and the proper maintenance techniques. In this situation using both scholarship and practice within public relations furthers the discipline as a whole.

According to Ledingham et al. (1999), public relations practitioners must have knowledge of relationship indicators and influence of those indicators on relationship quality to effectively manage organization-public relationships. This will help build and maintain trust and commitment necessary to organization-public relationships (Huang, 2008). For example, managing long-term organization-public relationships increases positive perception and trustworthiness (Waters, 2008). Furthermore, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) found when telephone customers perceived a strong relationship with their carrier they were less likely to switch. Hall (2006) found community relations to be a legitimate business function that contributed to the whole bottom-line of an organization. When recognition and awareness

increased, relationship perception increased and therefore the likelihood of continued business might increase (Hall, 2006).

Review of the Literature

Crisis Communication. Traditional crisis communication involves establishing a plan, evaluating the crisis, audience and the accusations, generally followed by an image repair plan (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2000). Crisis responses must include a timely, consistent and active response (Huang, 2008). Theories such as attribution theory focus on the connection between a situation and the communication response (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). In 1997, Benoit introduced Image Repair Theory where he discussed five broad categories of crisis response. The categories include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997).

The first category is denial. There are two forms of denial when working to repair a company image. The first form is a statement of falsehood: When a company can claim that the crisis or situation is not true (Benoit, 1997). The second is shifting the blame: When there is a way to place blame of the negative situation on a different party (Benoit, 1997).

The second category is evasion of responsibility and it has four forms. The first form is when a company can claim the actions were provoked or in response to another offensive situation (Benoit, 1997). The second form is when the company can claim it did not have enough information to avoid the situation (Benoit, 1997). With the third form, a company might be able to claim the situation happened on accident (Benoit, 1997). Finally, the fourth form means the company might claim it was with good intention and therefore not be blamed for the miscommunication (Benoit, 1997).

The third category of Image Repair Theory is when a company might try to reduce offensiveness of the situation or action in one of six ways. The first way, companies might choose to highlight or push, positive qualities and actions to improve public perception (Benoit, 1997). The second way would be to downplay or diminish the negative effects of the situation (Benoit, 1997). The third is differentiation - when companies try to differentiate between two similar actions to reduce one of them (Benoit, 1997). The fourth way is transcendence, which argues that the end justifies the means of an action (Benoit, 1997). The fifth way of reducing offensiveness is to choose to attack or challenge the accuser (Benoit, 1997). Finally, the sixth way: If acceptable, a company may choose to compensate victims for the issue (Benoit, 1997).

The fourth category is corrective action. If applicable, a company may use corrective actions during a crisis. Using this strategy, the company would promise to correct the problem and be transparent with the process while improving (Benoit, 1997). Finally, the fifth category is mortification. The company, or figurehead of a company, confesses and begs for the public's forgiveness as the last effort to repair the image (Benoit, 1997).

Communicators can use these strategies to create contingency plans for crisis situations (Benoit, 1997). Similarly, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) operates under the assumption that an organization's reputation is valuable and therefore threatened by a crisis. Meaning, if a crisis negatively affects the company reputation, then the company will be worse off in the long run. Therefore, SCCT focuses on managing reputation during a crisis and provides help selecting the proper response based on the type of crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Coombs and Holladay (2002) explain that crisis managers must identify the type of crisis by evaluating the company's control of the event, the responsibility of the company in the

situation, and the company blame. There are 13 crisis types in Coombs and Holladay's (2002) study.

First, rumor is the circulation of information that is meant to harm the company and is false (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). A natural disaster is a natural event that damages a company (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Third, malevolence is an attack from outside the organization to do harm to the company (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Workplace violence is an attack from an employee, current or former, on the company; similarly, a challenge is an attack by a stakeholder (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Sixth is a technical breakdown accident (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This would include recalls or equipment issues. A technical breakdown recall is a product recall because of failure (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Eight is megadamage, which is a technical breakdown that damages the environment, such as oil or chemical spills (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Human breakdown accident is similar to the technical accident, but it is caused by human error; Human break down product recall is a product recall because of human error (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Eleventh is an organizational misdeed with no injury (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Meaning managers deceive stakeholders, but no one is hurt. Misdeed management misconduct is a knowing violation of laws or regulations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Finally, Misdeeds with injuries is the same as above, but some are injured (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Coombs and Holladay (2002) found these 13 types form three crisis clusters, the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the preventable cluster. Crises in which the company or stakeholders take harm are in the victim cluster. The accidental cluster involves crises that were caused by unintentional actions from the company. Finally, the preventable cluster intentionally places the company or stakeholders at risk of harm.

Once they define the crisis type, managers should then identify a communication strategy based on the potential crisis damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The more potentially damaging the crisis, the more the company must try to accommodate the victim in the situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Furthermore, the strategy should try to mitigate the situation and demonstrate the company cares about the consequences and the victims (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The eight crisis strategies are similar to those listed above in Benoit's (1997) image repair theory, however, they have slightly different names: Attack on accuser, denial, excuse, victimization, justification, ingratiation, corrective action, full apology (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Other scholars suggest that the organization-public relationship is affected by past interactions. Crisis managers believe in a favorable pre-crisis reputation and relationship to build a "halo" around the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006). A crisis has the potential to upset a relationship however, a halo would act as a shield for the relationship. The "halo effect" in public relations refers to a situation in which a company uses its positive reputation to enhance the crisis strategy. When the pre-crisis reputation is strong enough, the relationship or reputation would be able to withstand the crisis with minimal damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006).

Relationship management theory (RMT), one of the most popular approaches in crisis communication, focuses on organization-public relationships (Broom et al., 1997; Bruning, 2002; Coombs, 2000; Ledingham, 2003). Regardless of crisis strategy used, relationship management is important to minimize damage. Organizations have relationships with stakeholders, who have vested interests in the company. Maintaining these relationships through a crisis is beneficial for both sides; relationship management theory suggests investing in relationships before a crisis situation to maintain organizational reputation (Coombs, 2000). To

create relationships that will last after the crisis has been resolved, or strong enough to avoid a crisis with proper management, the public must perceive the company as trustworthy (Butler, 1991; Coombs, 2000; Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998). For example, Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) found, when using blogs as a relationship management tool, publics that read the blogs perceived a stronger relationship with the company and perceived a lower level crisis than those that did not read. Furthermore, in 2009 Domino's used social media to reach its publics after an employee's YouTube video went viral (Young & Flowers, 2012). Domino's had to be open, honest, and responsive on a one-on-one level (Young & Flowers, 2012). These steps were hindered by the viral nature of these media and lack of trust on social media as a whole (Young & Flowers, 2012). However, Domino's used Twitter and YouTube to give consumers information as it became available and to respond to their tweets or comments (Young & Flowers, 2012). Maintaining this type of open, dialogic communication, as suggested by RMT, allowed Domino's to resolve the crisis and begin planning for another potential online crisis (Young & Flowers, 2012). Domino's found the only way to monitor and mediate crises that happen on social media is to go to the source and resolve it on the same medium (Young & Flowers, 2012). Relationship management enhances crisis strategy by focusing on open communication and direct dialog to minimize crisis damage.

Trust within relationships and communication. Within public relations, trust and open communication were listed as some of the factors that suggest a positive, mutually beneficial relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Organization-public dialogic communication is defined as: "the orientation of mutuality and the climate of openness that an organization and its publics hold in communication to bring about mutually beneficial relationships" (Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015, p. 176).

When seeking to build and understand trust, there are common elements within relationships: availability, competence, consistency, discreetness, fairness, integrity, loyalty, openness, promise fulfillment, and receptivity, or synonyms thereof (Butler, 1991; Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015). These elements are defined based on the specific relationship (Butler, 1991). For example, the organization must be available for its publics in an organization-public relationship. Similarly, it must come across as an expert, or competent, in its industry (Yang et al., 2015).

This is especially important for companies and public relations professionals to understand when examining the profession through relationship management theory. If, as discussed above, beneficial relationships are dependent on trust between parties, then the conscious implementation of trust is paramount (Yang et al., 2015). For example, Tormala & Clarkson (2008) found when a high level of trustworthiness is perceived, then more of the organizational message is received. Additionally, when a low level of trustworthiness is perceived, less of the organizational message is received (Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). Furthermore, organization-public relationships can use trust, involvement, investment, commitment, and open communication between the organization and its key public to impact the stay-leave decision (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Meaning, companies that understand how to manage organization-public relationships using the dimensions above, can affect whether a consumer stays with the brand or leaves the brand. That said, the likelihood of maintaining a positive image or relationship after repeat crises is low, regardless of relationship management (Coombs, 2004). In fact, Coombs (2004) found a negative relationship between an organizational crisis history and reputation regardless of the previous relationship. This means companies may lose very loyal customers if they have more than one crisis that affects that specific public group.

Doney, Cannon & Mullen (1998) outline the cultural effect on trust. As social norms, conventions, thoughts, and technology change, so too does the path with which people learn to trust others, institutions, and businesses. For example, Doney et al. (1998) found five processes by which trust is formed: Calculative, prediction, intentionality, capability, and transfer.

Calculative processes are individual-focused and are broken easily. These processes are created because it is in the public's best interest at the time. However, as soon as the situation changes the public may react differently (Doney et al., 1998). For example, calculative trust is common for quick transactions. A prediction process is based on consistency. This form of trust is built over time and based on habit. If the habit is broken or changes, then the trust will be lost. A prediction process type of trust is very fragile (Doney et al., 1998). The easiest example of a prediction process is a romantic relationship between two people. Once one party does something to break the habit of the relationship (i.e. lies), then the trust will falter. Intentionality processes are based on values and beliefs. As long as both parties continue these shared beliefs, these processes are strong because they are based on similarities and stable convictions (i.e. Religion, rights, etc.) (Doney et al., 1998). Capability processes are based on the ability to follow through with promises and obligations. This type of trust only endures as long as the parties seem capable (Doney et al., 1998). This type of trust is common in a business setting where everyone must follow through on individual deliverables. Finally, transfer processes are built within a network. This means trust may transfer from one perceived party to another within the same network based on recommendation or close association (Doney et al., 1998). This is common between two parties that have a strong relationship. One party might suggest another connection or might choose a connection within the same network (i.e. buying a Lexus because of a positive personal history with Toyota). Each of these processes is affected by social norms

and they describe ways in which scholars and practitioners can begin to overcome or use those norms.

Trust within organization-public relationships is highly dependent on the perceived nature of the relationship and can be nurtured, even through crisis communication (Huang, 2008; Yang et al., 2015). Open-dialogic communication, like that on social media, within an organization-public relationship, will make organizations more trustworthy in the eyes of their publics (Yang et al., 2015). Kent and Taylor (1998) define dialogic communication as a negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions. As technology advances and the ways in which publics communicate advance, modern public relations ideas accept dialogic communication as a way to build relationships. Communicating with general publics and stakeholders online through websites, Twitter and Facebook will modernize the profession (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Muckensturm, 2013; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Young & Flowers, 2012). Li (2013) found Twitter is an effective platform for relationship building and management that can lead to brand loyalty in a practical setting.

Social Media. Social media is defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Within social media, it may be necessary to consider a relationship approach as the profession continues to evolve. Public relations as a whole must adjust and evolve as technology and forms of communication move forward (Coombs, 2000). Sveningsson (2015) found people use many social media sites to find news and information. With changing culture, technology and communication media crisis communication adapted to social media. This calls for more interpersonal communication because the perception of social media interaction is one-on-one (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). In fact, almost a quarter of the public's time spent online is spent on social networks and blogs (Liu

et al., 2011). Therefore, it is natural that crisis communication has moved in that direction to connect with larger publics on a personal level (Freberg, 2008; Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2011). When using crisis communication on social media, companies significantly reduce damage and increase public sympathy (Wang, 2016). These “human” tactics manage relationships with consumers on a perceived personal level (Wang, 2016).

As crisis communication moves to social media and blogs, it is easier to communicate directly with publics; however, there are circumstances to consider such as individual followers, crisis type, and origin, message form, and strategy, as well as influential agents on social media (Liu et al., 2011). These circumstances create a very difficult environment for companies trying to communicate during crisis situations because publics create and filter their own messages (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Young & Flowers, 2012). Social media is a collection of different communities and individuals creating and using content (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Ledingham et al., 1999). These elements begin to affect the way publics interact with and perceive crisis messages (Young & Flowers, 2012).

Social media is the current culture (Greenwood et al., 2016), and there is a cultural effect on trust (Doney et al., 1998). However, with all of the information on the internet and social media, there has been a backlash. According to Time, 98% of Americans do not trust what they see or read on social media (Ho, 2012). Often information on social media is one-sided and incomplete, or completely false (Sveningsson, 2015). This information is troubling for public relations professionals because of the new emphasis on these social media platforms (Porter et al., 2015). However, it is important to note NPR’s recent finding: Young adults cannot differentiate between real and fake news on social media sites (Domonoske, 2016). This seems to suggest an overwhelming acceptance of online information in young people. To maintain

relationships with stakeholders and other publics with modern technologies, companies need to be trusted online (Porter et al., 2015; Young & Flowers, 2012). Therefore, communication professionals need to consider the outcome carefully when audiences view strategic messages through these media (Freburg, 2012; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015; Young & Flowers, 2012).

Some scholars suggest there is no reason for organizations to be on social media, or that they do not understand how to optimize communication strategy on social media platforms (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Porter et al., 2015). When using dialogic communication on Twitter, brands ranked higher in brand loyalty (Li, 2013). The problem is not all brands are using social media platforms in this way (Li 2013, Porter et al., 2015).

The internet can act as a facilitator or trigger in a crisis situation because of the viral nature of social media, so it is more important than ever to monitor media and maintain control of the company message (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). However, Turcotte et. al., (2015) found, when articles come from quality opinion leaders on social media, then people are more likely to trust that article. Furthermore, when they trust the opinion leader, they are more likely to follow and share from the original outlet (Turcotte et. al, 2015). Research by Turcotte et. al. (2015) also found the opposite to be true. If the information comes from a poor opinion leader, then people are less likely to trust the outlet. This suggests that a company seen as an opinion leader or expert would be seen as more trustworthy than others that are not seen as experts.

Maintaining trust on social media is important now more than ever. More than three-quarters of Facebook users check the site daily, and a majority of people on social media in the US consume news on Facebook and other social media sites (Greenwood et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Statista (2016), the average time spent on social media in 2016 was

118 minutes, up from 109 the previous year. In fact, there has been a steady increase in usage since 2012 (Statista, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to understand how people perceive information communicated from companies via these media.

Based on organizational relationship and trust literature, trust is one of the necessary factors in strong, long-term relationships with publics (Broom et al., 1997; Bruning, 2002; Coombs, 2000; Ledingham, 2003; Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). Furthermore, when companies are trusted they can form relationships strong enough to withstand many crisis situations even on social media (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006; Young & Flowers, 2012). Therefore, this study proposes:

H1: *Strong and positive relationship history will lead to trust in a company's social media crisis communication.*

Credibility. Communication must be credible to improve trust and relationships between organizations and publics (Liu et al., 2011; Waters & Bortree, 2012). Research from van Zoonen and van der Meer (2015) acknowledged that credibility can either refer to the credibility of the content or the credibility of the source, but both are important and necessary in given situations. Message credibility influences decisions and follow-through intent (Freberg, 2008). This is based on competence, immediacy and, salience of the messages that reach the audience (Westerman, Spence & Van Der Heide, 2013). Again, demonstrating credibility is necessary to foster trust, which will increase the effect of the message and its credibility (Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). For example, Liu et al. (2011) found it is necessary to match a crisis response strategy with certain types of message forms and sources. Publics believed and reacted to messages differently depending on the response strategy, forms and source of the message. Certain strategies worked well over traditional media (or third-party sources), while others worked well with word-of-

mouth forms, and sources. Public perception and reaction to information affect trust of the message. Butler (1991) listed competence as a condition of trust; therefore the public must perceive competence from the message and/or source to foster trust.

Source credibility, which is a message source's perceived trustworthiness and expertise, has the potential to persuade and influence behavior, depending on how confident the individual is in previous knowledge or decisions about a similar topic (Tormala & Petty, 2004; Tormala, Briñol & Petty, 2006). Credible sources may be high-ranking officials or employees within a company. However, there is a distinct difference. Commonly, organizations use specific spokespeople or high-ranking officials to address media and give formal announcements (van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). While this is normally standard practice and generally accepted, it should be noted that companies often overlook employee-public communication. This can often be effective because of their direct connection to the company while still maintaining an independence to connect personally with audiences (van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). Interestingly, if a person has strong enough reasoning and personal connection, an expert source trying to persuade a change might actually encourage the opposite behavior (Tormala & Petty, 2004).

With new media and social media, credibility is important. Publics can now bypass gatekeepers all together, therefore the amount of information – true or false – is abundant (Westerman et al., 2013). Publics view competence as the most important factor of trust when it comes to organizations, so maintaining an open communication pathway should help increase trust as a whole (Auger, 2014). Within and organization-public relationship, if the organization has strong perceived source and message credibility, then the relationship is strong and the message should be received (Liu et al., 2011; Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015).

People spend more time on social media every year (Greenwood et al., 2016; Statista, 2016). As people spend more time on social media, more crises will arise on these platforms (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). As more crises begin on social media, it is necessary to have a crisis communication strategy on the same medium (Liu et al., 2011; Young & Flowers, 2012). As discussed above, publics that read blogs more frequently and perceived a relationship with companies online were more likely to have a less negative view of the crisis situation (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Therefore, this study proposes:

H2: *Individuals who spend more time on social media will have more trust of crisis messages on social media.*

Trust, credibility, and relationships are all interconnected. Credibility and trust feed each other, meaning one will always affect the other (Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). Strong organization-public relationships are built on trust, and therefore also connected to the credibility of the company (Liu et al., 2011; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). In crisis situations, companies with perceived credibility and trustworthiness have strong enough relationships to withstand crises. This relationship should carry on to new social media platforms (Turcotte et. al, 2015; Young & Flowers, 2012). Therefore, this study proposes:

H3: *Publics with a positive relationship with the company will perceive higher message credibility through social media crisis communication.*

H4: *Publics with a positive relationship with the company will perceive higher source credibility through social media crisis communication.*

Generation: Millennial and Generation Z. Millennials are 21-36 years old, the largest generation since the Baby Boomers, and the most active generation on social media so far (Fry, 2016). They are one of the most studied generations because of their new media habits (Smith,

2011; Statista, 2016; Tanyel et al., 2013). Furthermore, Millennials as a generation have mixed reviews from society and scholars alike. As a generation, Millennials spend more time consuming information from digital media than traditional media and use it for interactions unavailable with traditional forms of media, such as sharing and reacting to information (Tanyel et al., 2013). Despite their extensive amount of time online, Millennials do not like advertising on digital media (Tanyel et al., 2013). They prefer recommendation, validation of choice, and reviews from peers (Smith, 2011). Millennials respond to communication differently than other generations and enjoy different forms of communication than previously expected (Smith, 2011). They respond better to targeted communication to provide higher stimulus but dislike communication that interferes with their tasks (Smith, 2011).

With all of the information on Millennials, little is known about Generation Z. In fact, there is little to no academic information about their habits or their responses to communication tactics (Smith, 2011; Tanyel et al., 2013). Trade publication research suggests Generation Z spends most of its time on social media using Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Tumblr, and Tinder (Richards, 2017; Dupont, 2015). Referred to as Pivotal, Generation Z expects transparency and reality with brands and communication strategies (Richards, 2017; Dupont, 2015). Generation Z is likely to be the next generation to tackle social injustice and prefer to work collaboratively (Dupont, 2015). This generation also prefers honest symbols, videos, and visuals from companies that match their own ambitions, and values their privacy (Dupont, 2015; Williams, Page, Petrosky, & Hernandez, 2010). This study looks at individuals from Generation Z that are 18-20 years old, but Generation Z as a whole is from infants to 20 year-olds.

Both generations are accustomed to high-tech information sources and value peer acceptance and reviews (Williams et al., 2010). Because both generations grew up in an online

and global world, they are very accepting and have wide, varied backgrounds (Williams et al., 2010). Similarly, both generations value higher education and continued learning more so than generations before them (Williams et al., 2010). This study examines both Millennials and Generation Z to see if any differences between the two exist, and address the gap in the literature about the new generation. Furthermore, because males and females consume slightly different media at different rates (Statista, 2016), this study looks at any differences between genders within these generations. Therefore, this study proposes:

RQ1: *Will Generation Z students perceive social media crisis communication differently than Millennials?*

RQ2: *Will there be a difference in perception of social media crisis communication between males and females?*

Chapter 3 - Research Method

The survey method was applied to test the above hypotheses and to answer the research questions. The goal of this study is to determine whether relationship history will have an impact on trust in social media crisis communication. Using a series of valid, reliable scales, a questionnaire can gather quantitative information from a large group of people in a relatively short amount of time (Babbie, 1990). A questionnaire is a cost-effective and efficient way to assess attitudes or describe characteristics of a large population (Babbie, 1990). These advantages make survey research easy to measure and apply after the data have been collected and analyzed. However, there are disadvantages to this method as well. For example, it is hard to create a real-life scenario when working with surveys, and there might be indirect reasons for the respondents' answers (Babbie, 1990). These would include incentives, the situations in which the respondents take the survey, and whether or not they are trying to please the survey facilitator. Additionally, survey researchers can have difficulty getting enough reliable responses in some cases (Babbie, 1990).

Participants

The survey questionnaire was delivered online via Qualtrics. Participants had a week to complete the survey at their leisure. Undergraduate students at a Midwestern university were recruited to participate in the study. The survey was offered to lecture classes (between 30-300 students) in the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Engineering, and Architecture. This provided a standard and sufficient sample size of 371 students to detect an effect (Waters & Bortree, 2012, Weller, 2015). This study surveyed 371 students at a Midwestern university. 336 (N=336) responses were analyzed. Some responses were not analyzed due to incomplete responses, outside the age range of the study (18-35 years old), or the respondents did not have personal

social media accounts on Facebook or Twitter. The age range of the respondents was 18-32 years old. The average age was 20.5 years old with a standard deviation of 1.9. 210 respondents were Generation Z, and 125 were Millennial respondents. Of the 336 analyzed responses, 168 responses were male (50.0%), 167 responses were female (49.7%), and one response (less than 1%) selected "Other." There were 292 (86.9%) identified as White, 28 (8.3%) respondents that identify as Hispanic, 12 (3.6%) as Black or African American, two (less than 1%) as American Indian or Alaska Native, 14 (4.2%) as Asian, two (less than 1%) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 14 (4.2%) identified as other.

Study Procedure

The survey outlined a recent crisis, the Chipotle E.coli crisis, to aid participants when answering the questions in the questionnaire. In 2015, five Chipotle customers in Seattle suffered from E.coli, then more outbreaks began to surface around the nation (Zuraw, 2015). These later outbreaks included at least 234 people in California, at least 64 in Minnesota, and at least 136 people in Boston; there were no deaths associated with the outbreak (Zuraw, 2015). PRSA (2016) outlines strengths and weaknesses within Chipotle's crisis response. PRSA (2016) stated Chipotle minimized the situation too early and were unable to control the user-generated content online. However, it then began to fix issues and appeared apologetic and humble on talk shows (PRSA, 2016). Over 88% of respondents had heard of the crisis, and over 30% of respondents said they heard about the crisis mostly through social media. An accidental type of crisis was selected for analysis for two reasons. First, accidents are a common type of crisis, and they are not usually morally problematic (Irvine & Millar, 1996). Furthermore, accidental crises have a medium-level of blame or responsibility on the company (Claeys, Cauberghe & Vyncke, 2010).

As discussed above, Statista (2016) reports Facebook and Twitter as the most used social media sites. Facebook has the highest number of users within the United States, regardless of age, and Twitter ranks highly among Millennials (Greenwood et al., 2016). Additionally, Richards (2017) lists Twitter as one of the social media sites frequented by Generation Z. Therefore, crisis messages were pulled from these two sites to help facilitate responses.

After answering questions about their social media usage, participants who did not use Facebook or Twitter were not used in the study when analyzing data. The remaining participants (N = 336) were shown examples and scenarios of social communication on Facebook and Twitter following the Chipotle crisis. Posts from Facebook and Twitter were taken from the crisis timeline and included a variety of types of crisis communication. Social media crisis communication is defined in this study as corporate responses to crisis in forms of Facebook or Twitter posts as well as corporate response to public comments on those platforms. For example, participants saw comments and tweets in response to public questions or statements. Then, they were asked to answer questions about their relationship to the company. After, participants rated the company's trustworthiness and their likelihood to continue engaging with the company. Next, participants evaluated how trustworthy they find organizational communication on social media. Following this, participants were asked about message and source credibility. And finally, participants answered questions about their demographic information: age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Measures

This study used seven-point Likert scales to measure the variables: Organization-public relationships, trust, and message and source credibility. The language in the scales' questions was adapted to fit this study and modern communication media. The relationship management

scale from Morgan and Hunt (1994) was used to measure the relationship with the company. Morgan and Hunt (1994) are widely referenced and the scale is a standard in relationship management (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). The scale is seven points (strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7)). Participants answered questions about the relationship they perceive with the company: 1) *The relationship I have with Chipotle is something I am very committed to*; 2) *it is something I will continue*; 3) *Chipotle deserves my business*; 4) *As a company, Chipotle cannot be trusted sometimes* (this item is reversed: strongly disagree (7), to strongly agree (1)); 5) *Chipotle can be counted on to do the right thing, and has high integrity*; 6) *How likely are you to eat at Chipotle in the next six months, year, two years* (very low (1)/very high (7)). This measured the strength of their relationship and continued behavior with the company and was found to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha=.85$).

Trust on social media platforms was evaluated using Heath et al.'s scale to (1998) and achieved an acceptable level of reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=.73$). This is also a seven-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree (7)). Participants answered questions about their feelings in regard to information on social media: 1) *I believe reports from company social media platforms are accurate*; 2) *I doubt the accuracy of reports from companies on social media*; 3) *I believe companies are committed to protecting the community*; 4) *I have come to doubt company reports on their social media platforms*.

Finally, the study evaluated message and source credibility using seven-point Likert scales found in Roberts's (2010) study from Meyer (1988) and Flanagin and Metzger (2000). These scales are standard (Roberts, 2010). This scale was also reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha=.88$). Participants first answered questions about the messenger (Roberts, 2010): 1) *Chipotle Cannot(1)/Can(7) be trusted when communicating on social media*; 2) *Chipotle is*

Inaccurate(1)/Accurate(2) when communicating on social media; 3) Chipotle Does(7)/Does Not(1) tell the whole story when communicating on social media; 4) Chipotle is Unfair(1)/Fair(7) when communicating on social media; 5) Chipotle is Biased(1)/Not biased(7) when communicating on social media. Then participants answered questions about the message on social media (Roberts, 2010): 1) Messages from Chipotle are Unbelievable(1)/Believable(7) on social media; 2) Messages from Chipotle are Inaccurate(1)/Accurate(7) on social media; 3) Messages from Chipotle are not trustworthy(1)/trustworthy(7) on social media; 4) Messages from Chipotle are biased(1)/not biased(7) on social media; 5) Messages from chipotle are incomplete(1)/complete(7) on social media.

Variables. This study ran a One-Way ANOVA to test for differences in social media message perception between generations. For this test, the generation of the individual was the independent variable (RQ1). For this test, trust and credibility were the dependent variables. To test for differences in social media message perception between genders, this study again used a One-Way ANOVA (RQ2). For this test, trust and credibility were the dependent variables. Additionally, the study ran linear regressions to test for connections between relationship and trust (H1), relationship and credibility (H3, H4), and frequency of time on social media and trust (H2). In these correlations, relationship and frequency were independent variables that were tested against trust and credibility in separate simple linear regressions.

Chapter 4 - Research Results

H1 predicted that strong and positive relationship history would lead to trust in a company's social media crisis communication. The average organization-public relationship with Chipotle was 4.5 out of 7. A simple linear regression was calculated to predict trust based on the relationship with the company. A significant, weak-moderate relationship between the variables of relationship and trust was found ($F(1, 334) = 33.97, R^2 = .09, p < .00$). As the relationship with the company increased so does trust of social media communication ($\beta = .30, p < .05$) (Table 1). Therefore, H1 was supported.

Table 1. Relationship and Trust Linear Regression

Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	Sig. (<i>p</i>)	<i>R</i> ²
(Constant)	33.97	3.19	.20		16.37	.00	.09
Relationship with Company		.25	.04	.30	5.83	.00	

H2 predicted individuals who spend more time on social media will have more trust of crisis messages on social media. The average time spent on Facebook was 2.88 out of five and the average time spent on Twitter was 2.53 out of five. Simple linear regressions were calculated to predict trust based on the amount of time spent on social media. A significant, weak relationship between the variables, time on social media and trust was found ($F(2, 333) = 8.33, R^2 = .048, p = .00$). The regression for Facebook alone was marginally significant ($F(2, 333) = 8.33, p = .05$) ($\beta = .11, p < .05$). The regression for Twitter alone was significant ($F(2, 333) = 8.33, p = .01$) ($\beta = .15, p < .05$). There were 315 respondents who had a personal Facebook account, compared to 258 who had a personal Twitter account. As a whole, an increase in the amount of time on social media predicted an increase in trust of social media communication (Table 2). Therefore, H2 was supported.

Table 2. Time on social media and Trust Regression

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	Sig. (<i>p</i>)	<i>R</i> ²
(Constant)	3.78	.14		27.54	.00	.05
Facebook Use	.09	.04	.11	1.94	.05	
Twitter Use	.10	.04	.15	2.5	.01	

H3 predicted publics with a positive relationship with the company will perceive higher message credibility through social media crisis communication. A simple linear regression was calculated to predict message credibility on social media based on the relationship with the company. A significant moderate-strong relationship between the variables relationship and message credibility was found ($F(1, 334) = 118.20, R^2 = .26, p < .00$) (Table 3). As relationship increases, message credibility on social media increases ($\beta = .51, p < .05$). Therefore H3 was supported.

Table 3. Relationship and Credibility Regression

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	Sig. (<i>p</i>)	<i>R</i> ²
(Constant) (Source Cred.)	2.156	.197		10.946	.000	.264
Relationship Average (Source Cred.)	.467	.043	.513	10.933	.000	
(Constant) (Message Cred.)	2.148	.197		10.878	.000	.261
Relationship Average (Message Cred.)	.465	.043	.511	10.872	.000	

H4 predicted publics with a positive relationship with the company will perceive higher source credibility through social media crisis communication. A simple linear regression was calculated to predict source credibility on social media based on the relationship with the company. A significant moderate-strong relationship between the variables, relationship and source credibility was found ($F(1, 334) = 119.54, R^2 = .26, p < .00$) (Table 3). The results show a

positive correlation between the relationship with the company and perceived source credibility of social media crisis communication ($\beta = .51, p < .05$). Therefore, H4 was supported.

RQ1 sought to find if Generation Z students perceive social media crisis communication differently than Millennials. An ANOVA was run to test for difference in generations for both trust and credibility. There was no significant difference revealed in trust between the two generations ($F(1, 334) = .11, p = .74$). There was also no significant difference found in source credibility between Generation Z and Millennials ($F(1, 334) = .02, p = .88$). The ANOVA revealed no significant difference in message credibility between Generation Z and Millennials ($F(1, 334) = .13, p = .72$). Therefore, this study found no difference in perception of trust of crisis communication on social media, source credibility of crisis communication on social media or message credibility of crisis communication on social media between Millennials and Generation Z.

RQ2 sought to find a difference in perception of social media crisis communication between males and females. An ANOVA was run to find differences in genders for both trust and credibility. There was no significant difference in trust between males and females ($F(2, 333) = 3.67, p = .03$). There also was no significant difference in source credibility ($F(2, 333) = 1.10, p = .33$) between males and females. The ANOVA revealed no significant difference in message credibility between genders ($F(2, 333) = 1.13, p = .33$). Therefore, this study found no difference in perception of trust of crisis communication on social media, source credibility of crisis communication on social media or message credibility of crisis communication on social media between males and females.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This study attempted to address the gap in public relations literature with current public relations theories and the new social media landscape with Millennials and Generation Z. RMT applied to crisis communication on social media had not been examined with these two generations specifically nor used to look at differences in the current generations' social media perceptions. Relationship management theory highlights the importance of trust and credibility when dealing with crisis situations and should be applied to social media platforms (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). This study looked at the connection between relationship, trust and credibility on social media, and whether or not this theory still applies to Millennial and Generation Z audiences. Overall this study supports and suggests the importance of relationship management as a crisis communication strategy on social media with these two generations.

The study demonstrated that when perceived relationship with the company increased, the trust of crisis messages on social media increased. This is in line with previous studies linking relationship and trust on social media and on traditional media (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Li, 2013; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Young & Flowers, 2012). This finding demonstrates the necessity of relationship management on social media as suggested by Young and Flowers (2012), who found similar results in their research. Domino's used Twitter to give consumers information and to respond to their tweets to keep an open dialog with consumers and nurture the organization-public relationship (Young & Flowers, 2012). Though the relationship was weak to moderate, this study shows relationship management on social media is important to consider with crisis communication to foster trust with the publics in this study. Beneficial relationships are dependent on trust between parties, so the conscious

examination of trust is important. (Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015). Furthermore, as the cultural shift to social media continues there will be more of a social media effect on trust (Doney et al., 1998; Statista, 2016). However, as discussed by Coombs (2004), should Chipotle's crisis record increase a positive relationship will not help public trust or opinion.

Within a crisis situation, trust can also impact whether a public decides to stay or leave the company (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Crisis managers focus on trust during crisis situations because the more trustworthy the message and source, the more of the company's message is received by publics (Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). RMT is a public relations theory meant to foster the organization-public relationship in a practical context (Ledingham et al., 1999). This study uses social media crisis communication as the practical context and the findings in this study further indicate the necessity of relationship management in crisis communication on social media platforms, even though they are not considered traditional outlets.

In particular, this study shows that time on social media as a whole – when looking at both Facebook and Twitter – had a significant relationship with the trust of social media messages. As time on Facebook and Twitter increased, trust of social media messages also increased. This was also true when looking at Twitter alone; however, when looking at Facebook alone, the results were only marginally significant. The more someone used Twitter, the more their perceived trust in the crisis communication increased. Facebook had a marginally significant ($p = .05$) relationship, so the amount of time on Facebook may have a weak relationship with perceived trust of crisis communication on social media, and warrants further study. This marginal result could reflect the growing issue of “Fake News” and Facebook's role in spreading falsehoods (Mullin, 2017). As “Fake News” becomes more of an issue, publics see

more misinformation on Facebook because they spend more time on that platform than on Twitter (Mullin, 2017; Statista, 2016). However, because time on social media as a whole has a significant positive relationship with trust, this study recognizes its overall importance. Even though the relationship was weak, the amount of time an individual spends on social media can affect the perceived trustworthiness of social media messages from the company (Bratu, 2016; Li, 2013; Sweetser and Metzgar, 2007; Young & Flowers, 2012). This is important to note when looking at crisis communication strategies and relationship management with Millennials and Generation Z. Crisis communication professionals will need to observe social media habits of these audiences, specifically the average time spent on social media. If the time spent on social media drops, then crisis communicators might have to adjust crisis communication strategies on social media to maintain the same level of trust as when publics spend more time on social media. Because open-dialogic communication on social media increases trust within an organization-public relationship, emphasis on this type of communication might be best as public time increases on social media (Statista, 2016; Yang et al., 2015). This will call for even more one-on-one conversation to keep up with public time on social media and communicate effectively to reduce crisis damage on social media platforms, especially Twitter where the strongest relationship existed (Liu et al., 2011; Wang, 2016).

The findings of this study supported the claim that as the relationship with the organization increases, the perceived message credibility on social media also increased. There is a moderate-strong relationship supporting previous studies linking relationship and message credibility (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Li, 2013; Muckensturm, 2013; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Smith, 2011; Tanyel, et al., 2013; Young & Flowers, 2012). This study found relationships with publics online are necessary to increase the credibility of company crisis messages on social

media. Message credibility influences public decisions and their intent to follow-through with the company or purchase (Freberg, 2008). The connection between crisis communication and message credibility is important to maintain trust with the messages and retain publics.

Finally, the study found a significant positive relationship between the organization-public relationship and source credibility. This supports previous findings that it is necessary to have a positive relationship to be perceived as credible; if the organization has strong perceived source and message credibility, then the relationship is strong and the message should be received (Liu et al., 2011; Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). Publics view competence as the most important factor of trust when it comes to organizations, so maintaining an open communication pathway on social media increases source credibility, and therefore trust, as a whole (Auger, 2014). The moderate-strong connection between organization-public relationship and credibility means relationship management is imperative to increase credibility on social media when working with a crisis situation. Furthermore, this study supports Sveningsson's (2015) claim that people get news social media sites, which makes company credibility even more important as they strive to be expert resources.

The results of this study also show that trust, message credibility, source credibility, and relationship are interconnected. Strong organization-public relationships are built on trust, and companies can foster trust through message and source credibility. Therefore, relationships are also connected to the credibility of the company (Liu et al., 2011; Sweetser and Metzgar, 2007; Tormala & Clarkson, 2008). Not surprising, trust and open communication are listed as factors suggesting a positive, mutually beneficial relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). The correlation between a strong relationship and perceived credibility carry over to Facebook and, in particular, Twitter.

This study highlights the importance of crisis communicators creating relationships prior to a crisis situation with publics so that the company is perceived as trustworthy and credible (Butler, 1991; Doney et al., 1998). Results suggest, similar to existing literature, that relationships endure after the crisis has been resolved, or will be strong enough to avoid a crisis with proper management (Coombs, 2000). For example, open, dialogic communication, as suggested by RMT, allowed Domino's to resolve its 2009 crisis and begin planning for another potential online crisis (Young & Flowers, 2012). Domino's found using the same social media platform and a positive pre-crisis organization-public relationship made their messages more trustworthy and credible to their audiences (Young & Flowers, 2012).

Using Chipotle's E.coli crisis to examine the correlation between relationships, trust, and credibility online provides academic evidence to support the outcome of Domino's actions in 2009 (Young & Flowers, 2012). Chipotle had an average organization-public relationship of 4.5 out of 7, and almost all of the respondents had heard of the crisis. This crisis situation work well for this study, and provided results that supported previous research. The connections between relationship and trust, relationship and message credibility, and relationship and source credibility support Domino's crisis strategy. This study demonstrates how good pre-crisis relationships positively affect trust and credibility, just as Domino's saw during their crisis communication execution.

This study found that there was no significant difference between Generation Z and Millennials when looking at relationship, trust, and credibility through social media. This study found that both Millennials and Generation Z respond to relationship management on social media. Because both generations grew up with social media and similar technologies, Millennials and Generation Z respond to communication tactics (Williams et al., 2010).

Similarly, the level of distrust online mentioned in the article by Ho (2012), did not seem to show in this study. Therefore, this study argues these generations do trust the information they find on social media, and the more positive the relationship, the more trustworthiness is perceived. Millennials and Generation Z are digital natives and require attention on the medium (e.g., social media platforms) with which they spend their time (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Li, 2013; Muckensturm, 2013; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Smith, 2011; Statista, 2016; Tanyel et al., 2013; Young & Flowers, 2012). As discussed above, organization-public relationships are connected to Millennial and Generation Z's trust in, and perceived credibility of crisis communication, as suggested by previous research (Broom et al., 1997; Coombs, 2000; Ledingham, 2003).

This study also found no significant difference between males and females in these generations when examining the connection between relationship, trust, and credibility. Both genders spend an increasing amount of time on social media and both genders grew up with the technology (Statista, 2016). Because there was no difference between these genders, this study suggests crisis communication and relationship management on social media will affect both males and females.

Though it did not measure the perceived crisis level, this study finds that publics that spend more time with, and perceive a positive relationship with, a company online are more likely to think more highly of that organization during a crisis. Managed communication can influence the perception of the organization-public relationship (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Because this study observed social media, it supports the idea that companies who spend more time on social media with dialogic communication and building relationships will increase public perception of trust and credibility through crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Kent &

Taylor, 1998; Ledingham et al., 1999; Li, 2013; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Wang, 2016; Young & Flowers, 2012).

Theoretical implications. This study suggests the relevance of relationship management theory in social media crisis communication. Though the theory was introduced before social media and online communication, the fundamentals of relationship management theory carry through to crisis communication utilizing emerging media. Relationship management should continue to be a priority of crisis management as it moves online to promote trust and credibility. Furthermore, because of the connection between dialogic communication and trust, social media is one of the best avenues to continue to foster trust with Millennial and Generation Z publics (Yang et al., 2015).

Additionally, the study suggests there is a connection between time exposure to the medium (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) and trust. As publics spend more time with social media, they perceive crisis communication as more trustworthy. This could add an interesting factor to the relationship management paradigm because exposure time cannot be manipulated outside of academic studies. Therefore, it may be necessary for researchers to account for this when examining social media and RMT. For example, RMT is a practical theory, crisis managers would need to pay close attention to media habits and usage with these publics to assess how to maintain the level of trust the company needs or wants. If there is a general dip in time spent on social media, crisis communication managers may need to adjust crisis strategy to foster trust through outreach, adjust credible sources etc.

This study will add to the body of knowledge on Generation Z. Though there was no significant difference found between the two generations, the study does support the fact that Generation Z responds to relationship management and follows the same patterns as previous

generations. The findings support relationship management as a strategy to increase trust and credibility, even in the most recent generation. For example, Generation Z's relationship with a company still affects the perceived trustworthiness of the company.

Practical implications. This study may affect the way practitioners see social media communication as a whole, not solely in crisis situations. As this study suggests, a strong relationship could lead to public trust in the organization and perceived organizational credibility on social media, and relationship management is necessary to have a strong pre-crisis organization-public relationship (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Therefore, crisis and PR managers should focus on relationship management as both an every-day strategy and a crisis strategy.

It will be increasingly important to have perceived trustworthiness and credibility on social media sites because publics are spending more time on these sites. Though the relationship was weak, this study found the amount of time on social media does affect the perceived trustworthiness of crisis communication on social media. For example, As Generation Z increases their daily amount of time on social media sites and more of them enter the economy, targeting these publics online will be imperative to building and maintaining relationships.

Maintaining organization-public relationships online will help to improve trust and credibility in case of a crisis situation with both generations. Adjusting crisis plans to mirror these findings would decrease the perceived severity of the crisis and reduce damage to the company (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006; Wang, 2016). Because crisis perception responds to perceived relationship, trust, and credibility, this study shows it is necessary for crisis communicators to adjust social media crisis strategy to these ideas.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the study include the use of a convenience sample. Using a more diverse population from which to draw the sample might affect the results. However, the sample size in the study (N= 336) was large enough to make significant assumptions of Millennials and Generation Z. Another limitation of this study is Generation Z's youth. This study did not survey minors – under 18 years old - and the majority of Generation Z are under 18 years old. This study only looks at Facebook and Twitter, there may be a difference in trust, credibility or between generations on other social media platforms. Future research on this topic could look at individuals under 18 years old in Generation Z. There may also be interest in social media sites outside of Facebook and Twitter. For example, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Instagram are popular social media platforms that are increasing in popularity (Greenwood et al., 2016; Statista, 2016). Looking at other social media platforms may show a difference in Millennials and Generation Z. Future researchers may also look at other types of crisis, like natural disasters, rumors, technical, man-made etc. Future investigation could look at older generations, Generation X use social media more frequently every year and Baby Boomers have moved to some social media platforms as well (Greenwood et al., 2016). There may be a difference in trust online with generations that did not grow up with the same technology.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between organization-public relationships, trust and, credibility. The study analyzed 336 individuals from the Millennial and Generation Z publics. The purpose was to test the relevance of relationship management theory on social media with these younger generations. The findings supported the claims that positive organization-public relationships will have more public trust and more perceived credibility with Millennials and Generation Z. The study also found the more time these publics spend on social

media, the more trustworthy they find messages from companies on social media. This study should encourage practitioners to pay attention to the organization-public relationship both before and during a crisis. Strong relationship management should supplement crisis communication strategy by making the messages more trustworthy and credible on social media.

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Appendix A - Questionnaire

Directions: Please answer the following questions honestly and to the best of your ability.

1. Do you have personal social media accounts?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. Which of the following do you have? (Check all that apply)
 - a. Facebook
 - b. Twitter
 - c. Neither
3. Roughly how frequently do you use social media per day?
 - a. Facebook: Never/Always (5 point)
 - b. Twitter: Never/Always (5 point)
4. Do you follow any companies on social media?
 - a. Y/N
 - b. If Yes, what companies do you follow (fill in as many as possible off the top of your mind: _____)
5. How frequently do you dine at Chipotle
 - a. Never/Always (5 point)
6. Do you follow Chipotle on Facebook or Twitter?
 - a. Facebook only
 - b. Twitter only
 - c. Both
 - d. Neither
7. Have you heard of the Chipotle-E.coli crisis?
 - a. Y/N
8. Where did you receive the information about the Chipotle crisis?
 - a. Mostly traditional outlets (TV, Newspaper, Radio)
 - b. Mostly on social media
 - c. Mostly from people in person
 - d. Other: _____

Please consider your relationship with Chipotle as a customer. Indicate how you feel about the following statements from strongly agree to strongly disagree. (7 point: Strongly agree/Strongly disagree; Morgan & Hunt, 1994))

9. The relationship I have with Chipotle is something I am very committed to.
10. The relationship I have with Chipotle is something I will continue.
11. Chipotle deserves my business.
12. As a company, Chipotle cannot be trusted sometimes.
13. As a company, Chipotle can be counted on to do the right thing
14. As a company, Chipotle has high integrity
15. What is the likelihood you stop eating Chipotle:
16. (7 point: very high/very low, formative scale)
 - a. Within the next six months?
 - b. Within the next year?
 - c. Within the next two years?

Please consider the way companies (organizations, not individual people) use social media. Indicate how you feel about the following statements from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Heath et al., 1998).

17. (7 point: strongly disagree/ strongly agree) Items were reversed:
18. I believe reports from company social media platforms are accurate
19. I doubt the accuracy of reports from companies on social media
20. I believe companies are committed to protecting the community
21. I have come to doubt company reports on their social media platforms

Please view and read the following social media examples to answer the questions that follow. The examples are only meant to refresh your memory of the Chipotle E.coli crisis.

Play Like A Girl! and 5 others follow

 **Chipotle** @ChipotleTweets · 24 Sep 2015
@KatyMcClintic We take our customers **health** very seriously, please contact us at chipotle.com/email-us -Rusty

1 2

In reply to soil bby


 **Chipotle** @ChipotleTweets · 25 Sep 2015
@lemony_emmy Your **health** and well-being is our top priority. Please contact us at chipotle.com/email-us -Shane

1


Play Like A Girl! and 5 others follow

 **Chipotle** @ChipotleTweets · 17 Aug 2015
@EndPali We take our customers **health** very seriously, please contact us at chipotle.com/email-us -Rusty

1 1 2

 **Chipotle Mexican Grill**
December 16, 2015 · *

"As a chef, nothing is more important to me than serving my guests food that is safe, delicious, and wholesome." -Chipotle founder Steve Eells



Comprehensive Food Safety Plan
Read about our plan in a letter from Chipotle founder Steve Eells

CHIPOTLE.COM/FOUNDERLETTER [Learn More](#)


Like Comment Share

 **Chipotle Mexican Grill**
November 9, 2015 · 🌐


The safety of our customers and the integrity of our food always have been and always will be our top priorities. And so we've taken a number of steps to ensure our food is safe to eat in Oregon and Washington. Read more:
www.chipotle.com/update

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

👍❤️ 835 Chronological ▾

 **Richie Cannella** @rcannella15 · 23 Dec 2015
[@ChipotleTweets](#) hey Joe, when are y'all gonna get your act together? Serious question because this is ridiculous at this point


↩️ 1 ↻ ❤️

 **Chipotle** ✓
@ChipotleTweets [Follow](#) ▾

[@rcannella15](#) Hopefully this will help:
chipotle.com/founderletter -Joe

As we mentioned in previous communications, we expected that there may be more cases reported stemming from the original incident in late October. The CDC is now reporting five additional cases from that same time period. Since this issue began, we've completed a comprehensive reassessment of our food safety programs with an eye to finding the best practices for each of the ingredients we use. We're now in the process of implementing those programs, including high resolution and end of shelf-life testing of ingredients, continuous improvement in the supply system based on testing data, and enhanced food safety training for all of our restaurant teams. With all of these programs in place, we're confident that we can achieve a level of food safety risk that is near zero.



LIKE
1 

10:06 AM - 23 Dec 2015

Based on the examples above, please indicate how you feel about the following statements.

(7 point scale (Roberts, 2010))

22. Chipotle Cannot/Can be trusted when communicating on social media
23. Chipotle is Inaccurate/Accurate when communicating on social media
24. Chipotle Does/Does Not tell the whole story when communicating on social media
25. Chipotle is Unfair/Fair when communicating on social media

26. Chipotle is Biased/Not biased when communicating on social media
27. Messages from Chipotle are Unbelievable/Believable on social media
28. Messages from Chipotle are Inaccurate/Accurate on social media
29. Messages from chipotle are not trustworthy/trustworthy on social media
30. Messages from Chipotle are biased/not biased on social media
31. Messages from chipotle are incomplete/complete on social media

Now we would like to know a bit about you

- How old are you? _____
- Male/Female/Other/Choose not to identify
- Race and Ethnicity
 - White
 - Black or African American
 - American Indian and Alaska Native
 - Asian
 - Native Hawaiian
 - Other Pacific Islander