RESPONDING TO RACISM:
HOW SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES MAY DECREASE LIKELIHOOD OF BOYCOTTS, PROTESTS AND UPRISINGS

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ABSTRACT

While there is vast research on crisis communication strategies, there is a gap in work concerning how to evaluate these strategies among the public and specific stakeholders. The goal of this study was to attain a better understanding of how African Americans react to corporations’ responses to racial crises. Through focus groups, this study was able to highlight the need to explore other response strategies, created specifically to address crises involving race that include re-staffing and community outreach methods.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Understanding differences in the public’s perception of an event during times of crises can be critical to determining appropriate messaging strategies to use in response to such crises. Stuart Hall (1980) determined that audiences accept, reject or negotiate views of messages they decode from media. Reception differences can be even more pronounced during crises that involve racial discrimination or other racial issues (Williams & Olaniran, 2002; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). Racial crises require special attention and image restoration tactics (Spence, Lachlan & Griffin, 2007; Baker, 2011; Williams & Olaniran, 2002; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006).

This research would draw from the theoretical framework of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), image restoration theory and the contingency theory of accommodation. The purpose of this research will be to better understand if the current, primary crisis response strategies identified in SCCT are accepted by African American audiences, and to identify if certain demographics among African Americans such as age, education and occupational level could lead to some being more forgiving than others to corporations during such crises.

At this stage in the research, racial crises will be generally defined as crises in which organizations are accused of racial discrimination or other racially motivated offenses that have acquired national media attention. While crisis response is one of the most popular areas to researcher in the field of crisis communication and conflict management, responses to racial crises have not thoroughly been researched,
and corporate institutions still struggle to identify appropriate messaging strategies to use in response (Baker, 2001; Richardson, 2007; Schwarz, 2008).
Chapter 2: Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Encoding, Decoding Model of Communication

While all messages will have some variance in the way they are decoded or interpreted by the receivers, cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1980) identified three positions that can be used to classify audiences based on their perceptions of messages in media. The three decoding positions, dominant, negotiated and oppositional have been applied in research studies examining audience’s perceptions of media. Those audience members that side with the dominant position of a message successfully interpreted the message the way its creator intended for them to (Hall, 1980; Katz & Liebes, 1990). This means the message’s creator successfully encoded the message (Hall, 1980). Audiences who accept the overall intended, dominant meaning of a message, yet still have objections to certain elements comprised in the message will have a negotiated position and those who reject the message entirely and suggests alternative idea side in the oppositional position towards the message (Hall, 1980).

One notable study by Katz and Liebes (1990) applied Hall’s (1980) encoding and decoding framework to research by examining how different cultures interpreted the American television show *Dallas*. Katz and Liebes (1990) found a wide range of interpretations of the show, depending on the audiences’ culture. Some of these perceptions varied widely from the meanings the creators of *Dallas* intended for audiences to derive. Katz and Liebes (1990) recognized that audiences have differences that can surface when decoding media messages, which can lead to differences in the gratifications derived from that media. Katz and Liebes’ (1990) study reinforces Hall’s
(1980) theory that media messages are not fixed, and instead can extract multiple interpretations that are dependent on the ease the audience has in decoding the message. Similarities between encoder and decoder helps ease the transmission process of messages (Hall, 1980), but communication professionals will not always have the luxury of sharing similarities with their audience.

In addition to Katz and Liebes (1990), Morley (1980) also applied Hall’s (1980) encoding and decoding framework to audience research. Morley (1980) was interested in how audiences’ socio-cultural backgrounds affected their interpretations of messages delivered through the popular British news program, Nationwide. Morley believed that audiences with shared cultural backgrounds would exhibit similar decodings to Nationwide. Morley (1980) and Hall (1980) both believed that audiences’ cultural make-ups could play a role in how television messages are particularly perceived. Both scholars acknowledge that a single message can be interpreted a number of different ways. Morley (1980) showed two Nationwide programs to 29 small groups that represented different cultures, races and socio-economic statuses. Groups ranged from bank managers to photography to students to black feminist (Morley, 1980). Morley found that groups whose beliefs matched more closely to those reflected in the program were able to accept the dominant or intended meanings of the messages, while those who had counter beliefs had more opposition in regards to the messages presented. Morley (1980) explains:

Whether or not a program succeeds in transmitting the preferred or dominant meaning will depend on whether it encounters readers who inhabit codes and ideologies derived from other institutional areas (e.g. churches or schools) which
correspond to and work in parallel with those of the programme or whether it
effectively encounters readers who inhabit codes drawn from other areas or institutions (e.g.
trade unions or 'deviant' subcultures) which conflict to a greater or lesser extent
with those of the programme. (p. 106-7)

Overall, Morley’s results seem to reflect Hall’s (1980) observation that more cultural and
sub-cultural differences among encoder and decoder will result in a higher risk for
oppositional readings of messages. This observation is relevant to the field of crisis
communication since the large majority of research omits any minority input or fails to
address crisis communication from a cultural lens. Specifically regarding crisis
communication of racial crises, there is a heightened need to be able to communicate
with people of different races. Understanding how and why audiences will have different
interpretations of messages will help the field in better communicating across cultures in
these particular sensitive times.

**Crisis communication.** A crisis is an unexpected event or series of events that
can have serious negative outcomes for the organization and other stakeholders involved
(Williams & Olaniran, 2002; Spence et al., 2007). It is nearly impossible for any
organization not to face some sort of crisis during their existence (Baker, 2001). Media
outlets are the primary sources for people seeking information about crises (Spence et al.,
2007; Coombs, 2007). Coombs and Schimdt (2009) advocate the need for crisis managers
to have clear understandings of how the public interprets crisis messages in order to know
what strategies should be used or avoided in certain situations. Effective crisis
communication informs the public on the current state of the crisis and what is being
done to address it, usually via media channels (Spence et al., 2007; Baker, 2001).
If done correctly, crisis communication can be a tool used to minimize the damage to an organization’s reputation (Coombs, 2007). If the response messages are found to be ineffective, or the crisis is being blatantly ignored, Baker (2001) claims it can cause permanent damage to the relationship the organizations had with the public and their stakeholders.

When communicating across cultures to large audiences, the encoding stage is very important for communication professionals since they will need to ensure that their messages will resonate and be positively interpreted from people of different ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and beyond (Katz & Liebes, 1990). During times of crisis, audiences can also differentiate by the nature of their relationships with the company. Coombs (2007) identified employees, stockholders, community members and customers as some of the different stakeholders that could be affected by corporate crises and may be owed a response. Benoit (1997) acknowledges the differences across stakeholders and suggests prioritizing audiences and delivering different messages to different audiences in order of their importance in regards to which audience has the most interest in the crisis or has the most to lose because of the crisis.

The reputations of companies are based on information and interactions with the public (Baker, 2011; Coombs, 2007). Maintaining a positive corporate reputation is essential to building trust between the company and its stakeholders. Positive relationships with stakeholders can to be crucial to the success of a company (Stephens 2005 et al.). Scholars suggest several communication strategies that can help preserve reputations post-crises including those advised through the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and the image restoration discourse theory (Coombs,
Coombs and Schmidt (2000) call for crisis-communication researchers to be “more prescriptive” when determining guidelines for using certain strategies in order to ensure the best strategy is being selected.

Most research has depended on analyzing case studies testing responses through surveys to determine their effectiveness (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Another way to evaluate the effectiveness of crisis-response strategies and determine the success corporations have in repairing their images in society is tracking the media coverage that followed the companies’ response. Measuring public perception by surveying the audience and reviewing statements from community leaders that are representing the crisis-affected community are additional methods used to evaluate crisis-response strategies (Chin, Naidu, Ringel & Snipes, 1998; Spence et al., 2007). Little research has explored the decoding process the African American audiences go through, which result in their acceptance or rejection of the corporations’ response to the discrimination claims (Richardson, 2007).

Richardson (2007) is one of the few researchers who have examined how African Americans interpret crisis-response strategies. Specifically, Richardson (2007) examined the effectiveness of the Red Cross’ response to Hurricane Katrina victims, who were predominantly African American. Richardson (2007) found that although the Red Cross had good intentions behind their crisis responses, many African Americans in his study found the responses insensitive. Richardson (2007) addresses the gap in research on crises that specifically involve African Americans and sites this gap as a possible reason why corporations still struggle to respond to these situations. He calls for crisis managers to be more aware of cultural differences among them and the audience and consider the
importance of diverse work settings (Richardson, 2007). My research would help fill this gap and provide cultural insight to the field of public relations.

**Situational crisis response theory.** SCCT is one approach crisis managers use when deciding on appropriate response strategies (Coombs, 2007). This theory focuses on identifying the ways stakeholders will perceive organizations’ responses to crises based on specific elements of the crisis situation. The stakeholders of an organization in crisis may be developing new opinions about the organization because of the crisis the organization is apart of or responsible for. Situational crises communication theory helps professionals determine the appropriate responses needed to reduce reputational harm (Coombs, 2007). Crisis managers typically use the media to deliver messages to the public during times of crises (Williams & Olaniran, 2002). To effectively use SCCT, crisis managers must understand the full scope of the crisis and its potential reputational harm. To do this, Coombs (2007) identifies initial crisis responsibility, crisis history and prior relational reputation all as critical factors for crisis managers to consider when determining the potential harm the crisis could have on the organization’s reputation.

During times of crises, crisis-response strategies are critical to saving corporations’ images (Coombs, 1995). In an analysis of popular crisis-response strategies derived from SCCT and image restoration discourse theory, Coombs (1995) identified five categories such strategies could be classified by: nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification and suffering. Nonexistence strategies are built within the framework that no crisis exists or the accused is not guilty. Denial is an example of a nonexistence strategy (Coombs, 1995). Denial is also a strategy suggested in image restoration discourse theory identified by Benoit (1997). However, denial is a strategy not
recommended for racial crises (Baker, 2001). Instead, Baker (2011) recommends, “racial incidents resulting from actions or behaviors are best managed by measured and calculated responses” (p. 519). Distance strategies are another category of strategies identified during Coombs’ (1995) study. While this category accepts that a crisis has occurred, responses center on distancing the organization from the crisis through excuses and justifications. Ingratiation strategies focus on highlighting the good things the company has achieved instead of the backlash they may currently be receiving due to the responsibility of the crisis. The next category identified by Coombs (1995) is mortification, “an attempt to win forgiveness of the publics and to create acceptance for the crisis,” (p.452). Mortification strategies include asking for forgiveness or offering to compensate those affected by the crisis. Coombs (1995) defines suffering, the final category identified in his study as, “suffering portrays the organization as an unfair victim of some malicious, outside entry,” (p.453). To determine what category would have the most appropriate strategies for the crisis, more information about the crisis is needed (Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2007).

Attribution theory is a framework used in SCCT (Coombs, 2007; Schwarz, 2008). This theory explains how people decide who is to blame in times of crises. Understanding how audiences attribute blame during a crisis can help crisis managers decide on what strategy would be best to use. Attribution theory explores how stakeholders attribute responsibility by examining the information used to attribute and their justification for their attributions (Schwarz, 2008). This theory is crucial to understanding how to effectively communicate with an organization’s stakeholders during a crisis. If audiences do attribute blame to the organization, Coombs (2007) explains that stakeholders could
end the relationship they have with the organization. This is especially true in racial crises where a company or organization’s sponsors will withdraw their financial support and distance themselves from the company or organization under fire (Baker, 2001). Schwarz (2008) proposes that crisis managers consider applying even more components of attribution theory when considering their crisis communication plans such as the convariation principle of Kelley (1967) because it provides more in-depth information on what types of information individuals are influenced by when determining who or what to attribute to a situation in addition to other variables that may influence attribution such as the relationship history and perceived consistency of the corporation. Schwarz (2008) suggests the convariation principle of Kelley be used as an extension to SCCT.

**Image restoration theory.** Image restoration discourse theory is another approach used in crisis communication. This theory helps crisis managers construct effective messages during a crisis based off the predicted reactions to the crisis and provides a framework for evaluating the messages produced (Benoit, 1997). SCCT uses image restoration discourse as a framework for understanding the potential reactions from stakeholders, which then guides crisis managers to specific strategies (Coombs, 2007; Richardson, 2007). Image restoration discourse theory suggests five categories of strategies crisis managers should use for image repair. These categories are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action and mortification (Benoit, 1997).

Denial strategies include denying the act happened or that corporation is at fault for the act that happened and shifting blame by identifying that another party is responsible (Benoit, 1997). It is important to consider implications for lying about
responsibility of a crisis. Benoit (1997) highlights the Exxon’s denial of responsibility for the Valdez oil spill, which conflicted with later sources of information, resulting in Exxon losing the trust of its audience and losing creditability with the public overall. Evasion of responsibility strategies are used to minimize the responsibility for the crisis (Benoit, 1997; Richardson, 2007). These strategies include, provocation, defeasibility, claiming it was an accident or that there were good intentions. Reducing the offensiveness of the event strategies are used to make the crisis seem less offensive. Subgroups of this category include bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser and compensation (Benoit, 1997). Corrective action strategy communicates steps to prevent reoccurrence of the crisis (Richardson, 2007). Benoit (1997) says the mortification strategy apologize and accept responsibility of the crisis. While accepting responsibility and asking for forgiveness may positively resonate with the public, Benoit (1997) cautions that this strategy may open the door for those affected to seek lawsuits against the organization.

Coombs and Schmidt (2000) conducted an image restoration analysis on Texaco’s racial crisis that occurred when a recording of the corporation’s top executives saying defamatory racial remarks was leaked. Texaco used five image restoration strategies: bolstering, corrective action, shifting blame, mortification, separation, which is a combination of bolstering, shifting blame and corrective action. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) tested the effectiveness of Texaco’s response strategies by surveying a sample of the public and analyzing their answers using character measures, the potential supportive behavior measure, and an attribution scale (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Results found that the public perceived all strategies used by Texaco positively and that bolstering and
corrective action could be less risky strategies than mortification that generate the same benefits (Coombs and Schmidt, 2000). Although this was a racial crisis in which defamatory remarks about African Americans were made public, Coombs and Schmidt did not control for the race of the participants.

**Responding to racial crises.** Racial crises are crises in which organizations are accused of racial discrimination or other racially motivated offenses that have acquired national media attention. Baker (2001) identifies several major corporations that have all faced serious claims of racial discrimination, specifically towards African Americans and Latinos. Such companies include, but are not limited to Texaco, AT&T, Denny’s and American Airlines (Baker, 2001). Cities such as Lubbock, Texas and New Orleans, Louisiana and have also endured race-based crises (Spence et al., 2007; Williams & Olaniran, 2002). Earlier this year, the Los Angeles Clippers faced racial crisis when recordings surfaced of the team’s owner making defamatory remarks about African Americans and the high-end department store Barneys New York recently paid a $525,000 settlement after its practices of racially profiling African Americans were exposed. In 2013, Paula Deen faced similar struggles when one of her restaurant mangers filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against Deen. Deen was soon dropped from the Food Network and her sponsorship with Home Depot was terminated (Hong & Len Rios). Since there is no sign of a decline in racial crises, there is a growing need for crisis managers to know how to respond to these events.

It is important for crisis managers to understand that not all African Americans will have the same reactions to certain crisis responses (Richardson, 2007). There are additional cultural differences among African Americans that may heighten their
sensitivity to certain images and crisis responses (Baker 2001; Richardson, 2007).

According to the United States Census Bureau, there were more than 4 million African Americans living in the U.S. in 2013, which comprised 13.2 percent of the country’s population. However, Hong and Len Rios (2015) found that African Americans were underrepresented in the public relations field and were more likely to hold lower-level positions. Recruiting more Blacks into public relations careers could better control for the risks of a corporation’s being misunderstood or perceived insensitive to the Black community (Richardson, 2007).

Race-based crises have been highly publicized throughout media (Williams & Olaniran, 2002). Examples of this heightened attention include the 1998 case of Lubbock, Texas police department’s racial profiling of three Hampton University basketball coaches. This case generated headlines all over the country from Milwaukee to Atlanta to Washington D.C (Williams & Olaniran, 2002).

Baker (2001) divides racial crises into two categories. The first category of racial crises is based on words. Baker (2001) says crises based on words said by a representative of an organization are best addressed through apology and distancing itself from whomever said the bigotry remarks, since there is no way to justify their words. The second category is racial crises based on symbols, in which Baker (2001) says the best response for organizations is to change the symbol that has become the source of crisis. While Baker (2001) provides some guidance for how professionals should address racial crises, not all racial crises are ignited solely through words and symbols. Baker (2001) fails to address racially systematic practices and actions that also ignite racial crises.
Organizations’ actions have been very prevalent precursors to racial crises in the past and there is still very limited information on how one should address these issues.

Denny’s, a national chain of breakfast diners, experienced numerous claims of racial discrimination across the country during the 1990s (Chin et al., 1998). Denny’s used ingratiation response strategies when announcing their partnership with the NAACP to implement diversity programs. However, discrimination accusations at Denny’s across the United States continued and other strategies were soon explored after critics expressed concern that the NAACP partnership was not genuine (Chin et al., 1998).

Overall, there seems to be solid research in the area crisis-response strategies, but little work concerning how to evaluate these strategies among the public and specific stakeholders. In addition, although scholars acknowledge the heightened media attention surrounding racial crises, and the serious consequences of mishandling such issues, there has been little effort to incorporate minority viewpoints in response strategies. Understanding what leads audiences to accept or reject responses to racial issues is critical to the success of the crisis response. SCCT and other crisis-response frameworks fail to acknowledge any differences between racial crises and other types of crises. These frameworks also fail to acknowledge that it will not be as easy for some audiences to interpret the intended meaning of a message as others. Understanding how African Americans decode crisis responses to racial discriminations and how they construct their own opinions about racial crises could provide more guidance for how professionals should respond to these issues. It is important to find what crisis-response strategies African Americans accept, which ones they reject and why that is the case, in order to provide more effective messages and control for the risks associated with oppositional
readings of messages, which could be particularly heightened during times of racial crises. Therefore, in regards to race-based crises, the following research questions are applicable:

RQ1: How do African Americans decode crisis responses to racial discrimination?

RQ2: What makes certain African Americans more forgiving to racial crises over others?

RQ3: Are some principle crisis-response strategies identified in situational crisis response theory accepted more than others by African Americans?

RQ4: How do African Americans construct their opinions on racial crises?
Chapter 3: Methods

Since the research questions centered on understanding audiences’ perceptions and interpretations of crisis-response messages, focus groups were the ideal method to use. Focus groups provide insight into participants’ feelings, motivations and thought processes (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

Focus groups were a better choice than surveys in the case of a racial crisis because they allow for more in-depth discussions about the participants’ perspectives. In addition, the composition of surveys limits the answers participants can give (Morgan, 1996). Therefore, since the study sought in-depth answers on how African Americans constructed their opinions of crisis responses in regard to racial issues, surveys would fail to illicit such answers. A focus group method not only allowed for more in-depth answers, but it also provided insight into how the participants may discuss the topic in a natural social setting (Lunt & Livingstone 1996).

Maiko Nakai (2012) used focus groups to examine the audience perspective of corporations using social media to address crises. Specifically, Nakai (2012) was interested in the opinions of mothers seeking crisis-response messages through social media. Focus groups allowed for the researcher to, “ask open-ended questions to explore and interpret the meanings behind their real-life actions holistically,” (p.33). Nakai (2012) found that the moms believed organizations should respond to crises via social media. Therefore, the methodology of this study was modeled after Nakai’s (2012) study.

To complete the research, I conducted 3 focus groups with 4-5 participants in each group. This range of participants has been proven the most effective in producing
quality results (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Morgan, 1996). The participant’s ages ranged from 19-62, and their education levels ranged from completing some high school to graduate degrees.

Since the research questions explicitly inquired about the thought processes of African Americans while interpreting crisis-response messages, and previous research showed that people with more things in common would be more comfortable sharing their ideas in a group setting, the focus groups consisted entirely of African Americans (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Participants were recruited through snowball/chain sampling by using church bulletins, social media posts and referrals from others.

One focus group was conducted in Kansas City and two focus groups were conducted in Los Angeles with a moderator in place in my absence. Kansas City and Los Angeles were selected as locations for the focus groups because they are home to large populations of African Americans from various academic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses.

Participants were presented with materials from Chin et al.’s (1998) case study of Denny’s in addition to responses of more current racial crises from companies and organizations including Paula Deen and the National Basketball Association (NBA) via the Los Angeles Clippers. These cases were selected because they represent different strategies identified in SCCT and image restoration theory. Selecting these cases was purposeful, intense sampling because they provided rich information in regards to racial response strategies that display the phenomenon of racial crises sufficiently.

The participants introduced themselves and gave their employment positions and education backgrounds. The moderator or I presented each case, giving background on
what happened, introducing the key players in the incident and reading the statements issued in response to the crises. Then, the moderator or I had participants discuss their feelings about the responses with each other. Sample questions included:

1. Would this racial crises cause you to stop supporting the organization? i.e.: (watching on television, eating at their restaurants, buying their products)
2. Could the organizations respond to these crises better? How so?
3. Do you think this crisis warrants an apology? Why or why not?
4. If the organization responded this way: *gives alternate response using a different response strategy, would it positively change your perception of the organization?
5. Who do you feel is at fault for this crisis? For example, is it the key figures who made the defamatory comments, all representatives of the organization or those in leadership positions in the organization?
6. If this were not the first time this organization was accused of racial discrimination, how would it affect your perception of the org?
7. Were you able to empathize with this organization?

Responses from the focus group participants were then transcribed and organized by accepted, negotiated or oppositional views as defined by Hall (1980) in order to explore if certain themes were apparent between certain response strategies identified in Coombs’ (2007) situational crisis communication theory and Benoit’s (1997) image restoration theory and the audience reactions.
Chapter 4: Results

Participants’ responses were organized using Hall’s (1980) definitions of accepted, negotiated and oppositional readings of messages. Re-staffing, or firing key individuals responsible for the racial crises, was one of the most accepted or suggested response strategies among focus group participants. Initiating, or participating in programs that support and uplift the black community, was another theme that emerged from the focus group sessions. Participants expressed desires for corporations to rebuild their trust with black community. In order to fulfill this desire, participants suggested reaching out to black college graduates and providing them with employment opportunities that not only help strengthen the relationships between blacks and corporations, but also improve diversity demographics of corporations, which could potentially curtail the likelihood of such crises occurring again. Other interesting topics explored in the focus group were the power of donations and its role in reducing severity.

**Dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings.** Focus group participants who had dominant readings of the statements released in response to the three racial crises examined successfully interpreted the message the way the crisis managers intended them to and remained loyal consumers to the brand (Hall, 1980; Katz & Liebes, 1990). This means crisis managers successfully encoded the message (Hall, 1980). Participants who had dominant or accepted readings of any of the crisis responses presented in the study said the responses restored their support of the organization as a customer. The NBA’s response to the Los Angeles Clippers crisis was overwhelmingly the most accepted of the three responses presented to participants, which means most participants said they would
still be consumers of the NBA and the Los Angeles Clippers after reading the presented statement.

Participants who accepted the overall intended, dominant meaning of a message, yet still have objections to certain elements comprised in the statement had a negotiated readings of the statements. Several participants display negotiated readings of Denny’s statement. Participants who said they would still eat at Denny’s still had suggestions on how Denny’s could improve their statement:

Everything they did was good, but they would have to re-staff as well… Giving the money and everything was good, but you have to re-staff….

Participants urged Denny’s to re-staff the restaurants that were accused of discrimination. According to participants, they could not fully patronize the restaurant again until re-staffing took place. This is an example of a negotiated reading because participants were pleased with some of Denny’s actions, but suggested additional actions be taken in order to fully embrace the company again.

Participants who rejected the message entirely and suggested alternative ways to respond to the crises sided in opposition of the message (Hall, 1980). Paula Deen’s response to her racial crisis drew the most opposition from participants. Participants suggested alternative methods to respond including building partnerships with historically black colleges to increase employment diversity, giving lectures on racism at campus across the country or not apologizing at all. Deen’s crisis generated the most emotion and blatant disgust from participants when compared to Denny’s and the NBA:

At the point where you're planning plantation weddings, I don't think there's too much that can be done. Yeah, an apology or whatever. You know that's bullshit.
Maybe she could have tried to do some community service or something like that. But still, I just don't think there's too much you can do for real….As soon as I heard this, I think my mother found her stuff on clearance at Walmart and bought it. I was like, “You can’t do that.” You can’t buy her stuff because that’s gonna go directly to her….I mean, my reaction still stands. Whether she apologized or whether she didn't. You're still wild for that. So, I mean, the apology hasn't swayed what I think about what she did...I think her apology is clearly falsified. So maybe if she didn't say anything at all, I might have a tad bit of an ounce more of respect for the situation maybe. Because I know her people gon' die out soon.

So it's not that big of a deal to be racist. If she own it, then own it….

Participants’ reactions to Deen’s apology were blatantly oppositional. Many read her apology as disingenuous and even said no apology would have been better than a phony apology. In addition, participants expressed that they could no longer support Deen in any way such as buying her clearance cooking products, which is the opposite reaction Deen and her communication team would want their audience to have after hearing the apology.

**Re-staffing.** After study participants were presented with the crisis scenarios and response statements, re-staffing quickly became a reoccurring theme or suggestion among the different groups. Participants accepted the re-staffing strategy when it was used to respond to claims of racial discrimination, and suggested it as an alternative, more effective strategy when it was not used. In focus groups, participants expressed a desire for those at the root of the racial crises immediately fired. When this strategy was used, it was overwhelmingly accepted, and when other strategies were used instead such as
apologies, reducing offensiveness and denial, re-staffing was suggested as an alternative, more appropriate strategy to employ.

Denny’s was a case that did not use the re-staffing strategy. Several participants pointed that fact out and claimed it was a necessary action in order for them to patronize the establishment again:

My main concern is re-staffing. As long as they re-staff at all those stores, I'll go. If you're not racist, then fire all those people who are....They should rid themselves of every regional manager that was coddling that behavior. They should have sent a message that way. They should have sent some messages to the middle management and they should have sent the messages to some of the executives. And then the shareholders should have got rid of the CEO. That would have sent a message to me. I would have been like, "Oh, alright they did some things”….Everything they did was good, but they would have to re-staff as well. Giving the money and everything was good, but you have to re-staff…. I mean I guess like the regional managers are responsible for this. Because they actually allowed people to charge people two dollars before they walked in. This is not the club. Like, you don't need to charge people to sit down. That doesn't even make sense…. Participants urged again and again for corporations to re-staff after racial incidents. To participants, re-staffing was sign that the corporations did not endorse the behaviors of the employees accused of the discriminatory actions, or the employees who passively stood by while the actions took place.
The NBA was a case that did use the re-staffing strategy. The NBA’s response to the Los Angeles Clippers crisis was the only response to be accepted by the majority of participants, meaning majority of participants said they would continue supporting the brand after reading its response to the racial crises. Majority of participants accepted Adam Silver, NBA commissioner’s statement and following actions, and said that because the NBA responded the way it did they would still support the NBA and the Los Angeles Clippers. Participants said the NBA took the appropriate steps in removing Donald Sterling and apologizing for his behavior:

If the NBA hadn't taken the steps that they took, I would not have supported the Clippers. But I do believe the majority of the players there are African American or of minority descent so it was not in the NBA’s culture to support those views; If they hadn't taken the steps-- and no, I'm not even a sports person-- I would not want not one penny of my money, any way or form, to make it into or benefit his pocket. But, I do believe they took the appropriate steps….I would support the Clippers now because of the action that they made after. I respect their decision to let that person go and remove themselves from that situation….If they kept him after that, then that lets me know that y'all really don't care. And I wouldn't support it….

The previous quotes reveal that the NBA took the appropriate steps to restore trust with the black community after the racial crisis. Participants applauded the NBA’s swift action to end affiliation with Donald Sterling and said that it was a critical piece to them patronizing the team in the future.
One participant said if the NBA did not fire and replace Sterling, it would change his entire outlook of the NBA brand:

That would change how I look at the whole NBA. I'd be like, yo, this is just like a money machine. They don't care about ethics or nothing, it's just all about money. And that's so bad….

This reinforces how important it is for corporations to re-staff. If the NBA chosen not to re-staff, individuals like the participant above could have read that action as a second-hand endorsement to the racist behavior and further damage the reputation of the brand.

While the Paula Deen brand itself could not re-staff, or replace Paula Deen, The Food Network responded to the cook’s crisis by pulling her cooking shows off the air. This response was accepted by participants. One participant explained what she would have done if the Food Network would have continued supporting Deen:

Gotta leave the Food Network as a whole. Don’t even flip past the channel…. This provides insight on possible ways affiliate corporations should respond to racial crisis. Although Food Network ultimately was not the brand accused of racism, there affiliation with Deen forced them to act as well and could have possibly been interpreted as an endorsement if they did not remove the cooking shows from the air.

**Connect with the community.** Another theme among participants was wanting organizations to connect with African American communities in effort to restore trust after a racial crisis in a genuine manner without media attention. When discussing the Paula Deen and Denny’s crises, participants suggested the brands connect with historically black colleges to create employment pipelines to increase diversity.
One participant suggested Deen visit black schools and discuss what she has learned from her mistakes with students:

I think there is a possibility that people can change, and even though she may be set in her ways, but what if she was, without doing the media blitz, actually going and going in African American schools and talking about her behavior, and was like, "Hey, it was wrong." And was providing some type of assistance or support to African American communities without even asking for that publicity….

Other participants also suggested visiting black schools and communities adding Deen create programs that help benefit the black community to show she is not racist as her statement claims:

I just believe that actions, and it's always gonna be actions, are gonna speak louder than words. And it would have to be a period, a time of keep showing, keep showing, keep showing positive actions of this is who I am, this is what I mean. And people do media blitzes, you know, try to be out in front of it for a little while until their bottom line starts recovering again. So, she should still be out there after two years, saying, "this is who I am. What I'm changing and merging into." I am truly sorry and I regret this. But I haven't seen anything. So there's other cooking shows to watch on TV and that's what I choose to watch. Anything but her….

Overall, participants were unmoved by Deen’s response and revealed that working with the black community to restore trust with them may be the only way to regain their business. Through repeated school lectures and college recruiting programs, participants believed that would be Deen’s best chance at gaining their business again.
This method also was suggested when discussing the Denny’s crisis. Participants felt Denny’s could have done more to increase employment diversity at their restaurants:

They could have partnered with some of these HBCU's, they could have went to some of these universities, they could have picked out like, "Hey, we want to make sure we pick out some top talent so we can bring it in to our middle management, because we know that you guys have great ideas, we want to take those ideas and we want to take those ideas and we want to filter it through all of our organizations so that we can be ready and prepared for the future……

Following the money. Denny’s responded to its racial crises by donating $1 billion to the NAACP. Participants had mixed feelings about this gesture, but expressed a desire to know more about exactly how the money would be used. Some participants seemed offended by this donation saying they felt Denny’s was just throwing money at the problem without also offering a solution:

They added more insult to their selves by saying they will get with the NAACP to donate $1 billion. I don't know if that's the best organization to be handling that kind of money. I'm just gonna be honest with you. I think they should spread that wealth around and they should have put even more money into that. They should have commercials every day like, "Black people, please, our service has gotten better….That’s a nice gesture, but I would really have to see where that money went and how it was used……

Another participant questioned why Denny’s decided to donate to the NAACP over other organizations, schools and programs. One participant felt the donation reflected disconnect between the brand and the black community:
They feel the NAACP is the premier organization for African Americans and that we all are members, and we all are waiting for them to give us some type of word to move forward and push on. And they ain't got no leadership over there. And I don't know why they even went that way. And I think it's still tied to the south. You know first time I hear something goes south, the NAACP is on the beat. But I don't ever see no results from them. So I don't why that's supposed to make me feel better. It's just like Sparkle said, "Here's the money, shut up." We don't want y'all to talk, but we'll help y'all out….

Overall, participants believed Denny’s donation could have been more adequately used to advance changes in the culture of the restaurant through recruiting and community-based programs, than it was by giving the lump sum to the NAACP. This highlights a need for companies to proceed with caution with using large donations as a response strategy. According to participants, an investment in their communities would have been more positively accepted and showed more sincerity on behalf of the company than the donation to one black organization.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Research from this study provides a more in-depth approach to evaluating crisis-response strategies that will lead to better understanding of how African Americans decode responses to corporate discrimination. Results from this study help prove that certain response strategies already in practice are ineffective in reducing negative opinions among African American audiences in regards to the organization. This study highlights the need to explore other response strategies, created specifically to address crises involving race that include re-staffing and community outreach methods.

Study participants had varying degrees of dominant, negotiated or oppositional reactions to the three cases’ crisis responses. Of the three cases presented to participants, the NBA’s handling of the Los Angeles Clippers was the most only dominant or accepted message as defined by Hall’s (1980) encoding, decoding communication model. Hall (1980) identified three positions that can be used to classify audiences based on their perceptions of messages in media. The three decoding positions, dominant, negotiated and oppositional have been applied in research studies examining audience’s perceptions of media messages. Participants who side with the dominant position of a message successfully interpreted the message the way its creator intended for them to. Participants did not find the NBA at fault in this crisis. Instead, many participants were able to distance Donald Sterling from the rest of the organization. Further research is needed to determine if the NBA’s actions and statements, which used bolstering, corrective action and mortification strategies as defined by Coombs’ (1995) situational crisis communication theory and Benoit’s (1997) image restoration theory, to respond to the
incident contributed to the audiences ease in disassociating Donald Sterling from the rest of the Clippers and the NBA organization.

It is however important to note that the NBA, which has a strong African American fan base and majority black players may have been more inclined to respond the way they did than other corporations who are not as dependent on the Black dollar. As one participant put it, “it was not in the NBA’s culture to support those views.” Had the NBA stood by Donald Sterling or decided not to respond at all, it is possible the players and coaches could have spoken out against the organization and created an even larger crisis for them. I suggest other organizations that have similar fan or consumer bases quickly act to remove all employees accused of racist acts to make it clear to the Black community that their actions are not supported or represent the views of the organization.

The Denny’s crisis generated many different reactions from the participants. Participants who were children or not yet born when the crisis took place seemed less emotionally connected than older adults who remembered the event happening in the early 90s. The third group had an average age of 55 and some said they still have not gone back to a Denny’s since the crisis occurred in 1993. The following excerpt from the third focus group shows just how negative the Denny’s brand still is viewed today by African Americans:

**Moderator:** From 1991 to 1994, several Denny's across the country were facing racial discrimination accusations. In '93 alone, 50 discrimination charges across more than 12 states were filed at the restaurant. Claims ranged from Blacks being refused service to being asked to pay a two dollar cover charge and paying in
advance for their meals. In addition, management was caught referring to large
groups of Black customers as blackouts. Would you stop supporting Denny’s?

**Participant 1**: I most definitely would stop supporting because I have stopped
supporting Denny's.

**Participant 2**: I have too, I haven't been to Denny's since this happened.

**Participant 3**: Me either. Didn't like 'em. And I've felt the discrimination a
Denny's before. Did not like 'em….you walked in there, you're the one or two
black people in there, and they looked at you like you were trash. I actually felt
that. So no, I would not support Denny's at all. I just think that racial
discrimination is engrained in that institution. Because no matter where you go
across this country, they all act the same in Denny's. I don't like 'em. No!

Denny’s made a mistake in not following up their donation to the NAACP with a
plan of action. If Denny’s would have including details of how the money would be
allocated or used by the NAACP, it could potentially have salvaged their reputation
among black customers. There still are people in 2015 hurt by the actions of Denny’s in
the early 90’s. This suggests that other businesses undergoing similar crises should never
stop trying to restore the relationship between them and the customers affected by the
racial actions. The participants had great suggestions on how Denny’s could restore trust
with its Black customers through partnering with historically black colleges to improve
employee diversity and its overall image in the black community. In addition, these
actions could show the public that they cared about the black community in general, a
point participants repeatedly pointed out could not be determined through the strategies
they decided to select.
Another strategy used in Denny’s response was reducing offensiveness as defined by Coombs’ (1995) and Benoit (1997) who say reducing offensiveness. Reducing the offensiveness of the event strategies are used to make the crisis seem less offensive. Subgroups of this category include bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser and compensation (Benoit, 1997). Some did not view this strategy favorable and one participant was quickly able to identify language that seemed to downplay the severity of the incident. Crisis communication managers must be sensitive to the words they use in their statements. Denny’s was accused of more than 50 racial discrimination charges in 1993 alone, so defining their crisis as “mix-up” was not only inaccurate but also highly offensive and did not help its image moving forward with African Americans. This statement shows why more crisis managers from diverse backgrounds are needed. Hong and Len Rios (2015) found that African Americans were underrepresented in the public relations field and were more likely to hold lower-level positions. Recruiting more Blacks into public relations careers could better control for the risks of a corporation’s being misunderstood or perceived insensitive to the Black community (Richardson, 2007).

Participants perceived Paula Deen’s response following the crisis to her brand overwhelmingly negatively. Deen’s statement reflected the evasion of responsibility and mortification strategies as defined by Coombs’ (1995) and Benoit (1997). Crisis communicators should proceed with caution with using such strategies. Participants displayed little remorse for Deen after she used these strategies and expressed they may be more receptive to corrective actions such as community outreach.
Overall, it seemed that the participants felt they could forgive and still be consumers of the organizations, if they felt the organizations provided swift, genuine actions to reduce the damage caused, admitted their racism and offered support to the black community. As one participant pointed out, African Americans are known for being forgiving:

I think us, as a people, African Americans, I think we're more forgiving than any other race. I think we're more loving than any other race. And I think it's just engrained in us to find the good in people because that's how we have to work when we work with each other. You should always stand back and be observant and keep a good ear, but I don't think that should stop you from any type of progress that you can gain….

While there is vast research in the area of crisis-response strategies, few studies have looked to evaluate these strategies among the public and specific stakeholders. This research helps fill the gap. In addition, although scholars acknowledge the heightened media attention surrounding racial crises, and the serious consequences of mishandling such issues, such as boycotts, protests and likely uprisings, there has been little effort to incorporate minority viewpoints in response strategies until now. Understanding what leads audiences to accept or reject responses to racial issues is critical to the success of the crisis response.

Recently, the University of Missouri underwent its own racial crisis when black students, including a graduate student participating in a hunger strike, united in protest with black student athletes on the MU football team to bring awareness to the racial
turmoil on campus and the lack of acknowledgement from campus administration and specifically, the university’s president Tim Wolfe.

Soon, MU became a focal point for national and international media and audiences. Students demanded Wolfe’s resignation after he consistently reduced the severity of years of racist threats and actions toward black students on campus. Rather than recognizing and addressing the bigger issue of racism’s role in the culture of the institution, Wolfe and his administration treated every race incident with little-to-no acknowledgement at all. Due to administration’s decision not to fully address the race issue on campus, they unintentionally helped stir the pot of unrest on campus until it eventually boiled over to become one of the most historically weeks in MU’s history resulting in the resignation of the both the president and chancellor, two of the most powerful positions on the university’s campus.

When one reflects on what took place at MU, some of the same themes emerge that were found in the current study. Students demanding re-staffing of the president position and refusing to patronize with MU until actions were taken against racism verify the need to address discriminatory actions comprehensively and early. As Baker (2001) said, racial crises cannot be addressed in the same manner as other crises. The outcomes at MU, along with this research, can help other institutions better address race crises. The outcomes at MU provide a great example of what can happen when audiences’ oppositional readings lead to action. Understanding the needs of this specific audience during times of racial crises could help resolve these issues before they reach the point of boycotts, loss of sponsorships and irreparable reputation damage.
**Limitations.** A limitation of this study and all qualitative studies is that the results cannot be generalized and it’s hard to know if the group dynamic is playing a negative role in how participants answer questions (Lunt & Livingstone 1996). However, the moderator of the study was conscious of this limitation and tried to dig deeper for the opinions of those who may be hesitant to share because of the fear of judgment from the group. Other limitations include time and that not all response strategies are presented in the cases I selected.

Focus groups also render their own limitations, Critics of focus groups say the method cannot stand alone in research and should just be used a preliminary data (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Due to the episodic nature of focus groups, they are not conducive to making sweeping generalizations like more quantitative methods. However, they do grant insight into information that could not be obtained through quantitative data.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Overall, there seems to be no decline in the occurrences of racial crises. It is my hope that this research will provide for understanding of the African American audience during these times. It is important to find what crisis-response strategies African Americans accept, which ones they reject and why that is the case, in order to provide more effective messages and control for the risks associated with oppositional readings of messages, which could be particularly heightened during times of racial crises. This research helps bridge the gap between crisis communication and managing race-specific crises.

Results from this study help prove that certain response strategies already in practice may be ineffective at reducing negative opinions of organizations among African American audiences during times of racial crises. This study revealed that some African Americans seek corrective actions over apologies during these crises. In addition, this study found reducing offensiveness and evasion of responsibility strategies as possible strategies to avoid using in racial crises, and that donations should be followed up with plans of action. Overall, this study highlights the need to explore other response strategies, created specifically to address crises involving race that include re0staffing and community outreach methods.

After witnessing what took place at the University of Missouri this November, it is clear that more work needs to be done to better understand each other’s differences. Diverse communication teams can help bring alternative perspectives to the decision-making process before messages are disseminated to the public. Communication teams
must not assume that all audiences will interpret their messages the way intended them to and this is especially the case if they are addressing minority audiences.

Possible directions for future research include examining the use of community leaders to persuade African Americans opinion on racial crises. African Americans have historically placed more trust in community leaders than in media and other outsiders, so it would be interesting to explore a corporation’s use of community leaders to help shape public opinion about the crises. Another potential area to explore is African American’s information-seeking habits during times of racial crises. Richardson (2007) took a quantitative approach to this topic, but more data could be gathered qualitatively that could explain why African Americans seek specific channels and media outlets when seeking information about crises. Since crisis managers place a great deal of dependency on the media to reach audiences, understanding what channels and platforms African Americans prefer could provide insight for crisis managers to consider when disseminating their crisis responses.
References


