

## Effect of Rational and Emotional Framing on Highly Involved Audience in Severe Crisis Situation: An Experimental Study on MH370

DAYANG AIZZA MAISHA ABANG AHMAD  
NORATIKAH MOHAMAD ASHARI  
MUS CHAIRIL SAMANI  
*Universiti Malaysia Sarawak*  
*aadamaisha@unimas.my*  
*manoratikah@unimas.my*  
*smchairil@unimas.my*

### ABSTRACT

Rational and Emotional framing is an important crisis response strategy (CRS) used by organisations in its effort to minimize damage and reputational threat of a crisis. The framing effect of a message is crucial not only in influencing the audience attitude towards the organization, but also behaviour. Using one of Malaysia's most high profiled crises MH370 as a crisis scenario, this study examines the effect of framing used by Malaysia Airlines System in its crisis communication effort on Facebook. Facebook is one of the prominent social media platforms used by organizations in time of crisis. Despite its ability to facilitate immediacy and interactivity, the messages that are spread within the dynamic setting of Facebook however could also create contradicting outcome for the organization. This present study seeks to examine the effect of rational and emotional framing from the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Cognizant to the influencing factor of audience involvement on the effect of framing, this study incorporates Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) in examining audience response towards the organization by taking into consideration audience different motivation to message processing. The convergence of SCCT and ELM has made this study significant as it advances the explication of potential crisis communication effects by underscoring the distinct effect held by rational and emotional frames on highly involved audience; especially in regards to a crisis as severe and nationally salient like MH370.

**Keywords:** *Rational and emotional framing, crisis communication, audience involvement, MH370, Facebook.*

### INTRODUCTION

A crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that could bring reputational threat to an organisation. This includes the loss of an organisation's credibility as well as physical, emotional and financial harm to its stakeholders (Argenti, 2009). Stakeholders of an organisation consist of various groups including members of the community, customers, and also victims of the crisis; each in which are also audience and recipients of an organisation's crisis response messages (CRM). As such, the term audience and stakeholders in the case of this study are interchangeably used where deemed relevant and appropriate to the context of discussion.

Social media like Facebook is one of the vital platforms used by many organisations to provide fast response to stakeholders, minimize damage and restore organisational reputation (Coombs, 2007; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013; Pang, 2014). Facebook is one of the most important communication platforms used by the public to obtain and share information, particularly details that are not reported in the mainstream media; thus,

making it an alternative yet primary avenue to learn about a crisis. Most stakeholders, particularly victims or potential victims of a crisis use the information obtained, to learn and interpret a crisis, as well as to make evaluation of the organisation involved. It is critical for an organisation to be mindful and understand the opportunities and pitfalls of communicating the information of a crisis in the dynamic and interactive setting of social media. Stakeholders who find an organisation to be unfavourable could sever links with the organisation and/or spread negative words about the organisation (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, this could potentially create contradicting outcomes for the organisation's crisis communication effort (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Like the interactive condition of the online environment, stakeholders' response could also be influenced by how the organisation's CRM is framed.

The term 'frame(s)' in the scope of this research rationalises the factors and emphasised attributes used in creating the organisation's CRM. The 'framing' effect could therefore be applied to how much the stakeholders attribute responsibility towards the organisation based on the extra attention given to the factors and attributes highlighted in the organisation's CRM (Coombs, 2007). The attention given to the CRM and the assigned responsibility towards the organisation by the stakeholders could in turn serve as motivations for their actions even after the crisis. As reputations are evaluative, this study is cognizant on the important effect of framing in influencing stakeholder's response towards the CRM. Following the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007), this study regards that stakeholder attributions of crisis responsibility have affective and behavioural consequences for an organisation. The increased attributions of a crisis responsibility among stakeholders could trigger negative affective reaction towards the organisation and can cause them to sever interaction with the organisation. This includes purchase intention and support for the organisation (Coombs, 2007).

This present study seeks to examine closely the framing effect on the affect-behavioural intention of stakeholders towards the organisation in crisis. Extending Coombs SCCT (2007), this study incorporates one of the prominent frameworks used in the study of message processing - Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, as cited in Griffin, 2012) in applying SCCT for the purpose of this research. The use of ELM allows for a more thorough approach to examining stakeholder's response by taking into consideration their different motivations to message processing in the development of hypotheses on the framing effect and crisis involvement as illustrated in Figure 1. By examining a real organisation and actual CRM particularly in the social media setting, this study adds value to experimental studies conducted in crisis communication.

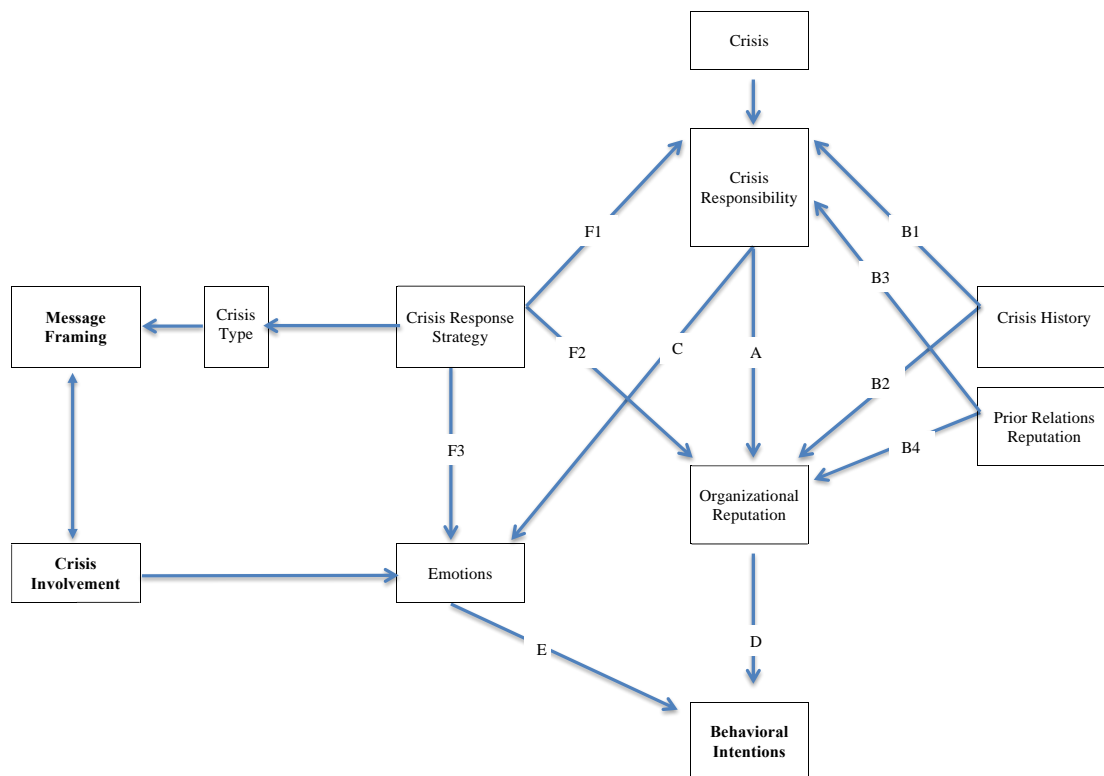


Figure 1: Application of ELM in SCCT

### THE SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

Audience response towards a crisis heavily relies on how the organisation presents the information in the message or in other words, frames a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Frames in the communication perspective involve the way (i.e. words, phrases, images) that information is presented in a message. Crisis type (CT) is also a form of frame. Each CT features certain aspects of the crisis. The cues presented in the frame thus function as indicators on how audience should interpret the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Taking into account the influence of a CT on audience interpretation of a crisis, this study is therefore interested to specifically examine the framing effect of a CRM disseminated by an organisation that undergoes a severe crisis situation.

SCCT postulates that the more responsibility that stakeholders accredit to the organisation in crisis, the more the organisational reputation suffers (Coombs, 1998). SCCT posits 12 types of crisis that are categorised in three clusters based on the degree of crisis responsibility assigned by stakeholders towards the organisation (i.e. weak, minimal, and strong attributions of crisis responsibility) as well as the degree of reputational threat the crisis has on the organisation (i.e. mild, moderate, and severe reputational threat) (Coombs, 2007). The applicability of SCCT however has since been empirically supported in a variety of crisis scenarios (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). As such, this study recognises the importance to examine SCCT empirically on a real organisation and actual CRM, particularly in the local context.

Organisations in Malaysia are not exceptional of challenging crises. This research has chosen Malaysian Airlines System (MAS) as the organisation and MH370 as the crisis under study. The tragic disappearance of Flight MH370 from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to Beijing, China on 8th March 2014 with a total of 239 passengers and crew members had implicated the organisation with the utmost reputational threat in the history of its establishment. Conversely, the MH370 crisis had affected MAS stakeholders at a large scale, both locally and internationally. Although MAS is currently known as Malaysian Airline Berhad (MAB), the organisation in the scope of this study is to be addressed as MAS, consistent with the timeline of the crisis. This study is focused on examining CRM released by MAS specifically on the day that the crisis occurred on 8th March 2014. This is to eliminate the possibility of the CRM being influenced by other external factors such as news media and other opinions made by other parties.

Using the series of propositions, key variables, and guidelines postulated by SCCT in identifying a crisis, MH370 can therefore be categorised as a severe crisis situation (Coombs, 1998, 2007). This was verified by findings reported in Noratikah Mohamad Ashari, Dayang Aizza Maisha Abang Ahmad and Mus Chairil Samani (2017). Based on the analysis conducted on CRM released by MAS, the type of crisis faced by MAS can be considered to fall within the category of highest reputational threat and in face of strong attributions of crisis responsibility.

SCCT basis to predicting audiences' attitude and behavioural response extends upon the Attribution Theory (Coombs, 2007). Attribution Theory posits that a person attributes responsibility for an event and emotional reaction to an event serves as motivations to their actions. This theory rationalises audience's reaction towards a crisis solely based on the cause of events (make attributions) especially those that are negative (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, 1986, 2006, as cited in Coombs, 2007), without taking into account the audience's different motivation and ability to process information about the crisis - audience's (i.e stakeholders) level of involvement. Taking this into consideration, this study examines the effect of audience's level of crisis involvement towards the organisation's CRM.

#### CRISIS INVOLVEMENT AND MESSAGE PROCESSING

By adopting the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, as cited in Miller, 2005) this study provides the rationale to audience's (i.e stakeholders) motivations to the forming of a "correct" response towards a certain message. The model predicts that an audience will have a particular strong motivation to process and elaborate the content of a message based on their personal relevance towards the issue. As such, audiences with high motivation towards the issue will devote a higher amount of attention to the content message than audience with low motivation (MacInnis, Rao, & Weiss, 2002). Audience with low motivation base their response on simple inference and thus puts little effort to think about issue-relevant information. They are likely to focus on non-content elements such as the emotional attributes of a message (Petty et al. 1983; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). In reference to ELM, this study suggests that the audience level of involvement towards the crisis would be determined by their motivation to engage in a thorough consideration of crisis-relevant information that the organisation presents; in which could affect how they form their attitude and behaviour towards the crisis (Petty et al., 1983).

In addition to motivation, a second necessary factor for audience's (i.e stakeholders) thorough message processing is ability. This factor highlights the importance of the audience's (i.e stakeholders) ability to critically evaluate messages, which will be influenced by individual variables (i.e. Intelligence, education, or knowledge about the issue). ELM predicts that audiences (i.e stakeholders) who have cognitively elaborated and critically evaluated the message could form a positive attitude or negative attitude towards the message depending on the how the message is elaborated (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, as cited in Griffin, 2012). In reference to ELM, this study considers high motivation and high message processing ability as criteria to defining highly involved audience. This study postulates that if CRM are 'correctly' elaborated, the highly-involved audience could likely perform a positive response towards the CRM. Nevertheless, as part of a crisis response strategy (CRS), the organisation's CRM must be suitable with the CT that it faced. If the CRM is suitable with the CT, then the stakeholder is likely to form a favourable post-crisis attitude and behaviour towards the organisation (Coombs, 2007) & Petty & Cacioppo (1981, 1986, as cited in Miller, 2005).

Findings in Noratikah Mohamad Ashari, et al. (2017) affirmed that the CRS applied by MAS was not suitable for severe crisis situation and high reputational threat. The result of analysis conducted on CRM released by MAS showed that the organisation has applied a 'diminish strategy' that was suggested suitable only for crisis with moderate reputational threat. In reference to SCCT guideline to CRS, MAS should have applied more of rebuild strategies.

The application of ELM in this study is also vital as it rationalises and grounds the experimental testing on the framing effect of organisation's CRM on audience with high involvement towards the crisis. Following ELM, this research considers highly involved stakeholders as those who devote higher amount of attention toward messages about the crisis.

#### EMOTIONAL VS RATIONAL FRAMING IN CRISIS RESPONSE MESSAGES

Taking into account the high degree of interactivity facilitated by the social media, allowing messages to be 'shared' among audience including the stakeholders could potentially create a boomerang effect for an organisation's reputation. The spread of false or incomplete information nevertheless may also form a risk, particularly because social media users often cannot distinguish between facts and rumours (Freberg, 2012). The varied response of audience could also be influenced by the message framing approach taken by the organisation in creating its CRM and the audience's different levels of involvement towards the crisis.

Rational Framing and Emotional Framing serves as a crisis communication strategy (CCM) for most organisations (Coombs, 1998). Rational Framing is grounded by information that is essential to building a strong foundation crisis response effort - Instructing Information and Adapting Information. Instructing Information are terms used to describe the information required and expected by the stakeholders to receive from the organisations, mainly to protect them from the physical threat of a crisis. An organisation's ability to provide the needed information will in turn cultivate the stakeholder's perception of the organisation's control of the crisis. For the purpose of the analysis of this study, Instruction Information is conceptualised and operationalised based on three variants: (a) the what, why, when, where, and how information about a crisis; (b) any precautionary

actions stakeholders need to take; (c) actions taken by the organisation to correct and/or end the crisis and/or to prevent a repeat of the crisis (Coombs, 1998). Stakeholders are believed to likely perceive positively and respond favourably towards organisations that know what happened and are able to advise on the next course of action and provide solution (Coombs, 1998).

On the other hand, Adapting Information functions to help stakeholders to cope with psychological threats from the crisis (e.g psychological stress that could be caused by the situation revolving around the crisis). As such, stakeholders should be supplied with information about the 'what' and 'when' of the crisis, as well as the corrective actions taken by the organisation to convince stakeholders that they are safe thus reducing their psychological threat. The final aspect of Adapting Information is that an organisation needs to express its concern toward the stakeholders; however not to the extent that can indicate admissions of guilt in regards to the crisis. Only after this part is established can the organisation focus on the CRS to protecting and restoring its reputation (Coombs, 1998, 2007).

Expressing concern builds credibility with victims and other stakeholders. Therefore, the organisation should acknowledge and show concern for stakeholders' needs (especially the direct victims of the crisis). The compassion emphasised in Adapting Information suggests the organisation credibility in turn, should facilitate the development of a favourable organisational reputation. Hence, to a certain extent may overlap with the Emotional Framing.

CCM in relation to Emotional Framing can be arrayed from helping victims (i.e. accommodative) to defending the organisation (i.e. defensive). Accommodation reflects compassion and concern for victims, whereas defensiveness lacks compassion by denying victims' needs. As such, the term Emotional Framing (and appeal) is found to have been used interchangeably with the term Compassion Framing. However, for the purpose of this study the analysis will be conducted using the term Emotional Framing. Emotional Framing refers to attributes used to appeal to the readers' emotions in the form of words that express feelings (e.g. love and sad) (Coombs, 1999). Emotional Framing is usually executed by using drama as well as subjective and evaluative properties (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2017). Messages with emotional framing appeal to individual's emotions (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005).

Framing effect not only depends on audience level of involvement towards the crisis, but also the suitability of CRS with the CT (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). The findings reported in Dayang Aizza Maisha, Noratikah Mohamad Ashari and Mus Chairil Samani (2017) on the analysis of framing used in MAS's CRM showed that the organisation has applied suitable CRS as recommended in Coombs (1998, 2007). The CRM by MAS were mainly built on Rational Framing, encompassed mostly of Instructing Information frames Dayang Aizza Maisha, et al. (2017). Based on the number of frames used and framing technique applied in responding to the crisis, it can be concluded that MAS displayed great sense of responsibility and ethics to the stakeholders by being solely devoted to serving the stakeholders' needs and interest. This is by providing important crisis-related information as well as keeping the stakeholders updated on the immediate action taken by the organisation to stay in control of the crisis. Although low in count, the number of Emotional frames in CRM, were deemed sufficient to allow the organisation to express empathy and care towards the stakeholders' needs, without being misinterpreted as organisation's admission of guilt and its degree of responsibility of crisis. Expressing too much of compassion attributes is not encouraged

especially at an early stage of crisis as it could potentially do harm to the organisation (Dayang Aizza Maisha, et al., 2017; Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 1998). MAS's emphasis on Rational Framing therefore should be able to cultivate positive response among the stakeholders and consequently contribute to favourable organisational reputation at the later stage of the crisis.

Although findings reported in Noratikah Mohamad Ashari et al. (2017) indicated that MAS was not applying the suitable CRS for its CT; however, this present study takes into account that MAS has applied the suitable CRS through the usage of appropriate framing approach and proportions of attributes in the formation of its CRM. But to further evaluate the suitability and actual effect of the CRS applied, this study concurs with Coombs (2007) on the need to examine the effect of CRS suggested in SCCT on a real case by using the crisis of MH370 as a crisis scenario. This is because, CRS in SCCT were developed from speculative conclusions drawn from past case studies; hence, the need for the present study to conduct empirical tests of hypotheses on actual audience of messages (or stakeholders of the organisation). Parallel to examining the effect of rational and emotional framing on audience in severe crisis situation, this study postulates the following:

H1: Rational message framing leads to a more positive crisis response towards the organisation than emotional message framing in the case of high crisis involvement

H2: Attitude towards an organisation is more positive than behaviour in the case of high crisis involvement

#### METHOD

In this study, a post-test only randomised experiment was conducted to test the cause-effect relationship between MAS's CRM on the audience response. The dependent variables are the audience attitude and behaviour in a highly-involved condition towards the crisis. This research focuses on actual CRM that were disseminated by MAS on their official Facebook page on the day the crisis happened (i.e 8th March 2014). Rationale to the analysis of Facebook in this study is its prominent usage by MAS as a crisis communication platform. Facebook accounts by stakeholders or third party users or unknown sources on the crisis (i.e. PrayForMH370) were not considered relevant for this research.

#### PARTICIPANTS OF STUDY

A convenience sampling of 300 undergraduate students, ranging from 19 to 27 years of age from various faculties took part in this study. The use of undergraduate students for this study was relevant to control for possible effects of education, intelligence and personal income (Pan, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, as cited in Griffin, 2012). Furthermore, to prevent any confounding effects of pre-crisis reputation, the 300 participants were screened and filtered using the criteria assigned for this study. Herein, mainly to filter participant's direct relevance, involvement, crisis history, prior-relational reputation with MAS (i.e participants in any form involved in crisis with the organisation in the past); each in which could lead participants to readily possess a negative response towards the organisation. These criteria are predicted to have a direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat posed by the crisis, which in turn intensifies participants' attributions crisis responsibility towards the organisation. Criteria assigned for the participants were also based on their usage of the social media as the primary source of information, updates, information

exchange activity; each in which are parallel and relevant to the use of social media by organisations in the context of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). Participants can either be Malaysians or of other citizenship, as long as they fit the definition of a stakeholder to the studied organisation.

After the filtering process was conducted, only 60 participants, all Malaysians, were found eligible and agreed to take part in the experimental session of this study. Sixty participants were deemed appropriate, considering the amount of sample size suggested in Roscoe (1975, as cited in Sekaran & Bougie, 2009, p.296) to attaining a successful experimental research can be as small as 10 to 20 in size.

#### EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

Sixty respondents, comprising of 18 males and 42 females took part in the experiment. Prior to the experiment, a priming procedure was conducted to manipulate the level of involvement of participants towards the crisis (i.e. knowledge towards the crisis). In this procedure, the participants were randomly assigned into two groups and were primed for high and low level of involvement (i.e HI and LI). Following Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (1981,1986, as cited in Miller, 2005), participants' degree of involvement was differentiated based on their (1) motivation and (2) ability in evaluating the crisis. This study considers that a person's involvement towards a crisis would increase their motivation to engage thoroughly in the crisis-relevant information; and in turn affect their attitude and behaviour towards the crisis (Petty et al., 1983). Also, a key factor to determining a person's ability to critically evaluate a message is ability. Herein, will be influenced by individual variables (i.e. knowledge about the issue).

Priming was only conducted to manipulate participant's level of motivation towards the issue and ability (i.e knowledge) by supplying the two groups with different depth of information about the crisis. The HI group was given more information about the crisis than the LI group. The priming material also demands the participants from both HI and LI to pay more attention when reading and processing the information supplied in the material. The material supplied were press releases containing actual crisis response messages that were presented by MAS in its official Facebook account. The press release presented to the group tested for Rational Message Frames (i.e HIR and LIR) differs from the group tested for Emotional Message Frames (i.e. HIE and LIE). The two groups were exposed to messages that were framed in a rational, objective and straightforward manner (i.e Rational Framing) while the other group were exposed with crisis response messages that were framed using drama, subjective and evaluative properties (i.e Emotional Framing). After reading the press releases, participants filled in a questionnaire containing measures for manipulation checks.

Manipulation check of the priming procedure was performed at the last stage of the experiment to ensure that the priming procedure was successful. Result of the Independent Samples T-Test test indicated that the manipulation procedure for the level of involvement between HI and LI towards the crisis was significantly different.

#### RESULTS

A manipulation check was conducted on participants' involvement towards the crisis. The independent variables were the type of message framing and the organisation in crisis. Participants' involvement towards the crisis response messages (i.e. presented in rational and emotional type of framing) as well as towards the organisation in crisis were treated as



covariates. Participants' response towards the crisis response messages, attitude and behaviour towards the organisation were dependent variables; assessed using a five-point scale in response to statements on the information presented by the organisation and on the organisation, itself. T-Test was used to obtain result of the manipulation procedure and test the hypotheses.

#### MANIPULATION CHECKS

Involvement could be a major influence in moderating the effect of message framing (Gallagher et al., 2011). Therefore, a manipulation check was conducted to confirm that the participants were different in their level of involvement towards the crisis. An Independent Sample T-Test analysis was performed to obtain result of the manipulation procedure conducted on the High Involvement (i.e HI) and Low Involvement (i.e LI) group. Results of analysis indicates that there was significant difference in scores for High Involvement (M=1.8667, SD=.34575) and Low Involvement [M=1.2333, SD=.43018];  $t(55.435) = 6.285, p=.000$ . The magnitude of the differences in the means was rather large (eta squared=0.979). Refer to Table 1.

Table 1: Priming on Level of Involvement towards Crisis

Group Statistics										
		Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean				
Involvement		HI	30	1.8667	.34575	.06312				
		LI	30	1.2333	.43018	.07854				

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Involvement	Equal variances assumed	4.117	.047	6.285	58	.000	.633	.10076	.432	.835
	Equal variances not assumed			6.285	55.435	.000	.633	.10076	.431	.835

#### TESTS OF HYPOTHESES

Based on the result of the participants' response towards the rational and emotional framing, this study has considered to include all 60 participants in the hypotheses testing. Earlier result of T-Test indicated that the mean for emotional response (M=8.8333, SD=.91287) towards the crisis response messages were higher than the rational response (M=8.5000, SD=1.10641) among the participants, regardless of their level of involvement. This means that, both lowly and highly involved were responding highly towards the emotional framing. This contradicts with the assumption postulated in ELM whereby highly

involved are more responsive towards rationally framed messages, while lowly involved will respond higher towards emotionally framed messages. Although the result of the manipulation procedure indicates that the procedure was successful in priming the participants in their level of involvement, but the response of the participants toward the emotional framing indicated otherwise. Considering the result of the later analysis, this research therefore acknowledges the need to include both highly and lowly involved participants in the experimental procedure.

H1: Rational message framing leads to a more positive post-crisis response toward the organisation than emotional message framing in the case of high crisis involvement

Two variables tested in this analysis were responses to rational messages and emotional messages. For this analysis, the responses from 60 respondents were used for this analysis. The paired sample t-test was used for the analysis with 0.05 degree of significance. The result indicates that both rational and emotional responses were highly related with Pearson score of 0.487, which is significant at 0.001. The t-value of -2.460 is significant at 0.05. Refer to Table 2. The null hypothesis could not be rejected. The analysis indicates that emotional message framing leads to more positive post-crisis response than emotional message framing.

In other words, if an organisation wants a more positive post-crisis response from their stakeholders, they should use emotional message framing and less of rational message framing. This is certainly true when the issue that is affecting the organisation is very severe and the threat to the organisation's image is grave as in the case of the missing MH370.

Table 2: Effect of Rational and Emotional Framing on Highly Involved Audience

Paired Samples Correlations		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	rationalresponse & emotionalresponse	60	.487	.000

Paired Samples Test		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	rationalresponse - emotionalresponse	-.350	1.102	.142	-.635	-.065	-2.460	59	.017

H2: Attitude towards an organisation is more positive than behaviour in the case of high crisis involvement

Two variables tested in this analysis were attitudinal and behavioural responses. The responses from 60 respondents were used for this analysis. The paired sample t-test was used for the analysis with 0.05 degree of significance. The result indicates that both attitude and behaviour responses were highly related with Pearson score of 0.622, which is significant at 0.001. The t-value of 3.052 is significant at 0.01. Refer to Table 3. The null

hypothesis was rejected. The analysis indicates that attitudinal responses are more positively related to post-crisis response than behavioural responses.

In other words, a more favourable attitude towards an organisation will lead to more favourable behaviour responses among the targeted stakeholders. An organisation should focus on their messages to construct more positive attitudes from their respective stakeholders. This will lead to a more favourable behavioural response.

Table 3: Attitude and Behaviour of Highly Involved Audience towards Organisation

<b>Paired Samples Correlations</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Correlation</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Pair 1	attituderesponse & behaviouralresponse	60	.622	.000

<b>Paired Samples Test</b>		<b>Paired Differences</b>					<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
		<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error Mean</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</b>				
					<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>			
Pair 1	attituderesponse - behaviouralresponse	.500	1.269	.164	.172	.828	3.052	59	.003

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Findings of this study contribute to the field of crisis communication research in a few aspects. First, by incorporating the framing type and the crisis involvement factor in examining CRM from the perspective of SCCT and ELM. At the same time, this study adds value to understanding the applicability of SCCT as a crisis communication theory; by testing the framework on actual crisis response messages released by real organisation in a severe crisis situation.

The first hypothesis is constructed based on the assumption that the framing of a CRM shapes how the stakeholders with high crisis involvement respond towards the message and subsequently the organisation. Highly involved audience are likely to respond positively towards the CRM and the organisation when the organisation applies rational framing by providing more information and facts about the crisis. This is because, highly involved audience are likely triggered by rational frames because it serves their cognitive appeal and allows them to further evaluate the credibility of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, as cited in Griffin, 2012; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Based on ELM, this study considers that rational frames might not attract as much attention for lowly involved audience as they tend to process the information about the crisis rather lightly or superficially (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, as cited in Griffin, 2012) and tend to focus on non-content element like the emotional frames (Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Therefore, in the case of high crisis involvement, the study expects that rational framing leads to a more positive response towards MAS's CRM than emotional framing. The result of this study however indicates otherwise. Emotional framing of MAS's CRM led to the positive response of the highly-involved stakeholders than the rational framing. This finding suggests that the impact of stakeholder's crisis involvement on the effectiveness of message framing may also depend on the salience of the crisis and/or salience of issues revolving around the crisis, as well as the emotions attached to the crisis.

McCombs (1999) suggested that an issue can be regarded as nationally salient when it creates personal motivations for concern and arouse emotion of the public towards the issue. Given that MH370 is not a fictitious crisis but an actual nationally-salient crisis in Malaysia, the emphasis and nature of the crisis had explicitly aroused the highly-involved audience's emotions towards the crisis. This could be due to the various effects of issues revolving around the crisis (i.e., the speed of information-sharing of the tragic loss of Malaysian citizens, the boycotting of Malaysian products by China, the increase of security and safety measures of aircrafts, the memorials held for the passengers, etc.). Messages about issues pertaining to the crisis is believed to have progressively, and directly or indirectly, influenced and/or established emotional attachment of the Malaysian stakeholders (including participants of this study) towards the crisis of MH370. This corresponds with findings of past researchers highlighting the effect of emotions (i.e anger, sadness, fright, and anxiety) on the stakeholder's interpretation of crisis situations (Kim & Cameron, 2013). Past literatures affirmed that emotional appeals in a given issue were more likely to be remembered by stakeholders (Flora & Maibach, 1990; Choi & Lin, 2007) and that emotional appeal was more effective in changing individual's attitude (Rosselli, Skelly, & Mackie, 1995) as compared to the rational appeal (Choi & Lin, 2007). Parallel to Jin, Pang & Cameron (2007), this study suggests that the stakeholders' emotions would be elicited by different types of crises, which would in turn affect the stakeholders' acceptance or rejection to organisation's strategy in responding to the crisis. This result is certainly noteworthy especially in understanding issue-relevant emotions, and in addressing how specific emotions promote different information processing of stakeholders towards the crisis, other than their degree of involvement.

The assumption that this study makes about the influence of crisis involvement on the audience (or stakeholders) framing effect of MAS's CRM in constructing the second hypothesis derived from ELM and SCCT. The second hypothesis takes into consideration the degree of responsibility assigned by highly involved audience on severe crisis situation. Based on the SCCT guideline to CRS for a crisis with high reputational threat, MAS is required to provide more rational frames in order to protect its reputation (Coombs, 1995 as cited in Coombs, 2007). Past research on MAS's CRS (Dayang Aizza Maisha et al., (2017) suggested that MAS has used the 'correct' proportion of rational frames in its CRM and in consequent should be able to reduce the negative effect of the crisis. The result of the current study's hypothesis testing confirms that in the case of high involvement towards the crisis, audience responded positively towards MAS, both in attitude and behaviour. Similar to Hamisah Hasan et al. (2016), this research illuminates suggestions of past literatures on marketing and consumer behaviour on the correlation and/or causation of a person's attitude on their behaviour towards a product (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Due to the probable effect of issue-salience in relation to MH370 and the likelihood of emotional attachment that the audience have towards the issue, it is reasonable to suggest that the positive attitude and behaviour towards MAS could also be caused by specific emotions that the audience have towards the crisis and subsequently the organisation. In consumer marketing research, specific emotions that consumers carry over from past situations could affect their future judgments towards a product or brand (Han, Lerner & Keltner, 2007). Specific emotions could influence the depth of thought and degree of effort put in processing a message (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). Nevertheless, these efforts also depend on the degree of certainty of emotion that one possesses towards the message

(Tiedens & Linton, 2001). In their research, Tiedens and Linton (2001) identified anger and happiness as high-certainty emotions; while sadness, fear, and hope as low certainty-emotions. This insight to consumer marketing and information processing are believed useful and relevant for this study to rationalise positive post-crisis response of stakeholders towards emotionally framed messages and subsequently, their positive attitude and behaviour towards the organisation. With the many uncertainties, speculations, and new emerging issues presented revolving around the disappearance of MH370 on 8th March 2014 to date, the emotions that were experienced by the audience, particularly in this later phase of crisis, could likely fall within the category of low-certainty emotions (i.e. sadness, fear, hope). According to Han et al. (2007), 'anger-induced (i.e high-certainty emotion) individuals would have stronger blame attribution to the organisation than sadness-induced (i.e. low-certainty emotion) individuals, who would attribute blame to other situational factors than the organisation' (as cited in Kim & Cameron, 2013, p.833). Hence, this could rationalise the acceptance of the audience towards the organisation's CRM in the context of this study.

The results of this study evidently contribute to the emerging field of crisis communication research. By using an actual CRM of a real organisation in a severe crisis situation, this research extends prior work in examining the effect of framing and crisis involvement on audience. However, the use of a real crisis especially that is nationally salient to stakeholders in Malaysia does present a limitation. The participants of the study were not able to be entirely controlled and/or eliminated from having prior knowledge towards the crisis. The salience of the crisis on MH370, and its effect towards the nation would have probably made the participants into 'active users' of the media (Malasig & Quinto, 2016) and the organization's CRM, especially during the initial stage of the crisis. Thus, making the participants somewhat initially involved and emotionally attached to the crisis even prior to the conduct of this present study. Therefore, the effects of framing and crisis involvement might have been stronger if the experiment was conducted on a hypothetical crisis.

Nonetheless, controlling for prior exposure of the CRM does not alter the main findings of this study. This research proves causal inferences about audience response towards emotional framing, as well as their attitude and behaviour towards the organisation; particularly in the case of high crisis involvement. This highlights the importance of organisations to understand the implication of focusing also to communicating appropriate amount of empathy and emotions in their CRM, especially in the sphere of social media. Currently, social media is not only an important tool for the organization's implementation of CRS, but also an influential force in shaping the organization's relationship with the public (Mukhtar & Syed Arabi, 2017). As such, in constructing its CRM, it is vital for organisations to take into account the specific emotions that stakeholders face toward different CT to ensure reputational revival of the organisation. The result of this study also addresses the need to extend the crisis communication theory of SCCT by paying more attention to the different crisis involvement of audience towards a crisis; as well as to consider incorporating another suitable guideline for CT with the magnitude and uncertainty as experienced by MAS with the disappearance of MH370.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The study was conducted with a grant from the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia.

#### BIODATA

*Dayang Aizza Maisha Abang Ahmad* is a lecturer at the Department of Communication, Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Mass Communication (Hons) in Broadcasting from Universiti Teknologi MARA (2006) and Master of Arts (Communication) from Universiti Sains Malaysia (2013). Her career involvement prior to joining the academic field includes television production, as well as advertising and promotions at various media organizations. Her academic and work exposure draws her interest into research focusing on media studies, integrated marketing communication, and crisis communication.

*Noratikah Mohamad Ashari* is a lecturer at the Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. She obtains a Bachelor's Degree in Mass Communication (Hons) in Public Relations and a Master of Arts (Media and Information Warfare) from Universiti Teknologi MARA in 2011 and 2013 respectively. She was trained in the media and public relations industry before joining the academia. Her research interests include media effects studies, cyber and information warfare, and strategic communication.

*Dr Mus Chairil bin Samani* is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication, Faculty of Language Studies and Communication Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Before joining UNIMAS, he was with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) for 23 years. He was a journalist with one of the local mainstream media after graduating with a Bachelors of Arts (Hons.) from University of Malaya in 1983. He read his Master of Science (Journalism and Mass Communication) and Doctor of Philosophy at Iowa State University (1988) and University of Malaya (2003) respectively. His current research interests are media studies and journalism.

## REFERENCES

- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). Understanding attitudes and predicting social behaviour.
- Argenti, P.A. (2009). Corporate Communication. New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin.
- Choi, Y., & Lin, Y. (2007, May 23). Communicating risk: The effects of message appeal and individual difference on risk message processing. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Claeys, A.-S., Cauberghe, V. (2014) What makes crisis response strategies work? The impact of crisis involvement and message framing. *Journal of Business Research*, vol.: 67, issue: 2, 182-189
- Coombs, W. T. (1998). An analytic framework for crisis situations: Better responses from a better understanding of the situation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 10(3), 177-191.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputation during a crisis: The development and application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10, 163-176.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16, 165-186.
- Coombs, W.T. (1999). Information and Compassion in Crisis Responses: A Test of Their Effects. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11 (2), 125-142.
- Dayang Aizza Maisha Abang Ahmad, Noratikah Mohamad Ashari, & Mus Chairil Samani (2017). Framing crisis response messages on Facebook: a second level agenda analysis of MH370. In *SHS Web of Conferences* (Vol. 33). EDP Sciences.
- Flora, J. A., & Maibach, E. (1990). Cognitive responses to AIDS information: The effects of issue, involvement and message appeal. *Communication Research*, 17, 759-774.
- Freberg, K. (2012). Intention to comply with crisis messages communicated via social media. *Public Relations Review*, 38, 416–421.
- Griffin, E. (2012). A First Look of Communication Theory. (8<sup>th</sup> Edition). New York: McGraw Hill and Sons Inc.
- Hamisah Hasan, Ezhar Tamam, Jusang Bolong, Mohd Nizal Mohd Nor, Azhani Ali (2016). An Exploratory Study on the Relationship between Involvement and Attitude towards TV Advertisements with Islamic Symbols and Purchase Intent. *Jurnal Komunikasi Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 32(2).
- Han, S., Lerner, J. S., & Keltner, D. (2007). Feelings and consumer decision making: The appraisal-tendency framework. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 17(3), 158-168.
- Jin, Y., Pang, A., & Cameron, G. T. (2007). Integrated crisis mapping: Towards a publics-based, emotion-driven conceptualization in crisis communication. *Sphera Publica*, 7(7), 81-96.
- Ki, E.-J. & Nekmat, E. (2014). Situational crisis communication and interactivity: Usage and effectiveness of Facebook for crisis management by Fortune 500 companies. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 35, 140-147.
- Kim, H. J., & Cameron, G. T. (2011). Emotions matter in crisis: The role of anger and sadness in the publics' response to crisis news framing and corporate crisis response. *Communication Research*, 38(6), 826-855.
- Lerner, J. S., & Tiedens, L. Z. (2006). Portrait of the angry decision maker: How appraisal tendencies shape anger's influence on cognition. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 19(2), 115-137.

- MacInnis, D. J., Rao, A., & Weiss, A. (2002). Assessing when increased media weight of real-world advertisements helps sales. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(4), 391–407.
- Maheswaran, D., & Meyers-Levy, J. (1990). The influence of message framing and issue involvement. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 27(3), 361–367.
- Malasig, B. J. C. & Quinto, E. J. M. (2016). Functions of and Communication Behavior on Twitter after the 2015 Nepal Earthquake. *Jurnal Komunikasi Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 32(1).
- McCombs, M. E. (1999). Personal involvement with issues on the public agenda. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 11, 152–168.
- Miller, K. (2005). *Communication Theories: Perspective, Processes, and Contexts*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). New York: McGraw Hill and Sons Inc.
- Mukhtar El-Kasim & Syed Arabi Idid (2017). PR Practitioners' Use of Social Media: Validation of an Online Relationship Management Model Applying Structural Equation Modeling. *Jurnal Komunikasi Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 33(1), 212-228.
- Noratikah Mohamad Ashari, Dayang Aizza Maisha Abang Ahmad, & Mus Chairil Samani (2017). Crisis Response Strategy and Crisis Types Suitability: A Preliminary Study on MH370. In *SHS Web of Conferences* (Vol. 33). EDP Sciences
- Pan, S. (2011). The Role of TV Commercial Visuals in Forming Memorable and Impressive Destination Images. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol.50, Issue 2, pp.171-185.
- Pang, A. (2014). Social Media Hype in Times of Crises: Nature, Characteristic and Impacts on Organizations. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 23, 2 (2013): 309–336.
- Petty, R. E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Schumann, D. (1983). Central and peripheral routes to advertising effectiveness: The moderating role of involvement. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10, 135–146.
- Rosselli, F., Skelly, J. J., & Mackie, D. M. (1995). Processing rational and emotional messages: The cognitive and affective mediation of persuasion. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 31, 163-190.
- Sekaran, U., & Bougie, R. (2009). *Research Methods for Business: A Skill-Building Approach* 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. United Kingdom: Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Tiedens, L. Z., & Linton, S. (2001). Judgment under emotional certainty and uncertainty: the effects of specific emotions on information processing. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 81(6), 973.
- Utz, S., Schultz, F., & Glocka, S. (2013). Crisis communication online: How medium, crisis type and emotions affected public reactions in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. *Public Relations Review*, 39(1), 40-46.
- Yoo, C., & MacInnis, D. (2005). The brand attitude formation process of emotional and informational ads. *Journal of Business Research*, 58(10), 1397–1406.