

**Effects of source and crisis attribution on organisational  
trustworthiness in news media reporting**

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**Key words**

Trustworthiness, organisational trustworthiness, crisis communication, crisis attribution, churnalism, multiple source reporting, single source reporting, news media.

## **Abstract**

In 2013 an industry report highlighted how media downsizing has resulted in journalists relying on content such as articles and television news provided by public relations practitioners with limited or no editorial oversight from journalists. Significant changes in recent years, largely triggered by financial drivers and constraints, to the media's construction of news has resulted in a shift in the processes used for sourcing and the reporting of news stories and news consumption, a process which has been termed churnalism (Davies, 2009; Giles, 2010; Hanusch, 2015; Yuan, 2011). Churnalism has led to the passive processing of information and content that is produced and presented as news. The significance of the processing of content by news media outlets on trustworthiness of stakeholders is a consideration for organisations who use news media as a communication channel in particular during crisis events.

This study builds on the existing work in this area to refine the understanding of how the content of media responses on consumers' trust in organisations during an organisational crisis in a news media environment where churnalism exists. It also brings the concepts of churnalism and crisis attribution together in the one study to identify how these variables impact organisational trustworthiness. Thus, the overall research problem guiding this thesis is:

*How can organisations produce and / or signal trustworthiness in media responses during a crisis to maintain consumers' trust in the organisation in a news media environment where churnalism exists?*

Within news media reporting organisational trustworthiness within a crisis is often portrayed by the reporting of information directly provided by the organisation in the form of media statements. This information is presented or framed within news stories to represent the organisation's position on the event.

Coombs' attribution theory (1995) and the integrated model of interpersonal trust developed by Mayer et al., (1995) were applied to examine an organisation's crisis event to fulfil the key aims of the study to explore the changing nature of journalism, how public relations practitioners interact with news journalists and how organisations engage with their consumers through news media during an issue or crisis event.

In relation to the study's overall purpose, the following research questions that guide this thesis are:

*Research Question 1 (RQ1)*

*In media coverage of an organisational crisis is the message source related to organisational trustworthiness?*

*Research Question 2 (RQ2)*

*In media coverage of an organisational crisis is attribution of blame for a crisis event related to organisational trustworthiness?*

*Research Question 3 (RQ3)*

*In media coverage of an organisational crisis are message source and attribution of blame for a crisis event related to organisational trustworthiness?*

To resolve these research questions, the thesis conducts a quantitative content analysis to explore how churnalism, which is characterised as single source news reporting, presents in news media articles during a crisis to identify the relationship between responsibility and trustworthiness in news media reports. As the research questions are seeking to explore the relationship between the variables in the study, attention has been given to content as the communication artifact within in news media reports. The relationship between the variables in this study are particularly relevant when examining the influence of the variable churnalism.

The results explore the effect of message source, single or multiple, on organisational trustworthiness and attribution of responsibility to the organisation or other source. The results show support for research question 1 with a relationship between the message source in an article positively effects the portrayed trustworthiness in the organisation reflecting the relationship between the source, the journalists and the information reported in news media stories.

Research question 2 is not supported with the results showing no relationship between news media articles that attribute responsibility for the event to the organisation and the level of portrayed trustworthiness in the organisation.

The coefficients to test research question 3 indicate that the combined variable of message source and attribution are not significantly related to trustworthiness, thus research question 3 cannot be affirmed.

The results of this study provide support for responding to a crisis event with an organisational message that embeds key elements of trustworthiness and predicting the needs of the journalist by including in the response information from an additional source to that of the organisation. In practice this approach would both acknowledge the existence of churnalism while assisting the journalist in their role to achieve the outcome of a news media report with a greater level of perceived organisational trustworthiness by stakeholders.

The findings of this research contribute to the stream of field of research by Coombs (1995, 2004, 2007) on the management of communication during a crisis. Specifically, this research contributes by contributing to the understanding of how to embed trustworthiness in media responses during a crisis to maintain consumers' trust in the organisation in a news media environment where churnalism exists. This understanding provides the opportunity for public relations practitioners to better manage the relationship between the organisation and its consumers through the conduit of news media.

Further research in this field of study could consider building on the findings of this thesis to enhance the understanding and application of the relationship dynamic that exists between news journalists and public relations practitioners in an environment where churnalism exists. These findings could enhance the understanding of the effect of embedded messages of trustworthiness in organisational responses to news media during an organisational crisis event.

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## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

Signed:

[QUT Verified Signature](#)

Date: 5 June, 2018

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Background to Research

Significant changes in recent years, largely triggered by financial drivers and constraints, to the media's construction of news has resulted in a shift in the processes used for sourcing and the reporting of news stories and news consumption, a process which has been termed churnalism (Davies, 2009; Giles, 2010; Hanusch, 2015; Yuan, 2011). Many of the studies that have been published on crisis communication have focused on the credibility of messages from a single source, being the organisation or entity responsible for the wrongdoing, whose reputation has been threatened (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2012). This study aims to explore how the content of media responses influences consumers' trustworthiness in organisations during an organisational crisis in a news media environment where churnalism exists.

The 2013 industry report titled Trends and Issues in Australian Corporate Affairs Report published by Salt and Shein highlighted to the public relations profession how media downsizing has produced a reliance on public relations practitioners to provide content, produce articles, television news content and blogs in a format which can be used directly and with limited or no editorial oversight from the news journalists. The reliance on content provided by public relations practitioners for use by news journalists in news media has been termed as churnalism (Davies, 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009). Davies (2009) defines churnalism as "journalists failing to perform the simple basic functions of their profession; quite unable to tell their readers the truth about what is happening on their patch; journalists who are no longer out gathering news but who are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories" (p. 59). Davies (2009) characterises churnalism as poor practices of modern day journalists who churn or recycle news stories off the wire or internet without appropriate critical investigation.

Churnalism has been described and observed as a growing trend in reporting news which has been created by the increased pressure placed on journalists to produce content

for multiple news media outlets resulting in limited time for journalists to undertake the critical practice of fact checking and independent investigation (Jackson & Moloney, 2015). Where once journalists were seen travelling out and about in the search for facts, churnalism is characterised by journalists who are now often deskbound waiting for the next major scoop; eager to be the first to report on the topic and thus draw traffic to their news sites (Davies, 2009).

Churnalism, which is characterised by single source news reporting, has been described by Davies (2009) as problematic as it permits falsehoods provided to news media to be accepted by some news media journalists as facts. For businesses this raises concerns as Davies (2009) identified this shift has resulted in news media journalists no longer fulfilling the foundational functions of fact checking the profession was built upon. In the setting of an issue or crisis, investigative reporting has the potential to succumb to the effects of churnalism rather than report the facts from an objective viewpoint.

The observation that has been made is that churnalism has led to the “mass production of ignorance” (Davies, 2009 p. 45) with many news media consumers unaware of the changes that have occurred to the way news is reported (Yuan, 2010). The way news is reported leads to a shift in the responsibility of public relations practitioners and organisations to consider how information is provided particularly in the event of a wrongdoing (Zavyalova, Ofarrer, Reger & Shapiro, 2012). The presentation of information in a single source news reporting environment has particular importance for the study of public relations which is largely predicated on managing relationships between an organisation and its various stakeholders (Cutlip et al., 2010; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000).

In this study news media is used as the descriptive term for all the presentations of news and information in the study including: television, radio and newspapers. Throughout this paper the definition used for source quoted within this article is the organisation, person or other record or document that gives timely information for inclusion in news media stories. Sources’ are the people or organisations who give information to journalists in exchange for media attention. Source type describes the origin number, single or multiple, of sources contributing to or referred to in a news media story for example single source news report (Van Leuven, Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2013).

In this study, a crisis is operationalised as a negative episode or event in a larger relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2000). While in the past, organisations wanted to tell only their side of the story, consideration should be given

to whether it is now incumbent on public relations professionals to be both the journalist and the organisation and in doing so provide to news media organisations material that contains multiple sources (Holt, 2016).

To achieve its purpose this study builds on the existing work in this field of study to refine the understanding of the impact of the content of media responses on consumers' trust in organisations during an organisational crisis in a news media environment where churnalism exists. The study also brings the concepts of churnalism and crisis attribution together in the one study to identify how these variables impact organisational trustworthiness.

In responding to the purpose of this study, a quantitative approach has been applied to analyse the content of 419 news media stories in press, internet and broadcast news media for the case of a lottery prize claim dispute. The organisation in the study is a regulated lottery organisation that operates lottery games throughout Australia in accordance with the legislative requirements in each state.

The event this study is based on can be summarised as a dispute over the payment of a lottery prize between one individual who claimed the prize and a collective group of work colleagues who suspected the prize was claimed using a ticket that had been jointly held amongst the group.

The findings of this study provide support for the identification of churnalism in the setting of an organisational crisis where the organisation is reliant on its message to create trustworthiness amongst its stakeholders and the effect of this message on its consumers to survive in the organisational setting of a regulated operating environment.

The relevant literature from each of these areas is reviewed and gaps identified to progress research into decision making models with which to better guide managerial decision-making during a crisis event. Additionally, the results from this study will be used to inform future experimental studies to test the hypothesised interactions between the variables under study within the scope of a corporate business context.

## **1.2 Research purpose and questions**

The purpose of this research study is to explore how churnalism, which is characterised as single source reporting, presents in news media articles during a crisis and identify the relationship between responsibility and trust in news media reports. These findings will assist to identify how organisations can produce and/or signal trust in

messages during issues and crises. Specifically, I look at the effect of source type, single or multiple, on organisational trust and the attribution of responsibility to the organisation or other source during a crisis event. In relation to the study's overall purpose, the following research questions will be answered:

*Research Question 1 (RQ1)*

*In media coverage of an organisational crisis is the message source related to organisational trustworthiness?*

*Research Question 2 (RQ2)*

*In media coverage of an organisational crisis is attribution of blame for a crisis event related to organisational trustworthiness?*

*Research Question 3 (RQ3)*

*In media coverage of an organisational crisis are message source and attribution of blame for a crisis event related to organisational trustworthiness?*

In answering these three questions this study will provide preliminary findings of the relationship between the presentation of churnalism during a crisis and the relationships between attribution for a crisis event and organisational trustworthiness.

### **1.3 Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications from this study**

This study seeks to make a number of specific theoretical contributions to the continuing evolution of one of the models in crisis communication and refine the understanding of the relationships between the three trustworthiness dimensions that lead to organisational trust and attribution contained within the model.

Firstly, this study will address the impact of the attribution of responsibility on the trustworthiness pillars that lead to organisational trust in the setting of a crisis in a news media environment where churnalism is evident. The explorations of relatedness of the impact of attribution of responsibility on organisational trust will be achieved by identifying and classifying the presence of the attributes of trustworthiness and attribution of responsibility in news media reports throughout a crisis event (Coombs, 1995; Coombs 2004, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2005).

The methodological approach used in this study will identify the relationship between the presentation of churnalism during a crisis through identification of single or multiple source news media reporting and the relationship between consumer attribution for a crisis event and perceived organisational trustworthiness. In doing this, the study will contribute to the theoretical models of attribution designed by Weiner (1987) and later extended by Coombs (Coombs, 1995; Coombs 2004, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2005), to broadly contribute to the theoretical understanding of the influence of and the propensity for consumers to trust organisations.

Secondly, this study will contribute to research on the impact churnalism has on the traditional role of news media and how churnalism could change the role and responsibility of public relations professionals (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950; McCoombs & Shaw, 1976; McCoombs & Shaw, 1972; Rowley & Kurpius, 2005). The messages that are reported in news media during a crisis event have the potential to influence perceived consumer trust in an organisation (Heyns & Rothmann, 2015). Research undertaken by Heyns and Rothmann (2015) identified being perceived as trustworthy, results in a likelihood for stakeholders to respond by engaging in trusting behaviours towards them which is an outcome desired by organisations. The analysis of these factors of influence is of interest to crisis researchers and managers in an environment during a time when the nature of journalism is changing and the discourse between journalists employed by news media outlets and public relations professionals is shifting (Sissons, 2016; Starkman, 2010).

Thirdly, within the framework of Weiner's attributional model (1987) which was extended by Coombs (Coombs, 1995, 2004, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2005) this study seeks to contribute to the decision-making matrix applied by public relations professionals by exploring the emergence and evolution of churnalism in news media and highlighting the relationship with perceived organisational trustworthiness by stakeholders during an organisational crisis event. Hence, crisis managers can use crisis response strategies in their attempts to shape attributions of the crisis and/or perceptions of the organisation itself.

Fourthly, in terms of managerial implications, this study will provide public relations practitioners with a greater understanding of how to embed trustworthiness in media responses during a crisis to maintain consumers' trust in the organisation in a news media environment where churnalism exists and in doing so better manage the relationship with the organisation's consumers. Practitioners need to consider if the organisation's stakeholders trust this channel. This understanding provides the opportunity for public



relations practitioners to better manage the relationship between the organisation and its consumers through the conduit of news media and build on the contribution to the understanding of discourse between journalists and public relations practitioners.

The study undertaken in this paper seeks to contribute to the practical understanding of how to communicate a message appropriate key message targeting and to the practical understanding of the relationship between churnalism, attribution of responsibility and organisational trustworthiness in the setting of an organisational crisis.

#### **1.4 Thesis Outline**

Chapter two of this thesis reviews relevant literature to establish the concept of organisational trustworthiness as a field of inquiry within the context of crisis events and the role of stakeholder relationships during these events. The established crisis attribution model (Weiner, 1987; Coombs, 1995, 2004, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2005) and related theory will be explored to establish the context for organisations in crisis and their considerations when attributing responsibility and crisis source in the context of churnalism – an evolving field of enquiry. Relevant literature on the role of organisational churnalism as an influencing factor in the trustworthiness of an organisation during crisis events is also reviewed confirming the need for an increased understanding of this concept within modern public relations practice to be established.

Chapter three outlines in detail the research methodology used for this study. The third chapter explains the overall research design and research instruments used, as well as the analysis strategy applied to determine the results in this study.

Chapter four outlines the research results in this study, addressing the relevant research questions and hypotheses for each. Each hypothesis is described in detail including the sample studied, success of the various manipulation checks for independent variables and reliability measures for the dependent variables. The strength of support for each hypothesis is established and implications for future study in this field of inquiry are identified and briefly discussed.

Chapter five brings together the relevant literature from Chapter two and the results from Chapter three to discuss the implications for the results and in doing so addresses the three research questions that guided this study. This chapter identifies and discusses the research limitations for this study and highlights the theoretical contributions. Additionally,

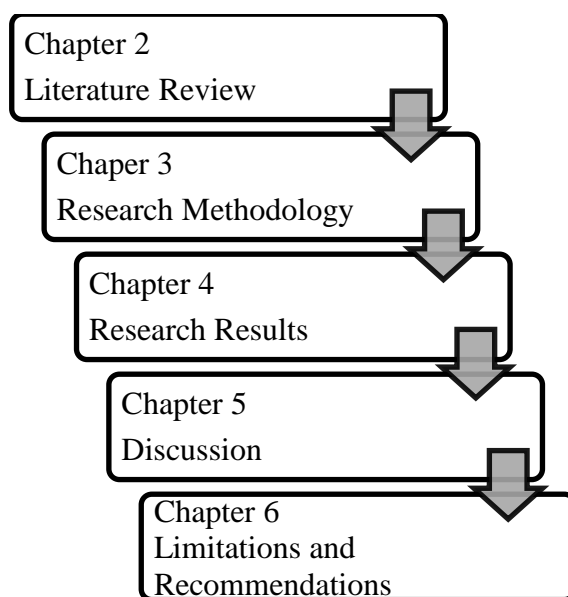
the implications for practice from the study are established and further avenues for research in the field are discussed.

Figure 1 provides an overview of this study's structure and the sequence the components of this study.

## 1.5 Summary

Significant changes in recent years, largely triggered by financial drivers and constraints, to the news media's construction of news has resulted in a shift in the processes used for sourcing and reporting of news stories and news consumption. This study furthers efforts to respond to the changing nature of journalism, how public relations practitioners interact with news journalists and how organisations engage with their consumers through news media during an issue or crisis event.

This chapter has outlined the background to this study by establishing the importance to organisations of effective crisis response models and the factors that influence their effectiveness, and highlighting the need for more research in this area. The research problem and research questions were identified and the research approach explained. The major contributions for this study have been identified while recognising the project's limitations.



*Figure 1: Overview of study's structure*

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

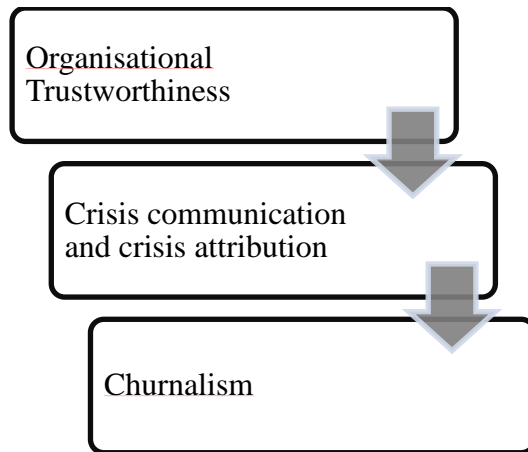
#### 2.1 Introduction

The review of the literature in this section forms the basis for the theoretical constructs and research questions that guide the methodological choices in this paper. The three key topics that are central to this study include organisational trustworthiness, crisis communication attribution and churnalism. Figure 2 provides an overview of this study's literature review structure. The key concepts of organisational trustworthiness, crisis communication attribution and churnalism are critical to the overall research problem around which this study is organised:

*How can organisations produce and/or signal trustworthiness in media responses during a crisis to maintain consumers' trust in the organisation in a news media environment where churnalism exists?*

The review and analyses of the relevant literature identifies the context in which this study sits and how the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature in these areas of study. The key concepts of the study are addressed through three research questions and in doing so presents the three hypotheses that were tested in this study.

First the review of the concept of organisational trustworthiness and the importance of this for organisations in contemporary public relations practice. Secondly the review of literature explores the field of crisis communication and crisis attribution models that have been developed to apply when responding to an organisational crisis and finally the review considers the concept of churnalism, its characteristics and its impact on contemporary public relations practice. The literature review approach is illustrated in figure 2.



*Figure 2: Overview of literature review*

## **2.2 The Concept of Organisational Trustworthiness**

Relationship theories in public relations have evolved and increased their level of practical application, complexity and sophistication since the early work of Ferguson (1984). Ferguson (1984) observed the absence of a logical unit of analysis in academic public relations journals when relationship management was discussed and examined in public relations literature. Ferguson’s (1984) study led to the conclusion that within the public relations profession there was a need to identify and define relationships as a viable unit of analysis within research studies within the public relations field.

In defining relationships within the public relations profession Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, Grunig, Repper and White (1992) extended on the findings of Ferguson (1984) by applying relationships as a unit of analysis and by including trust and credibility as additional dimensions of relationships analysed within their studies. The early research by Grunig et al., (1992) was predicated on two-way symmetrical communication which is defined as “a model of public relations that is based on research and that uses communication to manage conflict and improve understanding with strategic publics” (p. 18).

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) conducted research that examined relationship management within the public relations discipline. Their research findings identified with previous research conducted by Ferguson (1984) that explored relationship orientation by examining the characteristics of relationships with the perceptions of the parties in relationships, as well as constructs based on the reports of those in the relationships. Broom et al., (1997) observed “the formation of relationships occurs when parties have

perceptions and expectations of each other, when one or both parties need resources from the other, when one or both parties perceive mutual threats from an uncertain environment, and when there is either a legal or voluntary necessity to associate” (p. 95). As noted in these studies, trust, credibility and mutuality are important factors in relationship management within the public relations profession. The presence of these factors permits two-way symmetrical dialogue to take place and allows conversations to be undertaken with both parties understanding each other’s required outcomes from the relationship.

The research and literature examining trust contains multiple definitions that vary based on their field of application, for example, in the economic or political arenas (Seligman, 1997). What is agreed in the literature is that trust is a complex phenomenon that comprises of many subtleties centred around relationship between two entities, the trustor being the entity who trusts and the trustee who is the entity being trusted (Seligman, 1997). Further studies and the identified conclusions by numerous public relations researchers have agreed that within relationships trust is multidimensional with numerous characteristics and traits that define trust as unique within relationships (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Hall, 2006; Ki & Hon, 2007; Yang, 2007).

Mayer et al., (1995) acknowledged the growing level of importance of trust for relationships organisations have with its stakeholders and identified the opportunity to further the research in this field and examine the relationship between both the trusting party and the party to be trusted. Moreover, Huang (2001) revealed that trust is a critical element between an organisation and its publics as it can mediate the effect of public relations strategies on conflict resolution. Mayer’s et al., (1995) study applied the working definition of trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (p. 712). The research examined trust and the concept of trustworthiness using the multi-dimensional definition of trust. The outcome of the study was the development of a tested model of trust of one individual for another. The study by Mayer et al., (1995) led the field as evidenced by its wide acceptance and adoption by fellow academics in numerous studies including those by Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer (1998), Wasti, Tan, Brower and Önder (2007), Ball (2009), and Gillespie (2012). Each of these studies applied Mayer’s et al., (1995) construct of trustworthiness to bridge between public relations theory and practice. (See Figure 3)

The application of Mayer's et al., (1995) construct of trustworthiness led to further work in the public relations field examining trust and organisational relationships that was undertaken by Hon et al., (1999). Hon et al., (1999) used a working definition of trust as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (p. 3) and adapted the model developed Mayer et al., (1995) to identify trust as one of six essential elements of a successful relationship between an organisation and its constituents. This study examined one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party and in doing so identified three dimensions to trust. The three dimensions included integrity, dependability and competence. The first dimension of integrity was defined by Hon et al., (1999) as the belief that an organisation was fair and just. The second dimension was dependability which was defined as the belief that an organisation will do what it says it will do (Hon et al., 1999). The third dimension was competence which was defined by Hon et al., (1999) as the belief that an organisation has the ability to do what it says it will do.

In the study, Hon et al., (1999) identified the value of relationships built by public relations practitioners had bottom line financial benefits for organisations that included reducing costs associated with litigation, regulation, legislation and lost revenue resulting from bad relationships. Hon et al., (1999) also identified for public relations practitioners managing relationships with journalists that good relationships were those in which both the journalist and the public relations practitioner reported feeling having some degree of control within the relationship meaning neither party was in control to the exclusion of the other. Within this context Hon et al., (1999) noted both parties must trust each other to help them do their job; indeed, they have a communal relationship so each helps the other even though they may get nothing in return.

Further studies exploring public relations relationship management by Huang (2001) and Hall (2006) further tested the relationship factor of trust amongst others including mutual control, commitment, and satisfaction concluding trust is one of the multidimensional characteristics that defines the strength of relationships.

While the study conducted by Ki et al., (2007) focused on relationship management by public relations practitioners in this study the findings were concentrated on determining the influence that organisational communication and other behaviours have on key publics' perceptions of their relationship with the organisation and how these perceptions affect key publics' attitudes and behaviours.

In more recent years, studies examining trust have focused on the importance of trust for organisations noting that there is an increased reliance on the need for the presence of trust to effectively maintain relationships at all levels with internal and external stakeholders (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Mollering, 2006, 2013; Spicer & Okhmatovskiy, 2015;). The findings of these studies are relevant to this study as the conclusions inform the prism for the examination of the relationship dynamic between organisations and news media outlets.

Spicer et al., (2015) built on the work of Mollering (2006, 2013) and Bachmann et al., (2013) to examine and test how actors interpret and thereby come to trust institutions. The study by Spicer et al., (2015) analysed a regulated state owned financial institution where the state was both the owner and the regulator and concluded that there are multiple means of institutional-based trust production and given this there should also be multiple paths to repair trust with the organisation. The study findings are in harmony with and extend the organisational relationship trust conclusions of Mollering (2006, 2013) and Bachmann et al., (2013) and are consistent with earlier findings that identified if actions are attributed to an actor rather than an organisation, the experience of the consumer changes in variables including trust (Hon et al., 1999; Huang, 2001; Hall, 2006; Ki et al., 2007; Yang, 2007). Organisation-public relationships that have positive long-term relationships represent the value of public relations to organisations because these relationships encourage supportive behaviours among stakeholders (Ki et al., 2007). Mollering's (2013) findings include the identification of five trusting facets expressed as a process identify a gap in the literature to explore trust as a content input for organisational responses during a crisis event.

Within this field of research Gandy (1982) observed “there are information specialists whose responsibility is to ensure that the nation’s public media carry the desired message forward to the general public” (p. 74) signalling that “more often than not, sources do the leading” (p. 116). The findings from Gandy (1982) has seen the aim of the research study that has been undertaken focus on defining trust and developing the understanding of the concept of trust for application by organisations (Watson 2005; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). A variety of approaches have been taken when defining and exploring trust as a theoretical construct including a willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party and as “one party’s level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 19).

A variety of models and concepts of trust have influenced previous research on trust examining and differentiating the factors that contribute to trust and the outcomes of trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Heyns et al., 2015). An extensive and integrated model of interpersonal trust developed by Schoorman, Mayer and Davis (2007) conceptualised trust as a multi-dimensional concept that is relational, interpersonal and context specific (Ball, 2009). The integrated model of interpersonal trust developed by Schoorman, Mayer and Davis (2007) model was one of the first of its kind to define trust as relational and as a result largely dependent on characteristics of both the trustor and the trustee within a specific relationship that carries in depth and strength over time (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). The central concept of the model developed by Schoorman et al., (2007) is trust which signifies an intention to accept vulnerability towards another, as is evidenced by the decision to trust (Schoorman et al., 2007; Heyns et al., 2015). The relationships between the condition for trust and trust as the behavioural trust outcome identified by Gillespie (2003) is illustrated in Figure 3 (Mayer et al., 1995). Based on the model and the desired behavioural trust outcome, a proper measure of trust should access the extent to which the trusting party is willing to allow the trustee to have significant influence over their life with the context of the specific event or relationship (Gillespie, 2003; Schoorman et al., 2007; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Heyns et al., 2015).

The behavioural based model identifies factors including the trustor's propensity and perception of trustee characteristics of trustworthiness such as ability, benevolence and integrity are precursors of trust (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Consequently, the importance of the need to acknowledge that the precursors of trust should be differentiated from trust itself (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007; Heyns, 2015). Several studies have demonstrated the dimensions of trust have several distinguishing characteristics with these studies testing the hypotheses that trust results from the possession of one or more universally-applicable characteristics that include trustworthiness factors of ability, benevolence and integrity and that these three qualities are presumed to be perceived by all observers (Mayer et al., 1995; Mayer et al., 1999; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Colquitt et al., 2011).

Within this three-dimensional construct of trustworthiness, ability is identified as "that group of skills, competencies and characteristics that enable a party to have influence with some specific domain" (Mayer et al., 1995 p. 717); the definition captures the trustee's capacity to contribute to the trustor's well-being (Mayer et al., 1999). Colquitt et al., (2011) identifies ability as the "can-do" component of trustworthiness. Benevolence is



described as the extent to which the party is believed to desire to do positive things for the trustor (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). Colquitt et al., (2011) signals benevolence as the “will-do” characteristic of trustworthiness with Mayer et al., (1995) aligning benevolence with behaviours including loyalty and supportiveness. Integrity is defined as “the trustor’s perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable” (Mayer et al., 1995 p. 719). Integrity is assessed on the previous behaviour and reputation of the alignment between the behaviour of the trustee and the trustor’s internal beliefs and the consistency between words and actions (Mayer et al., 1995).

The relationship between the three components of trustworthiness that include ability, benevolence, and integrity, cannot be equated to trust but rather these attributes of trustworthiness that inspire trust are very closely related since interpersonal trust cannot exist without a positive assessment of the trustee’s trustworthiness (Gillespie, 2003; Gillespie 2012; Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007; Heyns, 2015). The trust framework, which includes the attributes of trustworthiness, identified and studied by Mayer et al., (1995) and applied in studies by Mayer et al., (1999), Mayer et al., (2005), Schoorman et al., (2007), Colquitt et al., (2011), and Heyns, (2015) will be used in this study to categorise and code each news media item for the three defined dimensions of trust.

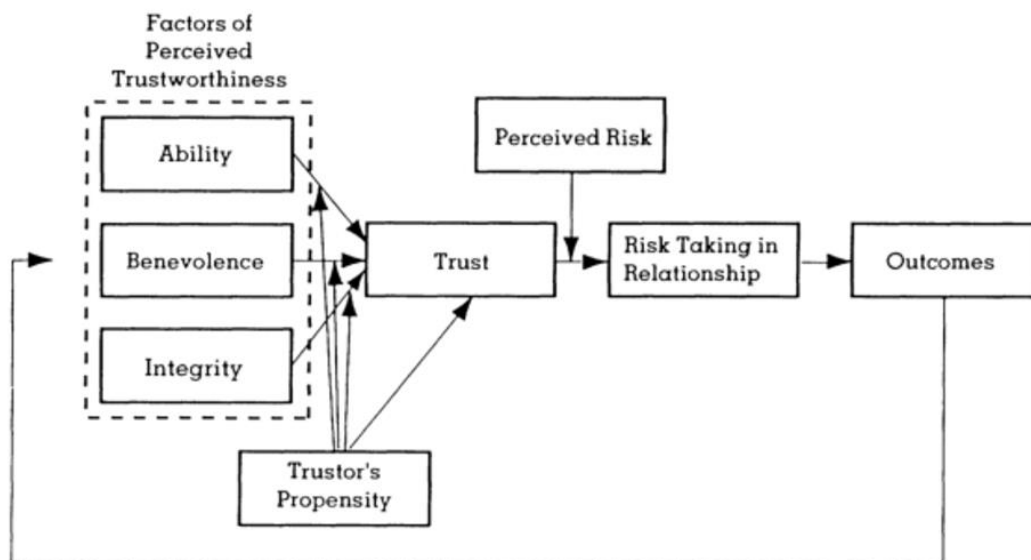


Figure 3: Integrated model of interpersonal trust  
 Source: Mayer et al., 1995

### **2.3 Crisis Communication and Crisis Attribution**

In the setting of an organisation, a crisis can be defined as an unexpected, non-routine event that creates uncertainty and threatens an organisation's priority goals (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998). A crisis can represent an actual or potential threat to the organisation (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Barton, 2000) and can impact an organisation's survival (Lerbinger, 1997). A crisis can be characterised by an event that delivers an undesirable outcome and one which could impact an organisation's appearance, reputation, publics, or services (Fearn-Banks, 2006). While noting that there is no one accepted definition of a crisis, Coombs (2012) defined a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 2).

Dowling (2002) noted, irrespective of which definition of a crisis is applied, a crisis has the potential to negatively impact the social order and the interaction between an organisation and its stakeholders. For organisations, this means a crisis has the potential to damage an organisation's reputation through reducing perceptions of trustworthiness (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) and by raising questions as to whether the organisation is compatible with the expectations of its stakeholders (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Heath, Lee & Ni, 2009).

Crises occur in most organisations at some point in their lifecycle, but regardless of when each of them has the potential to diminish the trust between the organisation and its consumers. It may be due to this that significant research has been undertaken on the topic that provides insight into how public relations professionals can prevent or repair damage to the reputation of organisations based on the traditional role of the media (Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2004).

As a function within an organisation, public relations has been the cornerstone of an organisation's relationships with its external stakeholders to establish relationships that are mutually beneficial to both parties. Cutlip, Centre and Broom (1994, p. 2) defined public relations as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. Coombs (2010) defines crisis communication as the "collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (p. 20). Applying Coombs' (2010) definition, within the context of an organisational crisis, the role of public

relations practitioners becomes critical as the survival and reputation of the organisation depends on the continued mutual beneficial relationships with its stakeholders.

Recognising the potential cost of organisational failure when managing a crisis, substantial research has been undertaken in the field of public relations that has examined crisis management. Dowling (1994) noted for organisations to protect their reputation they need to carefully consider their response to a crisis situation, highlighting the importance of not only its own view on its response but importantly the perceptions of its stakeholders. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) noted during crises, “the public seeks information to determine whether the crisis will affect them, how they should think, and what they should do” (p. 71). For organisation’s the importance of its stakeholders’ perceptions becomes their reality (Penrose, 2000) and as such “if stakeholders believe there is a crisis, the organization is in a crisis unless it can successfully persuade stakeholders it is not” (p. 99).

With the evolution of traditional news media, while the risk of a crisis may not have increased, the potential damage to an organisation from a crisis event has grown. Numerous studies have explored the topic of crisis and organisational trustworthiness and identified that traditional media were found to be critical to producing trust by verifying information, presenting information and adopting an investigative role for media consumers during a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Yioutas & Segvic, 2003; Cooper, 2002; Patel, 2007).

Coombs (2007) identified and tested how key facets of the crisis situation influence attributions about the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders. In testing his situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), Coombs noted the critical role news media play in informing most stakeholders about crises and communicating the information noting previous research by Yioutas and Segvic (2003) who found news media naturally feature certain aspects of a problem or situation in a story. Cooper (2002) noted the way the message is framed shapes how stakeholders define problems, causes of problems, attributions of responsibility and solutions to problems.

Patel (2007) examined mass media as a guardian of trust in a time of crisis exploring how the mass media report established roles of agents during a crisis, how the mass media act as a guardian of trust during a crisis and if mass media’s actions as a guardian of trust change after the crisis. This study identified the mass media acted as a guardian of trust to meet the needs of principals demonstrating the role of mass media in framing of roles and messages within a crisis.

Many of the studies that have been published on crisis communication have focused on the credibility of messages from a single source, being the organisation or entity responsible for the wrongdoing, whose reputation has been threatened (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2012).

Benoit (1997) developed his theory for public relations practitioners to use to design messages during crisis. Benoit's research examined what a corporation can say when it is faced with a crisis. Benoit (1997) based his image restoration theory on the idea that an attack, or crisis, requires two components: the figure attacked is held responsible for an action and that action is considered offensive. Benoit's approach has subsequently been applied in studies undertaken in the corporate sector (Blaney, 2002; Kinsky, Gerlich, Brock & Drumheller, 2014).

Coombs' (2012) research noted the value of crisis response guidelines to prevent or reduce the threats of a crisis and in making these decisions, organisations need to consider the anticipated reactions of their stakeholders, not just their own concerns (Coombs, 2010). Importantly, when responding during a crisis event, organisations need to consider the receiver-oriented versus sender-oriented crisis approaches (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay & Johansen, 2010). Coombs & Holladay (2007) noted with the gathering of information and stakeholder interaction with organisations, an image is conceived, but second-hand information from news, blogs, social media, word-of-mouth may also help in an organisation's reputational development in a crisis.

These studies have examined single source crisis communication approaches to managing and responding to crisis events. Within their unique frameworks Benoit (1995) and Coombs (2012) identify the importance of framing messages within crisis communication tactics to maintain trust and with an organisation's stakeholders and to mitigate organisational risk.

Anthony, Sellnow, and Millner (2013) have taken a different approach in their research examining source credibility and crisis. Anthony et al., (2013) explored the interaction of multiple messages if communicated simultaneously during crises. In the study by Anthony et al., (2013) a message convergence framework was applied as a tool to comprehend and analyse the process audiences used to simultaneously decipher pluralistic meaning from multiple sources typical of crisis events, the study participants looked for points of consistency among various sources, and some also mentioned comparing various traditional sources to discern points of overlap. Additionally, the findings of the study highlighted "the ability of the audience to continuously assess points of convergence and

their veracity as crises evolve” (Anthony et al., 2013 p. 360) indicating that convergence is a fluid state. In a practical setting, the findings of this study highlight the importance of consistent framing of organisational messages throughout crisis events to achieve message convergence when key messages communicated by multiple sources lead to a single conclusion. Anthony’s et al., (2013) conclusion has considerable strength or influence upon organisational stakeholders during crises.

Attribution of responsibility in crisis communication within the context of an organisational crisis, has been identified as one of the most important underlying elements for public relations practitioners to consider in crisis management (Sisco, 2010). Attributions are “perceptions of the causality or the perceived reasons for a particular event’s occurrence” (Weiner, 1985 p. 280). Attribution theory has been used increasingly by crisis researchers to identify, analyse and explain how stakeholders develop causal explanations for events and form impressions of organisations.

Numerous studies have identified that the attributions consumers make about crisis responsibility have affective and behavioural consequences for an organisation (Weiner, Armirkhan & Folkes 1987; Coombs et al., 2005). What has also been suggested in this field of research is that consumers need to assign responsibility for events and in doing so look for the causes of events, especially unexpected and negative events (Weiner, 1986). If stakeholders believe an organisation could control a crisis, they will also hold the organisation responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 2004).

Attribution has three dimensions that include locus, controllability and stability. Locus relates to the centricity cause of the event i.e. whether it is internal or external, controllability is the extent to which the event was the result of a controllable or uncontrollable cause and stability which reflects whether the cause of the event happens frequently (Coombs, 2004). When a crisis event occurs, stakeholders attempt to make sense of it in terms of these three factors which are shaped by information provided in the news media.

Crisis attributions are significant for organisations as they shape feelings and behaviors toward the organisation involved in the crisis (Coombs, 1995). Furthermore, when applying attribution theory, the threat of a crisis is largely a function of crisis responsibility and attribution of blame resulting in an organisation’s need to evaluate events to identify which crisis response is best for the situation in order to maintain trust (Weiner, 1986; Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2004; Tomlinson et al., 2009). Coombs (1995) noted that attribution theory “provides a framework for conceptualising crisis

management” and that “people make judgements about the causes of events based upon the dimensions of locus, stability and controllability” (p. 2).

For organisations managing a crisis the messages developed and communicated to explain the event can shape stakeholder’s attributions and the feelings created by the attributions (Weiner, 1988). Consequently, public relations practitioners need to carefully consider how they frame crisis responses in their efforts to shape attributions of the crisis and the perception and reputation of the organisation (Weiner, 1988). According to Coombs (2004) it should also be noted that “attributions of crisis responsibility are believed to intensify when there is either a history of crises or the relationships with stakeholders have been negative” (Coombs, 2004 p. 272) highlighting this variable as a consideration for organisational responses to crises.

Additional relevant causal attribution dimensions have also been identified as being useful for this study because in addition to cognitive processes in making attributions, attribution theory incorporates the role emotions play in establishing and diminishing the components of trust which are relevant to this study and to exploring the relationships within this case (Weiner, 1986; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Recognising this, public relations practitioners must consider how the components of trust can be embedded in crisis responses to maintain trustworthiness and or minimise diminished trustworthiness in an organisation.

The established crisis attribution model (Weiner, 1987; Coombs, 1995; Coombs 2004, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2005) and related theory explored to establish the context for organisations in crisis and their considerations when attributing responsibility and crisis source in the context of churnalism is an evolving field of enquiry. In this research, attribution theory will provide the theoretical framework for the analysis and discussion of evidence-based crisis communication where churnalism is evident.

## **2.4 Churnalism**

The concept of Churnalism is one that continues to emerge as further research is undertaken to study the effect it has on a broad range of topics. Davies (2009) defines churnalism as “journalists failing to perform the simple basic functions of their profession; quite unable to tell their readers the truth about what is happening on their patch; journalists who are no longer out gathering news but who are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories” (p. 59). What has

been identified and agreed in published studies is that churnalism is characterised by single source news reports as opposed to multiple source news reports which are considered foundational in the field of journalism (Davies, 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen 2009; Jackson & Moloney, 2015).

Churnalism as a concept has evolved from observational work practices with the trend of journalists going out less to investigate stories and relying more on external sources such as press releases for their information noted (Davies, 2009). Incorporating content from media releases and other material supplied by public relations practitioners into the news media by journalists is not a new phenomenon, however the noticeable change in practice is in the scale and frequency in which this is now happening (Jackson et al., 2015). The scale and scope of the modern public relations industry is such that the idealised models of the investigative journalist, independent newsgathering and the institutional role of press as the critical fourth estate are increasingly unsustainable (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009).

With the rise in churnalism comes the erosion of the role of media as gatekeeper who traditionally were responsible for filtering information to determine what material was suitable for mass publication (Davies, 2009; Lewin, 1947). The role of the news media gatekeeper is to determine which stories are allowed onto the news agenda and which are left out. This can function at several levels and will be affected by a media organisation's ownership, overall editorial policy, regulations and further down to the individual decisions of editors, sub-editors and reporters themselves (Franklin, 2009). Franklin (2009) highlighted that in practice, effective public relations professionals will seek information about who the key gatekeepers are in any given organisation, and this concept will have a role in the selection of target publications, specialist journalists or communications personnel and the crafting of key messages.

The early research and role of mass media as gatekeepers was identified and discussed more than forty years ago when McCombs and Shaw (1972) identified gatekeepers within mass media have the ability and power to force attention to certain issues. They hypothesised the agenda-setting function of the mass media based on Cohen's work (1969) who noted that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 13).

To recognise the relationship between news media and that of public relations the gatekeeper model was adapted by Kincaid in 1979. This theory became known as the convergence theory of communication, a communication model that was characterised by a cyclical, iterative process involving at least two participants. These participants are connected by sharing the same information with one another. Kincaid furthered his theory in 2002 introducing an extended model that permitted divergence and conflict as well as convergence and cooperation. A distinctive feature of the new model was the need to have a stage of mutual understanding which needed to exist to ensure each participant's trustworthiness—a factor that he noted was critical for participants to agree on a common position that they can trust each other to implement (Kincaid, 2002). Within the setting a news media environment, the convergence or narrowing of sources in news media stories is of concern for news media outlets and organisations alike as news media stories that contain multiple sources considered by some to have a greater level of creditability which can be linked to trust (Carr, Barnidge, Lee & Tsang, 2014). Butterick (2015) identified what is of more concern is that as journalists are having to produce more stories they are having to rely on a limited number of sources for content, comment and context which in its essence is resulting in a narrowing of sources for news media stories.

Research conducted by Davies (2009) reported 60 per cent of news stories in print consisted wholly or mainly of wire copy or copy provided by public relations practitioners with 70 per cent of the copy not fact-checked before it was published. The reason identified for its development is “journalists are no longer gathering news but are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories, whether a real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false” (Davies, 2009 p. 59).

Media relations is typically explained from a public relations perspective whereby communication practitioners are seeking favourable publicity for an organization and its products or services (Yoon, 2005). However, the evolution of churnalism has affected the dynamic that traditionally existed between news media outlets and organisations due to the reliance on organisations to provide content and the demand for journalists to churn copy within a news cycle that is now 24 hours. With a diminished number of journalists who have been described as having less specialist knowledge and less time to question sources and check stories Davies (2009) argues they can be easily led and at times organisations can be willing to do this. An observed trend in news media production is news media outlets often copy and paste news from each other, at times in the absence of foundational journalist practices such as fact checking (De Keyser, 2010). Franklin &



Carson (2011) noted there is evidence of news media content originating from public relations' activities which can be described as pseudo-events or information subsidies because they are "diced, sliced and packaged" (p. 50) to be consumed by instead of produced by journalists.

Jackson et al., (2015) argues that "churnalism has now become a shorthand definition for poor journalism and bad practice by modern day journalists who 'churn' or recycle news stories from PR sources and news agencies without appropriate critical investigation" (p. 766) and that in its worst form is a simple reproduction of a press release in the newspaper without any intervention or comment by the journalist. As media outlets cutback on journalism, there is a growing reliance on "information subsidies" identifying press releases, video news releases, briefings, trails, and exclusives offered by spin doctors to increasingly pressurised journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009).

In contemporary practice, government and business most commonly are the dominant communicators in an era when communication is more strategic (Bakir & Barlow, 2007). In recognising the changing news media environment and the presence of churnalism, Van Leuven's et al., (2013) examined the influence of digital technologies and cost-cutting measures in news organisations on the news access of different types of sources specifically examining the actors in the public sphere with the conclusions observing press releases are indirectly absorbed into newspapers via news agencies in a 'ladder of news sourcing' (Van Leuven et al., 2013).

Since this early work, the role and practices of public relations professionals have evolved through the diffusion of news media channels for example online news, television and social media which has aided public relations professionals when responding to crises. For modern practitioners, how an organisational crisis is framed and subsequently perceived by stakeholders is largely dependent on what information news media report and how this information that is reported is presented or framed for audiences. Coombs (2007) highlighted if a crisis situation is presented negatively, it may be almost impossible for any manager or practitioner to deflect the negativity and change the sentiment of the crisis event to positive. However, public relations practitioners cannot deny the importance of the role news media play within a crisis. Larsson (2010) described media as the "most important information path" in the event of pending crisis (p. 716).

Within this crisis frame, existing research has also examined how organisations can manage media coverage to protect themselves and if desired their competitors (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Refer & Shapiro, 2012). While numerous studies provide a congruent insight into

managing crisis communication with traditional media what these studies do not explore is the effect of the shift in media reporting that has been observed and attributed to financial drivers and constraints that has resulted in a shift in the processes used for sourcing and reporting of news stories and news consumption (Giles, 2010; Hanusch, 2015; Yuan, 2011).

Within the context of news media, trust can be considered a critical variable. For organisations the loss of trust is an issue that has been highlighted in the literature and identified that trust has been shown to support effective stakeholder relationships and within the field of public relations, once public trust has been lost it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to regain (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Dyer & Chu, 2003; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Coombs, 2004; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). While there has been recent research that has examined online news consumption and attitudes towards media reporting, the role and influence of journalism in the digital age and trust, the impact of churnalism on these responses in a crisis is yet to be examined (Brock, 2013; Lancaster et al., 2012; Page, 2013).

This study will explore how churnalism interacts with the attributions assigned by consumers for a crisis or issue and the trust they have in the organisation. Thus, increasing understanding about this topic is important to close the gap between theory and practice. Based on the literature the following hypotheses have been developed:

*Hypothesis 1. News articles that include more than one source are portrayed to have a higher level of organisational trustworthiness than single source news articles.*

*Hypothesis 2. News articles that attribute the responsibility of wrong doing to the organisation have a higher level of portrayed organisational trustworthiness than those that don't attribute the responsibility of wrong doing to the organisation.*

*Hypothesis 3. News articles that contain multiple sources and include attribution for the wrongdoing to the organisation have a higher level of portrayed organisational trustworthiness.*

## 2.5 Summary

This review of foundational literature demonstrates the importance of the need for organisations to maintain consumers' trust during organisational crisis and the evolving nature of news media which challenges the traditional media gatekeeper framework.

The concept of organisational trustworthiness and the importance of trustworthiness for organisations in contemporary public relations practice has been explored with three components of trustworthiness; ability, benevolence, and integrity established as attributes of trustworthiness that inspire trust identified as defining the variable for operationalising trustworthiness in the study.

Secondly the review explores the extensive field of crisis communication and crisis attribution models that have been developed to apply when responding to an organisational crisis and identifies the interaction between these factors.

The review considers the concept of churnalism, the newest variable in this study, has been defined and its evolution, characteristics and impact on contemporary public relations practice discussed to bring the concepts of churnalism, crisis attribution and organisational trustworthiness together in the one study.

The empirical testing of the research questions and hypotheses drawn from these gaps will help understand how churnalism interacts with the attribution assigned by consumers for a crisis or issue and the trust they have in the organisation. The design for the testing of the presented research questions and hypotheses is outlined in the next chapter.

A review of relevant literature on the role of organisational churnalism as an influencing factor in the trustworthiness of an organisation during crisis events is also reviewed confirming the need for an increased understanding of this concept within modern practice to be established.

## CHAPTER 3

### Research Design

#### 3.1 Introduction

Based on the research purpose, a review of the relevant literature, the three research hypotheses and three research questions this study is seeking to answer, this chapter outlines the research methodology applied in this study. This study is seeking to understand how churnalism interacts with the attribution assigned by consumers for a crisis or issue and the trust they have in the organisation. The important role of media source and crisis attribution are significant for organisations as they shape feelings and behaviours toward the organisation involved in the crisis (Coombs, 1995). Firstly, a rationale for the research design is provided. This discussion provides a rationale of the selection of the positivist paradigm on which the study is based. The research strategy and specific quantitative research methods used are then outlined. Data analysis strategies are discussed to provide a framework for understanding the research findings. Strengths and limitations of the approach are recognised and presented for consideration, as well as ethical issues appropriate to the design.

#### 3.2 Methodology

This study is seeking to explore how churnalism, which is characterised as single source news reporting, presents in news media articles during a crisis and to identify the relationship between responsibility and trustworthiness in news media reports. This thesis applies Coomb's attribution theory (1995) and uses the model of interpersonal trust developed by Mayer et al., (1995) to operationalise trustworthiness in the setting of an organisation's crisis event. Based on the research questions and the existing research in the areas of trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995), crisis attribution (Coombs et al., 2005; Weiner, 1986) and churnalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009; Davies, 2009) this study has adopted a quantitative approach to media content analysis, which examined one case characterised as a by a small defined group of stakeholders, involving one organisation to respond to the research questions. Quantitative content analysis is a suitable research

method to apply to understand how the variables in this study interact given it is news media reports that comprise the sample.

Content analysis of mass media and its effects through scientific study had its beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with studies by political scientists examining the effects of persuasive messages and political propaganda (Riffe, 2013; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009; Rogers, 1994; Severin & Tankard, 2000). Krippendorff (2013) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of this use” (p. 24) while Riffe et al., (2014) defines quantitative content analysis, as “the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurements rules and the analysis of relationship involving those values using statistical methods to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption” (p. 19) while Berelson’s (1952) often cited definition of content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18).

Both definitions identify this method of research involves the assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods (Neuendorf, 2002). As identified by Neuendorf (2002) content analysis summarises rather than reports all the details contained in concerning a message in the sample. This is consistent with a nomothetic approach to robust research i.e. seeking to identify generalisable conclusions from an aggregate of cases. This is particularly useful this study due to its field of enquiry and the examination of the flow and impact of messages. Neuendorf (2002) noted that one of the limitations of content analysis is the insistence that coding schemes be developed a priori to the analysis of the sample arguing this approach does not foster innovation. Given this study is not seeking to innovate but rather examine the relationship between variables to examine the relationship content analysis is an appropriate research method to apply.

The use of content analysis as a research method has been increasing in range and usage, particularly in the field of mass communication in which it has been the fastest growing technique (Neuendorf, 2002).

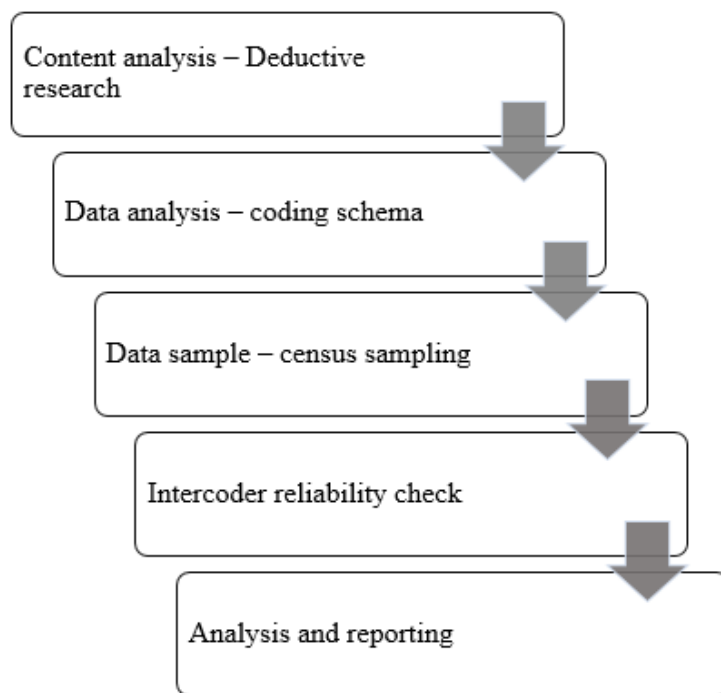
### **3.3 Research Design**

To answer the research questions within this study, a deductive research approach has been used. Deductive inferences are implied in their premises and as such a deductive research approach was applied to extend the existing understanding within this field and to enhance the understanding of the relationship between the variables in this study (Krippendorff & McNamara, 2005; Neuendorf, 2002). As the hypotheses are seeking to examine the relationship between the variables in the study, attention has been given to content as the communication artifact within the news media reports. This is particularly relevant when examining the influence of the variable churnalism.

To test the hypotheses derived from the research questions media content from news media reports was used as the primary data for analysis. An a priori design was applied that involved the list of issues and messages identified prior to undertaking the media analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). All the decisions on the variables, their measurement and coding rules were made prior to the measurement process. As noted by Neuendorf (2002) a lot of exploratory work was done before the coding scheme for this study was finalised.

The analysis of the content was both manifest and latent as the coding schema measured variables that were evident in the text, attribution and source, and the variable components of trustworthiness that were unobserved concepts (Hair et al., 2010). Early research adopting content analysis as a research method has evolved from seeking to analyse only manifest content to examining the subtler aspects of message meaning (Ahuvia, 2001).

The measurement of manifest content to assess the variables of attribution and source in this study was achieved via coder assessment. This was done by assessing the presence of the variables within the content of each news media report. The measurement of latent content to assess the three components of the dependent variable of trustworthiness in this study was achieved via multiple measures that involved the assessment of the presence of ability, benevolence and integrity defined as the three observable qualities within the multi-dimensional construct of trustworthiness in each news media article (Mayer et al., 1995). This method is consistent with the approach of Van Gorp (2007) who approached content analysis of news media coverage from the construct of news framing as latent content and is consistent with projective coding of latent content (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Figure 5 in Chapter 3 illustrates the research design applied in this study.



*Figure 4: Research Design*

### **3.4 Case background**

This study analyses the case that generated 419 news media stories that appeared in press, internet and broadcast news media in Australian news media reporting on a case with a defined group of stakeholders involving a lottery prize claim dispute between two parties involving an individual actor who is the prize claimant and a collective group of actors who are referred to as a syndicate of players. The news media reports were collated from Australian news media sources during and immediately following the event.

On Thursday May 28, 2015, a state Supreme Court ordered the organisation in the case to provide purchase details of a winning entry in a \$50 million lottery which was drawn on October 16, 2014 following a dispute over the payment of the prize to the individual actor in the case. The collective group of syndicate players suspected the individual actor within the case had claimed the prize on a ticket that they believed was a ticket that had been jointly held amongst the syndicate players. When questioned about the nature of the ownership of the ticket and the legitimacy of the prize claim, the allegation was denied by the individual actor i.e. the individual prize claimant which resulted in the generation of news media stories from May 24, 2015 to July 13, 2015 as the ownership of

the prize-winning ticket unfolded through a legal process that was played out in the Australian federal court system. Figure 4 below provides a timeline of the case and the quantity of all news media coverage, including syndicated news media articles, during the case.

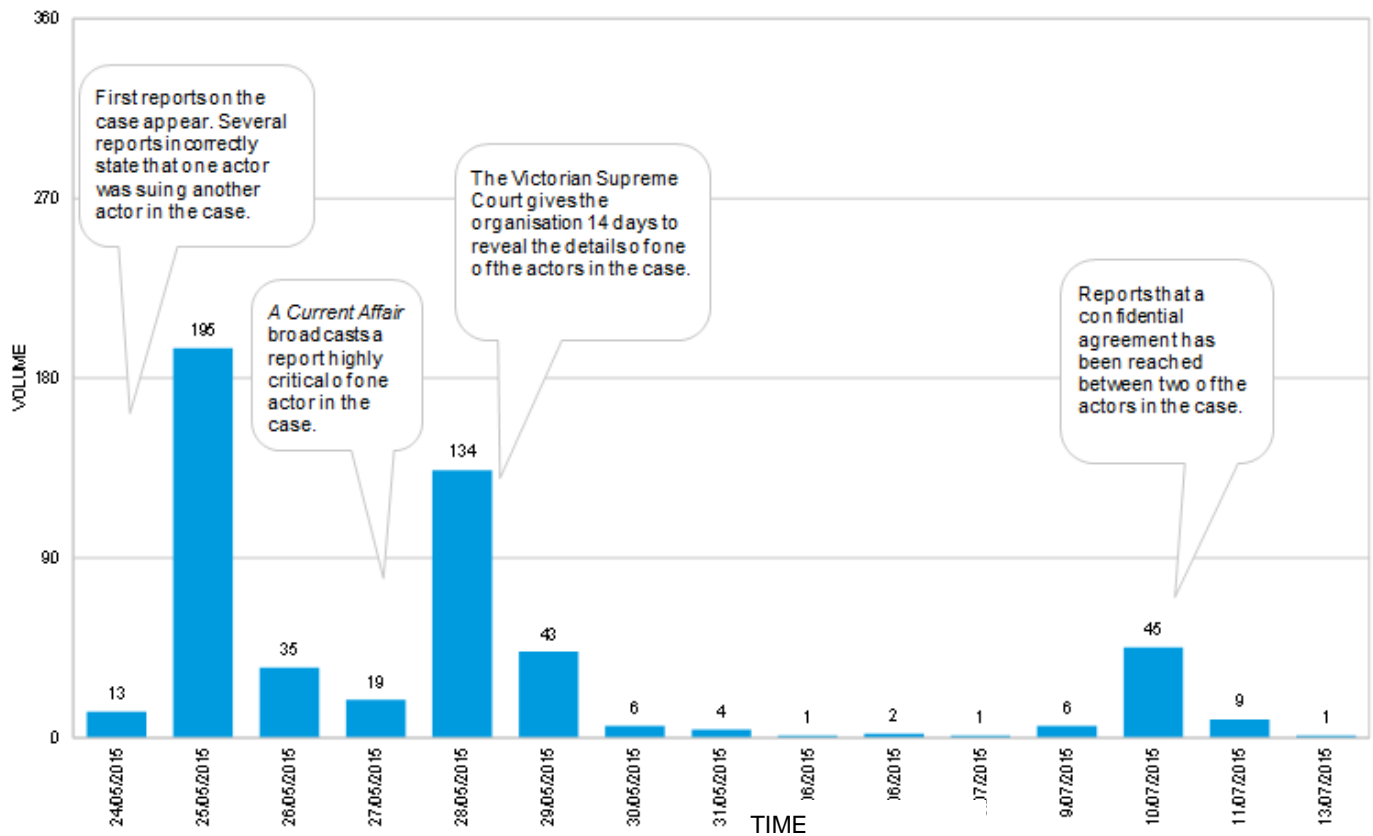


Figure 5: Case study timeline and media coverage

### 3.5 Data sample

Census sampling that included every unit in the population was adopted in the collection of the data sample with any news media content items mentioning case subject key words added to the data sample (Riffe et al., 2014). The key words included; Tatts, Tatts Lotteries, Powerball, Powerball syndicate and Powerball prize dispute. The news media reports were collated from Australian news media sources during and immediately following the event. The data sample was collected from television, online, radio and broadcast news media stories in the Australian news media market on the case involving



the prize claim dispute from May 24, 2015 to July 13, 2015. The legal dispute over payment of the winning ticket was uniquely reported in 419 news media reports that included 30 print news, 88 television news, 48 online news and 253 radio news broadcast reports. The sample did not include syndicated news media reports that involved the content being used by partner media outlets. The syndicated news media reports were excluded from the sample to ensure each data item was unique and not a replayed piece of news content. The sample size is deemed statistically significant with  $n = 419$ .

*Table 1: Unique news media report metrics*

Unique news media report metrics		
Total unique news media reports	Overall	419
	Television	88
	Online	48
	Radio	253
	Print	30

Census sampling was the most appropriate sampling method to use as the content the research is examining a particular event and to limit any sample bias (Riffe et al., 2014). In doing so, it follows the work of Jung (2002) who examined how Time and Fortune magazines covered three mergers that involved the parent corporation, Time Inc. This method of sampling was a superior approach as compared with other possible sampling methods some of which include nonprobability, convenience, purposive, probability, random or cluster sampling (Riffe et al., 2014). The use of census sampling reduced and sample errors and allowed for the maximum generalisability, validity and replicability of the study findings (Babbie, 2004). Each unique news report included in the sample was weighted equally to align with the quantitative research method applied for this study.

### **3.6 Variables**

#### **3.6.1 Trustworthiness**

The dependent variable in this study is trustworthiness and is measured in relation to the organisation that is central to the case. Several studies have demonstrated the

dimensions of trust have several distinguishing characteristics with these studies testing the hypotheses that trust results from the possession of one or more universally-applicable characteristics that include trustworthiness factors of ability, benevolence and integrity and that these three qualities are presumed to be perceived by all observers (Mayer et al., 1995; Mayer et al., 1999; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Colquitt et al., 2011). Within this study the desired behavioural trust outcome, a proper measure of trust should access the extent to which the trusting party is willing to allow the trustee to have significant influence over their life with the context of the specific event or relationship (Gillespie, 2003; Schoorman et al., 2007; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Heyns et al., 2015).

News media outlets frame or portray stories and influence perceptions of trustworthiness through the use of language selection, inclusion and hierarchy of information presented and which organisation or spokesperson is positioned as the subject matter authority within the news article (Zavyalova et al., 2012). Factors such as these can have significant impact on the assessment of ability, benevolence and integrity of each news article.

Trustworthiness was applied in this study using Mayer's et al., (1999) definition that identified trustworthiness as a predictor for trust as having several distinguishing characteristics that include ability, benevolence and integrity.

### **3.6.2 Attribution**

One of the two independent variables in the study is crisis attribution (attribution). Weiner (2008) identified that according to attribution theory people try to determine and interpret causes to an event or behaviour.

Coombs (2007) identified and tested how key facets of the crisis situation influence attributions about the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders. In testing his situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), Coombs noted the critical role news media play in informing most stakeholders about crises and communicating the information noting previous research by Yioutas and Segvic (2003) who found news media naturally feature certain aspects of a problem or situation in a story. Cooper (2002) noted the way the message is framed shapes how stakeholders define problems, causes of problems, attributions of responsibility and solutions to problems.

In this study news media articles attributed responsibility to the organisation, the prize claimant actor or the syndicate group of actors. For example, some news media

reports suggested the lottery organisation was responsible for guaranteeing the winnings are paid to the lawful winner while a number of opinion news media writers and radio talkback callers suggested the syndicate group of actors should have insisted on registering or recording the syndicate or at least have gotten copies of the lottery ticket.

### **3.6.3 Source**

The second of the two independent variables in the study is source. Source has been used to operationalise churnalism within this study as what has been identified and agreed in published studies is that churnalism is characterised by single source news reports as opposed to multiple source news reports which are considered foundational in the field of journalism (Davies, 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen 2009; Jackson & Moloney, 2015).

Davies (2009) defines churnalism as “journalists failing to perform the simple basic functions of their profession; quite unable to tell their readers the truth about what is happening on their patch; journalists who are no longer out gathering news but who are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories” (p. 59). News media stories that contain multiple sources are also considered to have a greater level of creditability which can be linked to trustworthiness (Carr et al., 2014).

### **3.7 Data analysis**

To test the hypotheses, the unit of analysis that was used for this study was one article with codes applied to measure each variable within each article (Riffe, 2013). The total sample of 419 news media articles from all news mediums were analysed that ranged from print newspaper articles, to radio news broadcast stories and television current affairs news reports. All news media articles were weighted equally.

Trustworthiness was operationalised using three of the seven factor predictors of trustworthiness identified by Mayer et al., (1999) that include ability, benevolence, and integrity. Mayer et al., (1999) identified that trustworthiness is affected by these three factors of trustworthiness that have a direct impact on trust itself. As this study is seeking to evaluate trustworthiness in an organisation Mayer’s et al., (1999) model of trustworthiness provides a robust framework for this study. Based on the case being examined in this study the coding of the measures of ability, benevolence, and integrity

were operationalised to reflect the focus on the evaluation of trustworthiness in the organisation.

For each of these trustworthiness factors, the items that most clearly reflected each theoretical dimension was defined and a coding scale developed for each item (Neuendorf, 2002). Table 2 in Chapter 3 and Table 3 in Chapter 3 present the trustworthiness descriptions and coding that was applied for each of the factors. Prior to conducting the data analysis, a composite variable, total trustworthiness, was calculated in SPSS by averaging the trustworthiness items to create a single variable to summarise trustworthiness as the dependent variable of interest in this study (Hair, 2010). Cronbach's alpha was calculated to measure the internal consistency of the composite variable. Table 4 in Chapter 4 reports these results with trustworthiness  $\alpha$  reported at 0.96 indicating strong internal consistency.

Because the first two hypotheses examine the relatedness between the independent variables, source and attribution, and the dependent variable, trustworthiness, a correlation was performed between the nominal data to identify and then describe the type and strength of association between the variables (Riffe et al., 2014). A correlation is deemed an appropriate measure to identify the direction and strength of the relatedness between these variables because it is the nature of the relationship that is being explored and correlation results indicate when two variables are strongly or weakly related to each other (Riffe et al., 2014; Hair, 2010).

To test the hypothesis; News articles that contain multiple sources and include attribution for the wrongdoing to the organisation have a higher level of perceived organisational trustworthiness a linear regression was conducted to ascertain if source type and responsibility attribution had a relationship with total trustworthiness by analysing the  $\beta$  values of the predictors in the presence of the hypothesised interaction (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, 2013). The regression allows for an assessment of the nature of the linear relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable in this study. The regression is a suitable analysis as it indicates how, for every unit increase in source and responsibility attribution, the dependent variable, total trustworthiness, will have some specified change in its unit of measure (Riffe et al., 2014).

Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 18) and for this reason and to ensure inter-coder reliability was applied to minimise individual subjectivity and increase internal consistency. Tinsley and Weiss

(1975, 2000) note that the more specific term for the type of consistency required in content analysis is inter-coder (or interrater) agreement.

Inter-coder reliability was applied to minimise individual subjectivity and increase internal consistency. A randomised sample of 10 per cent of the 419 items were cross coded with a Krippendorff's alpha (KALPHA) = .85 which is an acceptable level of reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002).

Table 2: Coding descriptions and examples

Study Variable	Definition of Variable	Study Operationalisation of Variable
Ability	Inclusion of information in the news media article about the ability of the organisation's skills, competencies, and characteristics that allow the entity to have influence within some domain. (Mayer et al., 1999)	<p>No evidence of ability. For example members of a Victorian Powerball syndicate are taking Tattersalls Sweeps to court, alleging a former colleague kept \$16.6m lottery win to himself. This example evidences the organisation demonstrated no ability to correctly pay the prize leaving the syndicate no option but to take legal action.</p> <p>Some evidence of ability. For example Goldman says Tattersalls sweeps was ordered to hand over the name of the person who purchased the ticket. This example evidences the organisation demonstrated some ability to correctly pay the prize as they were able to provide some details related to correctly paying the prize.</p> <p>Significant evidence of ability. The organisation confirms they can prove the correct winner has been paid by producing its records relating to the winning entry. This example evidences the organisation demonstrated significant ability to correctly pay the prize as they were able to provide all the details related to correctly paying the prize.</p>
Benevolence	Inclusion of information about the extent to which the organisation is believed to desire to do positive things for the trustor (Mayer et al., 1999).	<p>No evidence of benevolence. A Geelong worker's mates claim his Powerball winning ticket was part of a syndicate and will take it to court on Thursday. This example shows the organisation provided no demonstrated evidence or desire to do positive things for the trustor.</p> <p>Some evidence of benevolence. For example The syndicate hope Tatts Lotto will reveal all about the winning ticket. This example shows the organisation provided some demonstrated evidence or desire to do positive things for the trustor.</p> <p>Significant evidence of benevolence. For example Tattersalls have released a statement saying they will pay the owner the prize and will abide by any court</p>

		order. This example shows the organisation provided significant demonstrated evidence or desire to do positive things for the trustor.
Integrity	Phrasing of information about the previous behaviour and reputation of the alignment between the behaviour of the trustee and the trustor's internal beliefs and the consistency between words and actions (Mayer et al., 1999).	<p>No evidence of integrity by organisation. For example an angry Lotto syndicate of 16 Victorian workers is going to the Supreme Court with allegations the worker they had entrusted with buying their ticket has done a runner with the winnings of over \$16m. This example shows no demonstrated evidence of integrity by the organisation.</p> <p>Some evidence of integrity. For example Carlton says that there is an issue with a Powerball syndicate today, saying that there are suggestions that a member of a syndicate scarpereed with cash from a really big win. Carlton says that Tattersalls is investigating. This example shows some demonstrated evidence of integrity by the organisation.</p> <p>Significant evidence of integrity. For example the legal team for Geelong's Powerball 14 has received Tatts records relating to the controversial \$16.7 million windfall. This example shows significant demonstrated evidence of integrity by the organisation.</p>
Attribution	Enhancement of information to frame or attribute blame to any of the actors in the story i.e. who is responsible for causing the prize dispute the organisation or someone else Coombs (2007).	<p>Blame is attributed to someone other than the organisation or no attribution of blame is evident. For example a syndicate of transport workers believe one of their members may have kept a \$16.7m win for himself. This example demonstrates blame has been attributed to someone other than the organisation.</p> <p>Blame is attributed to the organisation. For example Tattersalls is being taken to court by members of a Victorian syndicate over a large lotto pay-out. This example demonstrates blame has been attributed to the organisation as legal action is required to remedy the situation.</p>
Source	Inclusion of single or multiple sources used by the journalist in the news media article (Jackson & Moloney, 2015).	The organisation or a single source other than the organisation is used by the journalist as the single source in the news media article. For example, Tatts says it would be inappropriate to comment as the matter is subject to court proceedings. This example demonstrates the use of the organisation as the single source of information used by the journalist in the news media article. For

		<p>example, the former workmates of a man who pocketed millions from a Lotto win have broken their silence as the case returns to court. This example demonstrates the use of a single source other than the organisation used by the journalist in the news media article.</p> <p>Multiple sources one of which is the organisation or multiple sources both of which are not the organisation are used used by the journalist in the news media article. For example, the Geelong Powerball winner says he bought two tickets, but his work friends say they believe the \$16.7m was part of a syndicate and will take it to court on Thursday. Tatts Lottery says it would be inappropriate to comment as the matter is subject to court proceedings however it will abide by any court order. This example demonstrates the use of multiple sources of information used by the journalist in the news media article one of which is the organisation. For example, discussion with Melissa Overman, Lifestyle Editor, News.com.au and Darren Curtis, Nine Reporter. The Daily Mail reports the Powerball winner, accused of ripping \$16.6m off his workmates, is making headlines today, saying he will buy his syndicate one beer to make good. This example demonstrates the use of multiple sources of information used by the journalist in the news media article none of which are the organisation.</p>
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*Table 3: Coding categories*

Study Variable	Coding Applied
Ability of organisation (Mayer et al., 1999)	0 = no evidence of ability of displayed by organisation 1 = some evidence of ability displayed by organisation 2 = significant evidence of ability displayed by organisation
Benevolence of organisation (Mayer et al., 1999)	0 = no evidence of benevolence displayed by organisation 1 = some evidence of benevolence displayed by organisation 2 = significant evidence of benevolence displayed by organisation
Integrity of organisation (Mayer et al., 1999)	0 = no evidence of integrity displayed by organisation 1 = some evidence of integrity displayed by organisation 2 = significant evidence of integrity displayed by organisation
Attribution (Coombs, 2007)	0 = blame attributed to someone other than the organisation or no attribution evident 1 = blame attributed to the organisation
Source (Jackson & Moloney, 2015)	0 = organisation used as the single source by the journalist or single source other than organisation is used by the journalist in the news media article 1 = multiple sources used by the journalist in the news media article. One of which is the organisation or both of which are not the organisation

### **3.7 Limitations of Research**

In responding to the research problem that is central to this study, there are a number of limitations that have been identified. Where possible, these have been controlled for in the research design, however others are inherent in the design and are noted in analysing the data.

For content analysis to be used effectively, it is critical the rules of good science are adhered to in order to produce a rigorous study that is valid, generalisable and replicable. To ensure the adherence to these principles census sampling was applied to control for sampling errors to ensure the generalisability and replicability of the study. To ensure validity of the variables under study a robust coding was developed and adhered to and while human coding was used inter-coder reliability measures were recorded.

The case used in this study is a low involvement case with a discrete number of stakeholders which due to its nature may produce a result that is not as amplified when compared to a case that elicited a higher degree of polarisation.

The possibility of a composite variable (Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008) also limits the study's findings (Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008). As one variable, trustworthiness, is complex and involves three factors a composite variable was created in SPSS which could limit the generalisability of the study.

### **3.8 Ethical Consideration**

The research process of this study is consistent with the policy of Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Within the scope of QUT's ethics policy, ethics approval is required only for projects or studies involving humans. As this study has used news media stories as its sample that are available via open public source there is no impact on human participation.

### **3.9 Summary**

To explore how churnalism presents in news media articles during a crisis and identify the relationship between responsibility and trustworthiness in news media reports this thesis applies a quantitative approach to analyse the content of 419 news media stories in press, internet and broadcast news media for the case of a lottery prize claim dispute. A coding schema was defined including coding descriptions and examples for coders and coding categories. The next chapter presents the research results and discusses these findings in context to the research questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### Research Results

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on the results from this study that address the three research questions as identified in Chapter 1 that explore how churnalism, which is characterised as single source reporting, presents in news media articles during a crisis and identify the relationship between responsibility and trust in news media reports. The statistical results are outlined and reported in this chapter. The independent and dependent variables used in the study are presented. The results of hypothesis testing through the use of statistical analysis are outlined. Support for the hypotheses is discussed where appropriate and forms the basis for the further analysis and discussion of the research questions in Chapter 5.

#### 4.2 Research Results

The results explore the effect of message source, single or multiple, on organisational trust and attribution of responsibility to the organisation or not to the organisation. Descriptive statistics were run in SPSS version 24 to assess each variable in the study.

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to measure the internal consistency of the composite variable. Table 4 reports these results with trustworthiness  $\alpha$  reported at 0.96 indicating strong internal consistency.

*Table 4: Cronbachs's Alpha results*

	Cronbach's Alpha
Integrity	.95
Benevolence	.96
Ability	.91
Total trustworthiness	.96

To address hypothesis 1, a correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between the message source included in each article and trustworthiness. The results showed there was a positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .33$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .00$ . The correlation result shows a relationship between the message source in an article and the dependent variable trustworthiness. The correlation result signals message source positively effects the portrayed trustworthiness in the organisation reflecting the relationship between the source, the journalists and the information reported in news media stories.

While source showed a significant correlation with the trustworthiness variable, the three factors of trustworthiness that include integrity, benevolence and ability were examined to identify if one of the three factors had an influence on the overall relationship with message source. The correlation to assess the relationship between message source and integrity showed there was a positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .34$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .00$ . The second component of trustworthiness, benevolence, reported a significant correlation between the two variables,  $r = .22$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .00$ . The correlation to assess the relationship between message source and ability showed there was a positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .31$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .00$ . Based on the correlation results hypothesis 1 is accepted.

To assess hypothesis 2, a correlation was conducted in SPSS to assess the relationship between attribution of blame for the event and trustworthiness. The results of this correlation showed there was no significant effect between the two variables,  $r = .03$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .50$ . The correlation result shows no relationship between news media articles that attribute responsibility for the event to the organisation and the level of portrayed trustworthiness in the organisation. No significant effects were found for the correlation of attribution and the calculated collective variable of trustworthiness. The three factors of trustworthiness that include integrity, benevolence and ability were examined in an effort to identify if one of the three factors had any influence on the overall relationship with attribution of blame. The correlation to assess the relationship between attribution included in each article and integrity showed there was a nonsignificant correlation between the two variables,  $r = .027$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .58$ . No significant effects were found between the second component of trustworthiness and benevolence,  $r = .03$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .57$ . The correlation to assess the relationship between attribution included in each article and ability showed there was a nonsignificant correlation between the two variables,  $r = .03$ ,  $n = 419$ ,  $p = .60$ . Thus hypothesis 2 that seeks to identify the relationship between attribution of blame and

the portrayal of organisational trustworthiness receives no statistical support thus hypothesis 2 is rejected.

To respond to hypothesis 3, a standard multiple regression was calculated to predict if there is an effect of both message source x attribution on trustworthiness (Neuendorf, 2002). Table 6 presents the test of this combined variable. No significant effects were found for the correlation. The regression equation reported  $F = 16.00$ ,  $p < .00$ , with an adjusted  $R^2$  of .04.

Four statistical assumptions were checked to confirm the output regression (Hair, 2010). These included normality, linearity, homoscedasticity and independence. To assess normality the standardised residual appear normally distributed. The relationship between the independent variables of source and attribution and the dependent variable trustworthiness are linear confirming linearity. A scatterplot was generated to assess and confirm homoscedasticity and to check independence a simple scatter was generated.

The coefficients indicate the combined variable of message source x attribution are not significantly related to trustworthiness  $p = .00$ . Hypothesis 3 is rejected as the combined variable of message source x attribution do not statistically demonstrate a predictive value on portrayed trustworthiness (Riffe et al., 2014). The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is 1.0 for source and attribution indicating no collinearity problems (Hair, 2010). Eigenvalues are  $= < .05$  with condition index 10.11 indicating there is no significant linear dependency between the combined variable under study and portrayed organisational trustworthiness. The model shows no significant statistical predictive value thus hypothesis 3 is rejected.

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables in this study.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among source, attribution, integrity, benevolence, Ability, total trustworthiness and source + attribution

	Mean	SD	Source	Attribution	Integrity	Benevolence	Ability	Total trustworthiness
Source	.08	.27						
Attribution	.99	.49	.02					
Integrity	.31	.57	.35*	.03				
Benevolence	.24	.43	.22*	.03	.87*			
Ability	.28	.53	.31*	.03	.92*	.92*		
Total trustworthiness	.29	.54	.33*	.03	.97*	.93*	.99*	
Source x Attribution	2.10	.42	.99*	.13*	.21*	.11*	.18*	.19*

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Correlations for the three factors of trustworthiness, integrity, benevolence and ability are included in addition to the correlations for the calculated variable total trustworthiness and the combined variable source x attribution. The correlations presented in Table 5 will be used to discuss the effect of message source on trustworthiness and the effect of attribution on organisational trustworthiness (RQ 1 and RQ 2[Riffe et al., 2014]).

Figure 6 presents the modelling coefficients for the regression model that examined the predictiveness of source x attribution on trustworthiness (Neuendorf, 2002). The model results in Table 6 will be used to interpret the relatedness of message source and attribution on organisational trustworthiness (RQ 3 [Riffe et al. 2014]).

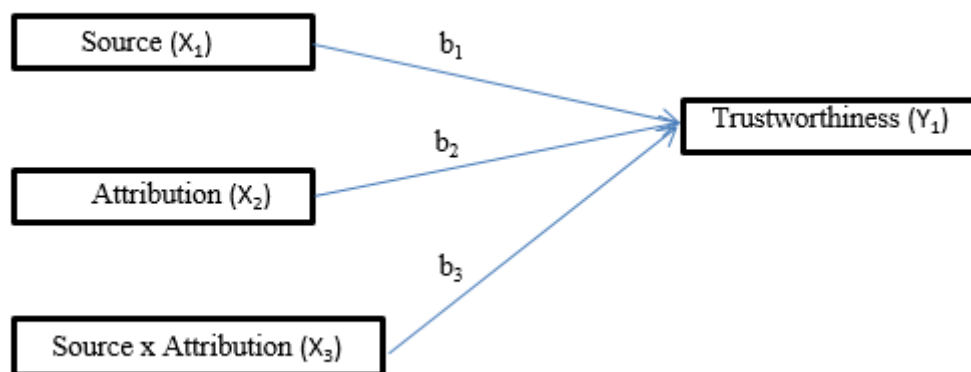


Figure 6: Regression model

*Table 6: Regression model coefficients*

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>	VIF	Eigenvalue
Source	.65	.00	1.00	.85
Attribution	.24	.63	1.00	.01
Source x Attribution	.24	.00	1.00	.02

### **4.3 Summary**

Chapter 4 has outlined the results from this study which are focussed on exploring how churnalism, which is characterised as single source reporting, presents in news media articles during an organisational crisis and identify the relationship between responsibility and trustworthiness in news media reports. The three research questions have been addressed and the support for the related hypotheses identified. The next chapter discusses the results in context to the research questions in this study.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion, Limitations and Recommendations

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the research conclusions for this study based on the research problem outlined in Chapter 1. The discussion draws on the research results presented in Chapter 4 and the literature used to inform this study from Chapter 2.

This study applied a quantitative content analysis to explore how churnalism, which is characterised as single source reporting, presents in news media articles during a crisis to identify the relationship between responsibility and trustworthiness in news media reports. Coombs' attribution theory (1995) and the integrated model of interpersonal trust developed by Mayer et al., (1995) were applied to examine an organisation's crisis scenario. The key aim of the study was to explore how the changing nature of journalism informs how public relations practitioners interact with news journalists and how organisations engage with their consumers through news media during a crisis event.

This chapter takes the key findings from the content analysis to explore the relationship between the variables in this study and discusses how these findings contribute to the understanding of the influence churnalism has on organisational trustworthiness. In discussing the findings this chapter responds to the three research questions and identifies significant relationship between the variables in this study.

Finally, this chapter identifies and discusses the implications for practice from the study and highlights the theoretical contributions. Additionally, the research limitations for this study are identified and further avenues for research in the field are discussed.

#### 5.2 The research problem

The study was designed around the research problem of:

*How can organisations produce and/or signal trustworthiness in media responses during a crisis to maintain consumers' trust in the organisation in a news media environment where churnalism exists?*



The findings offered support for one of the three hypothesised relationships between the variables in this study. The association between message source and trustworthiness was positively correlated with an increase in the number of sources in an article resulting in an increase in the level of portrayed organisational trustworthiness while the results that explored the relationship between attribution of blame and trustworthiness showed that if responsibility of wrong doing is attributed within a news media item the level of perceived organisational trustworthiness was not significant. Together, these findings addressed the three research questions.

### **5.2.1 Is the message source included in news media coverage of an organisational crisis related to organisational trustworthiness?**

The introduction of churnalism in news media reporting has changed the role of journalists and the relationship dynamic between news media journalists and public relations practitioners. Numerous studies have identified that traditional media were found to be critical to producing trust by verifying information, presenting information and adopting an investigative role for media consumers during a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Yioutas & Segvic, 2003; Cooper, 2002; Patel, 2007) while the work by Davies (2009) highlighted that journalists now churn out stories by passively processing whatever material comes their way. In the setting of an organisational crisis the ability for an organisation to embed messages of trustworthiness when telling their side of the story in a news media where churnalism exists and the content is passively repurposed.

The results of the study showed evidence for a positive correlation between message source, the calculated trustworthiness variable and the three factors that combine for the measure of total trust. This result and the acceptance of hypothesis 1 was expected based on the findings of Benoit (1995) and Coombs (2012) and the empirical reports of Davies (2009). A possible explanation for the strength of this finding may lie in the fact that the growing trend in media, which is characterised by single source articles, and the changes in the media landscape have also changed the way people find meaning and react to information in articles (Davies, 2009; Anthony et al., 2013). In this study this was evident with the majority of the news media reports presenting or reprinting the content as included in the organisation's media response statement provided to news outlets. These reports were churned through numerous news stories and bulletins throughout the duration of the crisis event to convey and reinforce the message that the organisation operated lawfully

and acted with integrity. The organisation's key messages remained consistent during the crisis event which could have contributed to the significance of the findings. Additionally, as the sample used in the study did not present distinct arguments, although it was not tested for, some message convergence effect could be present (Anthony et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2004).

Of note was of the three factors of trustworthiness, integrity accounted for the characteristic that had the strongest relationship with source. The result could be explained by the perceived trust in journalist's assessment of the information reported within the context of the crisis event as identified by Kohring et al., (2007).

### **5.2.2 Is attribution of blame for a crisis event included in news media coverage of an organisational crisis related to organisational trustworthiness?**

As traditional news media has changed throughout the past decades the potential damage to an organisation from a crisis event has evolved. Numerous studies have examined and reported results that demonstrate traditional news media are critical to producing trust by verifying information, presenting information and adopting an investigative role for media consumers during a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Yioutas & Segvic, 2003; Cooper, 2002; Patel, 2007). Within this study, there was no significant effect evident between attribution and trustworthiness. This result signals that if responsibility of wrongdoing is attributed to one of the stakeholders within a news media article there is no effect on the level of organisational trustworthiness. While the result reported was not significant, several previous studies on attribution by Weiner (1985, 2008), Weiner et al., (1987, 1991) and Coombs (2007) have reported an outcome contrary to the results found in this study. The variance in results could be attributed to the assignment of responsibility in the media responses provided by the organisation which was particularly evident in the segment on a broadcast current affair show with the report demonstrating bias toward the actor who was the holder of the winning lottery ticket and which was consistent with the organisation's media response. Evidence of churnalism or the repeated attribution statements by the organisation could have contributed to the nonsignificant result as the news media reports did not have the information or content to present an alternate. In particular there were televised news reports that used vision of a confrontation between the holder of the winning ticket and two other actors who were claiming they should receive a

share of the lottery prize as its centrepiece. The segment highlighted the socioeconomic status of the two actors, noting the positive difference the lottery prize money would have on their financial circumstances. Of the three factors of trustworthiness correlated, the association with each of the attributes ability, benevolence and integrity were of relative weight signalling equilibrium of the relationship between the three attributes of trustworthiness when correlated with attribution.

Research reported by Dowling (1994) noted for organisations to protect their reputation they need to carefully consider their response to a crisis situation. Of note Dowling (1994) highlighted the importance of not only its own view on its response but importantly the perceptions of its stakeholders. For organisation's responding to a crisis event, the importance of its stakeholders is critical as their perceptions become their reality (Penrose, 2000).

### **5.2.3 Are message source and attribution of blame for a crisis event included in news media coverage related to organisational trustworthiness?**

Work published by Coombs (2007) reported how key elements of a crisis situation influence attributions about the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders noting the critical role news media play in informing most stakeholders about crises and communicating the information. To ensure news media reports are salient for consumers of news media, certain aspects of a problem or situation are more commonly reported (Yioutas et al., 2003). Within this study, there was clear evidence of this reported behaviour with the event framed by news media as a brawl between former work colleagues over a Powerball prize. This scenario and the sequence of events was often reported in the news headlines as 'Powerbrawl'.

The results of the model showed no significant statistical predictive value between message source, attribution of responsibility and trustworthiness. The measure of total trustworthiness increased by 3.70% for each additional source when there was the presence of responsibility attribution within a news media report. Combined, the two independent variables had no significant interaction.

The non-significant This result could be explained by broader media trends with the shift to single source news stories which is often accompanied by syndication of news stories resulting in multiple media selection delivering the same messages (Davies, 2009; Yuan, 2010). Within this study, the presentation of content shaped how organisational

stakeholders defined the problem, determined the cause of problem, attribution of responsibility of the event and the solution to the problem. Contributing to the framing and perception of the crisis was the organisation’s communicated position on the sequence of the events and the repetition of the key messages which were both consistent throughout the timeline of the crisis and magnified by the churning of the messages across news outlets and channels. Additionally, each of the news articles attributed blame to one of the parties in the case which resulted in the portrayal of the crisis as avoidable due to the apparent evidence of wrongdoing. Figure 7 has been developed to illustrate the results of the study and the relationship between variables in the study.

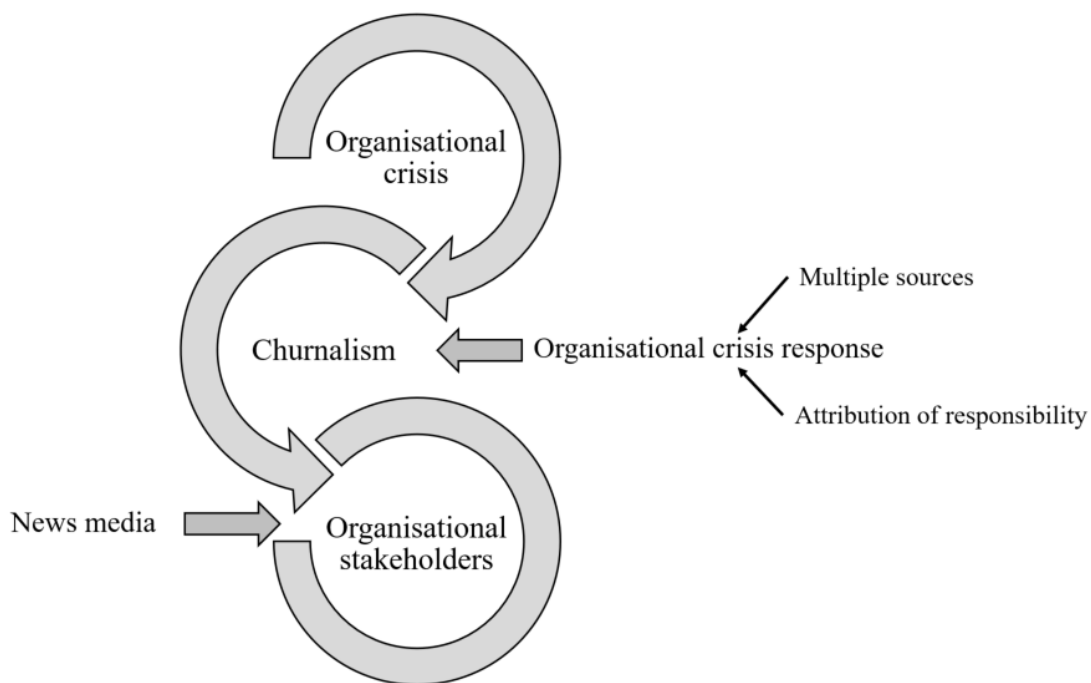


Figure 7: Results model

Reflecting on this finding, when faced with a crisis, organisations need to determine when and how they respond. The results of this study provide support for responding to a crisis event with organisational key message that embed key elements of trustworthiness and predict the needs of the journalist by including in the response information from an additional source to that of the organisation. In practice this approach would both acknowledge the existence of churnalism while assisting the journalist in their role to achieve the outcome of a news media report with a greater level of perceived organisational trustworthiness by stakeholders.

### **5.3 Implications for practice**

The findings from this study make a number of contributions to the practice area of crisis communication for public relations practitioners and progress insights into decision making factors to guide public relations practitioners' decision-making during a crisis event. Overall this thesis contributes to the practical understanding of how to embed trustworthiness in media responses during a crisis to maintain consumers' trust in the organisation in a news media environment where churnalism exists. In particular, when communicating a message appropriate targeting is the key. Practitioners need to consider if the organisation's stakeholders trust this channel. This understanding provides the opportunity for public relations practitioners to better manage the relationship between the organisation and its consumers through the conduit of news media.

Firstly, as identified by Davies (2009), Wahl-Jorgensen (2009) and Jackson et al., (2015) the news media environment has changed and will continue to adapt into the future. For public relations practitioners this has created a unique relationship dynamic with journalists as the role of a media gatekeeper has been eroded paving the way for a situation where content provided to journalists is churned into the 24-hour continuous news cycle due to the demands now placed on journalists. Further to the findings of Heyns et al., (2015) this study shows support for the influence of messages that are reported in news media during a crisis event influencing perceived consumer trustworthiness in an organisation. Thus, building on the contribution to the understanding of discourse between journalists and public relations practitioners.

Secondly, the findings of this study provide support for the evidence of churnalism in the setting of an organisational crisis and provide insight and guidance for public relations practitioners on the creation and distribution of organisational messages embedded with the three components of trustworthiness in the setting of an organisational crisis. When media statements and media releases are written and distributed during an organisational crisis event and are embedded with messages of trustworthiness, within a news environment where churnalism exists, this approach will support the organisation's trustworthiness amongst its stakeholders.

Thirdly, the way public relations practitioners communicate the attribution or responsibility for a crisis when multiple parties are involved in a crisis event influences the attribution in news media reports. As noted by Cooper (2002), the way the message is framed shapes how stakeholders define problems, causes of problems, attributions of

responsibility and solutions to problems. For public relations practitioners balancing the tension between organisational reputation, internal legal advice and trustworthiness is critical when communicating during an organisational crisis.

Fourthly, public relations practitioners should reflect on the opportunity to play the role of educator for journalists in a news media setting where churnalism is evident. As highlighted by Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger (2007) research suggests organisations should view the media as a partner in the crisis response. The findings of this study demonstrate the influence of the source on the reported components of trustworthiness of the organisation in news media reports.

#### **5.4 Theoretical contributions**

This thesis made a number of contributions. First, by applying Mayer's (1995) construct of trustworthiness to a crisis event to examine the relationship between source, attribution and trustworthiness this thesis has contributed to the understanding of the relationship between the variables of source, attribution and organisational trustworthiness in the setting of an organisational crisis and in doing so contribute to the ongoing expansion and scope of the field of crisis communication theory.

Secondly, to achieve its purpose this study builds on the existing work in this field of study to refine the understanding of the impact of the content of media responses on consumers' trust in organisations during an organisational crisis in a news media environment where churnalism exists. In particular this paper builds on the understanding of Benoit's theory for public relations practitioners to use to design messages during crisis which examined what corporations can say when faced with a crisis (1997). This study also contributes by bringing together the concepts of churnalism and crisis attribution in the one study to identify how these variables interact and impact organisational trustworthiness.

Thirdly, this study contributes to the field of research undertaken by Coombs (1995, 2004, 2007) to build on the continued evolution of the research focused on the management of communication during a crisis to refine the understanding of the relationships between the trustworthiness pillars that lead to organisational trust and attribution.

Fourthly, as there is limited research applying the concept of churnalism to the public relations profession, this thesis generates knowledge about the relationship dynamic

between journalists, organisations and their stakeholders in the setting of an organisational crisis by converging theories to contribute to a greater theoretical understanding of the application of knowledge in this field of study. In particular contributing to the understanding of the changing discourse between journalists employed by news media outlets and public relations professionals.

Fifthly, this study was designed to test multiple sources in news media articles in the setting of a real case in an environment where churnalism was identified. This is an area of study not yet explored or examined. Many of the studies that have been published on crisis communication have focused on the credibility of messages from a single source, being the organisation or entity responsible for the wrongdoing, whose reputation has been threatened (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2012). These studies have tested hypothesis for crisis events where there a single source, most commonly that of the organisation or the victim within the crisis context. Therefore, this expanded area of research is also worthy of noting for further exploration.

As a sixth contribution, this thesis builds on the theoretical understanding of how to embed trustworthiness in media responses during a crisis to maintain consumers' trust in the organisation in a news media environment where churnalism exists. In particular, in a crisis scenario where there are multiple sources. The understanding from these findings contributes to the collection of existing crisis communication research by providing preliminary insight into the influence of churnalism on the outcome of organisational trustworthiness during a crisis.

## **5.5 Research limitations**

As the nature of the case under study had a contained and clearly defined stakeholder group the strength of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables could have been muted. It is noted that this study is limited by being an analysis of a real-world case that has a low level of involvement focussing on one organisation in a niche and tightly regulated industry.

Next, this study is of an exploratory nature to identify the presence of a relationship between the variables in the study and further research is needed to test these relationships in a different scenario. Finally, one variable that wasn't included in this study was media platforms and the influence of these on news consumption (Yuan, 2010). Future research

should be conducted to address the transferability of the findings to other organisations, industries and scenarios.

The possibility of a composite variable (Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008) also limits the study's findings (Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008). As one variable, trustworthiness, is complex and involves three factors a composite variable was created in SPSS which could limit the generalisability of the study.

## **5.6 Avenues for further research**

A number of avenues for further research have been identified that build on the findings of Zavyalova et al., (2012) and Davies (2009). This thesis opens up opportunities for continued investigation of crisis communication, organisational trustworthiness and churnalism.

Firstly, further research is recommended into the role of news media on organisational crisis outcomes in an environment where churnalism is evident. Further study into this area will build on the continued evolution of the management of communication during a crisis to refine the understanding of the relationships between the trustworthiness pillars that lead to organisational trust and attribution.

Secondly, there is an opportunity to undertake additional study on the application of attribution of responsibility in media responses in a news media environment where churnalism is evident. While this study has explored this relationship in a case that is characterised as a low-level involvement case, future opportunity exists to expand the understanding in this field of study through application to a case with different characteristics and attributes.

Thirdly, as the influence of churnalism is a relationship model, organisations can learn from crisis events through acknowledging the relationship paradigm and developing crisis responses framed to deliver a best outcome for the organisation. The opportunity to test this model and evaluate the strength of the relationships between the parties or variables under study in the setting of a case with different characteristics and attributes is apparent. The results from this study could be used to inform future experimental studies to test the hypothesised interactions between the variables under study within the scope of a corporate business context.



Fourthly, as the demand for not only news, but content presented or published by news websites increases, the next step in this field of study shifts to content churn as the constant push to obtain more views and more website visits remains a key measurable for media organisations.

## 5.7 Conclusion

Chapter 5 has discussed the results of the study and drawn theoretical and practical conclusions to the research problem outlined in Chapter 1. In summary, resolving the research question has generated practical and theoretical contributions for public relations practitioners responding to an organisational crisis through the prism of news media.

Through quantitative content analysis exploring churnalism, a moderate positive relationship between responsibility and trustworthiness in news media reports. The study result provides evidence and some practical insights to how public relations practitioners can consider interacting with news journalists and to facilitate an outcome that permits organisations to engage with their consumers or stakeholders through news media during an issue or crisis event. The relationships identified between the variables in this study are illustrated in the model in figure 7.

The paper identifies how organisations can produce and/or signal trust in messages during issues and crises by exploring how churnalism presented in news media articles during a crisis and identified the relationship between responsibility and the attributes of trustworthiness in news media reports by refining the understanding of the impact of the content of media responses on consumers' trust in organisations during an organisational crisis in a news media environment where churnalism exists. A moderate predictive value between source, attribution and trustworthiness in this study provides support for the relationships between these variables. The study that has been undertaken represents an important exploration into the existing body of research in the area of crisis communication and public relations and has sought to overlay one of the practical challenges facing practitioners with the emergence of churnalism.

As the body of research applying the concept of churnalism to the public relations profession is evolving, this thesis generates knowledge about the relationship dynamic between journalists, organisations and their stakeholders in the setting of an organisational crisis by converging theories to contribute to a greater theoretical and practical understanding of the application of knowledge in this field of study.

Finally, this study of organisational trustworthiness in news media reporting in a setting where churnalism is evident represents a contribution to the existing scholarship in crisis communication and public relations. In a time of rapid change within news media, this thesis provides new insights it guides future studies to further explore and expand the knowledge and practice of organisational crisis communication.

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