

# An Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory on Germanwings Flight 9525 Crisis Communication

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**Abstract** – When such a crisis involves injury and loss of life, a comprehensive ability of organization to comprehend and predict the way of act and react of its diverse stakeholders is very important to keep the communications levels meet with their expectations, in terms of transparency and frequent communications to eliminate the paradigm of status quo during handling the catastrophe. On 24 March 2015 at 10:53 AM, the Airbus A320-211 from Germanwings carrying 144 passengers and six crew crashed in a remote area of the French Alps as it flew from Barcelona to Düsseldorf. To deal with challenges that tumble Lufthansa reputation (as the parent company of Germanwings) as well as the worldwide German airline industry reputation and financial losses, Germanwings is particularly used many strategies to communicate with stakeholders during the crisis occur.

This paper employs the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs to analyze how Lufthansa Group responded to the series of crisis communication during the flight crash crisis occurred. First, the analysis and evaluation of stakeholder's group are provided to give a clear path to whom Lufthansa Group should be responsible during the crisis occurred. Second, this thesis study outlines the perceptions of stakeholder's group and the possible reputational threat. Third, this paper investigated Lufthansa Group's crisis response strategies through an analysis of media channels, such as two press release, two press conference and video broadcast on certain period from 24 - 27 March 2015. Lastly, discussion on content analysis are conducted to measure the effectiveness of overall crisis communication response by Lufthansa Group according to SCCT model.

*Keywords:* communication, crisis communication, situational crisis communication theory, crisis response strategy

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## Introduction

In briefly, a classical study by Hermann (1963) as cited in Ulmer et al (2015), a definition of crisis is identified by three characteristics that separated its definition from other unlikable occurrences, which were: surprise, threat and short response time. However, in organization point of view, a crisis is defined as a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly (Coombs, 2007a). In an organization a threat is the possible damage that can impose on an organization itself, its stakeholders, and lastly the industry, which will lead to certain threats in related with public safety, financial lost and reputation loss (Coombs, 2007a).

None of the organizations like a crisis, but the reality is crisis happens at any time and none of organizations are immune to catastrophe. By its definition, Benoit (1995) defined crisis communication as an organization interaction, dialogue, or conversation between an organization and its public and stakeholders before, during, and after the crisis occurrence. Furthermore, the importance of communication has to flow between media, public and stakeholders in both directions, because an effective crisis communication is including the capacity to identify different target groups and adapt communication (Swedish Emergency

Management Agency, 2008). In addition, crisis communication was considered as the pivotal part of the process of organizational reputation recovery after the crisis occurs (Gottschalk, 1993) and part of the crisis management process, which includes a strategic plan and procedure for recovery for an organization that suffered from negative impacts and organization's public relation has significant role in response to control the damaging situation (Coombs, 1999).

In general, the public can either betray and against an organization and damage its believability and reputation, or vice versa – it could give bolster and help with endeavors in order to illuminate the crisis. Crisis communication, at its heart, it is important for an organization to plan a proper communication during a crisis in order to gain public support, or an attempt to influence perceptions about the crisis in a way that is ideal to the organization (Hearit & Courtright, 2003). Therefore, organization's public relation team have to protect and defend an organization and stakeholders from the threat that can have negative consequences. Moreover, the importance of an organization to view a crisis from a balanced perspective including both threat and opportunity has a much more prominent potential for recovering from a crisis, instead of overemphasize and focus a lot on the threat risk to an organization's reputation or image to 'just' react effectively (Ulmer et al., 2015).

### **Brief Description of the Case Study**

A few months ago, the German airline industry has had to address a series of challenges that left a limit time to execute, and almost no loophole for communications mistakes. On 24th of March 2015, an Airbus A320 operated by Germanwings flights 9525 that headed from Barcelona and Düsseldorf and carrying 150 people (144 passengers and 6 cabin crew) lost their contact before 11:00 AM local time with French radar, before crashing into the mountains and killing all 150 people on board. A news headline in the same date when the crisis occurs by National Post a report identify that flight radar demonstrates the plane taking off at 10:01 AM. It ascensions to around 11,500 meters (38,000 feet) above sea level by 10:27, where it travels for only four minutes before the plane begins to drop at 10:31. After five minutes, it's dropped to around 6,000 meters (20,000 feet). At 10:38, the plane continues falling, now down to 4,000 meters (13,300 feet) and overtop the mountains. At 10:41 it drops to around 2,000 meters (a little more than 6,500 feet) above sea level, and if the alps are about 6000-8000 feet (2,000 meters) high and it means the crash site is just 2 to 5 kilometres away from the point where signal was lost.

During that day, when Germanwings Flight 9525 crashing in the French Alps, the Lufthansa Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Carsten Spohr and the head of its low-cost airline Germanwings, Thomas Winkelmann have forcing them to quickly giving clarification statement to the hundreds of the victim's families of passenger whose flights with Germanwings Flight 9525 in regard to clarify and explain the detail crisis on what happened to flight 9525. Under a harsh spotlight, both the CEO and public relations officer from Lufthansa and Germanwings had not only to juggle with media relations and the ubiquitous apology to the family's victim, indeed when such a crises involve injury and loss of life the ability of Germanwings and Lufthansa to understand and predict the way of act and react of its diverse stakeholders its very important to maintain the communications levels meet with

their expectations, in terms of transparency and frequent communications to eliminate the paradigm of status quo in during the catastrophe.

As abovementioned, in general the three characteristics of crisis as mentioned by Hermann (1963), a crisis is characterized with surprise, threat and short response time, it is important for public relations to act quickly and responsibly during the crisis occurs. Because, the stakeholder’s groups and public opinions expect an immediate response and the longer they need wait to take a stance, the worse it looks for the organization. To deal with challenges that tumble Lufthansa reputation - as the parent company of Germanwings and worldwide German airline industry reputation and financial losses, Germanwings is particularly used many communication response strategies to communicate with stakeholders during the crisis occur.

### Theories of Crisis Communication

As mentioned by Ulmer et al. (2015) in the “*Effective Crisis Communication: Moving Crisis to Opportunity*” handbook, there are at least four applicable theories of crisis communication that widely used by communication researchers and practitioners in understanding of organization’s risk and crisis for the past 20 years. This research encompasses, Corporate Apologia (Hearit, 2006), Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and Organizational Renewal (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009), where those four the theoretical approach to organizational crisis is focused on the various ability of organization point of view in learning from the crisis, communicating ethically, considering both the threat and the opportunities linked with the crisis, as well as creating a prospective vision. Table 1 below briefly examine the four applicable theories of communication, as conclude by Ulmer et al. (2015):

**Table 1. Comparison of Diverse Crisis Communication Theories**

Theory	Characteristics
<b>Corporate Apologia</b> (Hearit, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasizes managing the threat created by a persuasive attack against the organization</li> <li>Focuses on an apology for wrongdoing</li> <li>Features communication strategies for the apology</li> </ul>
<b>Image Repair Theory</b> (Benoit, 1995)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasizes repairing the threat to the image of the accused</li> <li>Focuses on accounting for organizational actions that caused the crisis</li> <li>Features communication strategies for managing account</li> </ul>
<b>Situational Crisis Communication Theory</b> (Coombs & Holladay, 2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasizes lowering crisis attributions of responsibility for the crisis</li> <li>Focuses on determining communication based upon the type of crisis and the organization’s reputational assets</li> <li>Features flow-chart decision-making process</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational Renewal</b> (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasizes opportunities to learn and grow from the crisis</li> <li>Focuses n creating opportunities inherent to crisis events</li> <li>Features board leadership and organizational communication guidelines, emphasizing strong positive values, an optimistic forward-looking perspective, and learning to overcome the crisis</li> </ul>

Source: Ulmer et al. (2015)

### Introduction to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is one of the widely used theoretical

approaches for responding to organizational crises in communication research, which firstly introduced by W. Timothy Coombs - Professor in Communication Studies at Eastern Illinois University in 1995 under the theoretical name of "The Symbolic Approach to Communication Theory". SCCT is a theory that explicate categorization type of crisis through the variations of attributions that may arise during a particular crisis. An audience could vary in their opinion that a company is accountable for a specific crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Additionally, Ulmer et al. (2015) in the "*Effective Crisis Communication: Moving Crisis to Opportunity*" handbook outlined that SCCT is emphasizes on lowering crisis attributions of responsibility for the crisis and focuses on determining communication based upon the type of crisis and the organization's reputational assets.

SCCT by Coombs & Holladay (2002) consists of two core elements, namely (1) the crisis situation, and (2) crisis response strategies. SCCT is an attempt to evaluates the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based upon the reputational threat level (Ulmer et al., 2015) and understanding how to protect reputational assets during a crisis (Coombs, 2007b). Therefore, by understanding the crisis situation, a crisis manager can choose the most appropriate commination strategy during pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis (Heath and Coombs, 2006).

### **The Crisis Situation in SCCT Model**

During the crisis occurs, the first step that public relations team or crisis managers can act is to determine the basic of crisis type through categorizing its type to assess the reputational threat of a crisis by understanding how the media and other stakeholders are defining the crisis (Coombs, 2007d). Through the SCCT model each type of crisis generates specific and predictable levels of crisis responsibility and different attributions of organizational responsibility for respond the crisis (Coombs, 2007c). Thus, by identifying the crisis type, the public relations teams and crisis manager can anticipate how much responsibility stakeholders will attribute to the organization at the initial crisis responsibility level (Coombs, 2007c). SCCT clustered the crisis situation into 3 different types of crisis, which encompass: (1) victim cluster, (2) accident cluster, and (3) preventable cluster.

As seen in Table 2 below, the victim cluster includes various of crisis types that the organization is considered as part of the victim along with the stakeholders during the crisis occurs. All of the listed types of crisis in victim cluster generates minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and facing a minor reputational threat to the organization (Coombs, 2007c). In the second group of crisis cluster, namely the accidental cluster, all of the crisis exemplify unintentional actions by the organization and the organization did not intend to create the crises. The crises in this cluster produce moderate attributions of crisis responsibility or on the other words that organization facing a moderate reputational threat (Coombs, 2007c). Lastly, the preventable cluster consists of crisis that placing stakeholders at risk or knowingly taking inappropriate actions or human error, which actually could have been avoided by the organization. The crisis types produce a strong attribution of crisis responsibility and represents a severe reputational threat to an organization (Coombs, 2007c).

**Table 2. The Categorization of Crisis by Its Type**

Crisis cluster	Crisis type	Description	Reputational threat of crisis
<b>Victim cluster</b>	Natural disaster	Acts of nature damage an organization	Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and requires a minor reputational threat
	Rumor	False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated	
	Workplace violence	Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite	
	Product Tampering	External agent causes damage to an organization	
<b>Accident cluster</b>	Challenges	Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner	Moderate attribution of crisis responsibility and require a moderate reputational threat
	Technical-error accident	A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident	
	Technical-error product harm	A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled	
<b>Preventable cluster</b>	Human-error accident	Human error causes an industrial accident	Strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat
	Human-error product harm	Human error causes a product to be recalled	
	Organizational misdeed with no injuries	Stakeholders are deceived without injury	
	Organizational misdeed management misconduct	Laws or regulations are violated by management	
	Organizational misdeed with injuries	Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur	

Source: Coombs (2007c)

### **Crisis Response Strategy in SCCT Model**

Crisis response strategies in SCCT model are intended to repair the reputation and reduce the negative effects of a crisis in an organizations Coombs and Holladay (2002). SCCT model uses attribution theory to develop a theoretical link between crisis situations and crisis response strategies by considering crisis responsibility that provides the conceptual link between the two. Moreover, corporate response strategies are beneficial to repair the organization’s reputation, to reduce negative affect and to prevent negative behavioral intentions. It is also believed that the more accommodative strategies will be more effective and efficient to reducing anger and negative communications within the stakeholders (Coombs and Holladay, 2007).

Coombs and Holladay (2002) categorized crisis response strategies in two main crisis response strategies based on the level of responsibility acceptance, namely (1) primary crisis response strategies, and (2) secondary crisis response strategies were each category contains different tactics that most effective in response crisis in accordance to the crisis type so that they can avoid or minimize reputational damage. Table 3 below presents the brief description of crisis response strategies in the SCCT model.

**Table 3. Crisis Response Strategies**

Type of crisis response strategy	Strategy	Tactics	Description
Primary crisis response strategy	Deny	Attack the accuser	Where the crisis managers oppose or confront the people or group who claim a crisis exists
		Denial	When the crisis managers deny the existence of a crisis or claim that there is no crisis exist
		Scapegoat	When crisis managers blame to other people from the external of the organization
	Diminish	Excuse	When crisis managers aim to reduce the organization's responsibility for the crisis and justification defined as the crisis managers aim to reduce the perceived damage
		Justice	When crisis managers aim to reduce the perceived damage
	Rebuild	Compensation	When crisis managers aim to compensate the victims by offering money or other material things (i.e. gifts)
		Apology	When crisis managers publicly confess blame and accept responsibility by apologizing to the stakeholders
Secondary crisis response strategy	Bolstering	Reminder	The organization tells the stakeholders about its past good works
		Ingratiation	When the organization praises stakeholders
		Victimage	When the organization explains to the stakeholder if they were a victim too during the crisis occurs

Source: Coombs (2007a), Coombs (2007c)

## Case Study Analysis

### Analysis and Evaluation of Germanwings Stakeholder's Group

The most frequent quoted definition about stakeholders in strategic management study by Freeman (1984) described stakeholder as a group or individual who can affect or is affected by by the accomplishment of the organization's objective. In addition, Bryson (1995) added the definition of stakeholder as any individual, group, or association that can place a claim on an organization's attention, assets, or output or is affected by that output. Furthermore, this paper also input "the additional stakeholders" out from the fundamental stakeholder's group classification by Clarkson (1995). The additional stakeholders include those group or individual who have suffered either physically, mentally, or financially during the crisis occurs (Combs, 2007b).

An organization's stakeholders are impact differently and not often their interest and needs is contradictory during the crisis. Therefore, the abilities of organization to communicate openly and accurately during the crisis occur is the key point of successful crisis communication (Seeger et al., 2001) and the way to eliminate the failures to meet the needs of stakeholders in reasonable time (Ulmer, 2001). Based on the abovementioned in regard of the distinctive group of stakeholders by Clarkson (1995), which encompass primary and secondary stakeholder group as well as the additional stakeholders, Table 4 below is showed

the the limited range of Germanwings stakeholders and brief description of their influence and/or contribution to Germanwings business.

**Table 4. Germanwings Stakeholder Map**

Type of stakeholders	Stakeholder's group	Influence / Contribution
<b>Primary stakeholders</b>	Investors	Germanwings has been wholly owned by Lufthansa since 1 January 2009, it means Germanwings need to reported the annual report to the same investors of Lufthansa Passanger Airline Group → owners and financiers of the organization & influencing share price and percetions of financial markets
	Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure (Germany)	The highest government authorities that control and monitor the operational activities of Germanwings through its subsidiary from Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure in Germany (Bundesministerium für Verkehr und digitale Infrastruktur)
	Civil Aviation Authorities (CAA) in Germany	Independent specialist aviation regulator and provider of air traffic services in Germany
	European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA)	Working closely with CAA to promote the highest common standards of safety and environmental protection in European civil aviation
	Employees	Germanwings had an average of 2,073 employees in 2014 is organization assets and scarce resource who running Germanwings business activity
	Customers	There are approximately 16 million passengers in total flew with Germanwings over 130 destinations across Europe and 7 locations in Germany in 2014 is the source of revenues and profits & source of feedback information
	Suppliers (Airbus)	The sole aircraft supplier of all 63 Airbus that operated by Germanwings in 2014
<b>Secondary stakeholders</b>	Press or Media	Regularly report Germanwings in the news, since Germanwings is a developing German low-cost airline that owned by one of the biggest airline corporation in Europe - Deutsche Lufthansa AG
	Special interest groups	Wide range of different special interest groups, which encompass the organization that might be concerned on safety in aircraft
	Competitors	Germanwings competitors both in the domestic and European market who classified as low-cost carrier airline (LCC)
<b>Additional stakeholders</b>	Victims or passenger and crew on board	A group or individual who have suffered either physically, mentally, or financially during the crisis occurs

Source: Own Depiction, November 15, 2015

### **Germanwings Stakeholder's Responses and Actions to the Crisis**

Alexander Dobrint the federal minister of Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure in German state that *"According to current knowledge we assume that the captain was actively barred from accessing the cockpit"* (26/03/15). He said that the French Prosecutors' assessment that the plane was deliberately put into descent was plausible according to our experts. These includes to the preventable cluster, which is a human-error accident. This accident can effect strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat.

In another different time, he also stated *"Main questions for the task force will be looking at the door mechanism on planes. We also want to look at the procedures on how to get the medical certificate and also psychological criteria and procedures i.e. we want to look at how we can find problems with psychological profiles"* (02/04/15). He said that in the announcement at the special press

conference, where German authorities unveiled their plans to review the tragic plane crash by plans to launch special task force aimed at looking into mental health of pilots and locking mechanisms on cockpit doors. He also believed that this is a human-error and technical-error accident.

The Civil Aviation Authorities also known as CAA have Joerg Mendel the president as the stakeholder's representative. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2015, Joerg Mendel said *"We came to the joint conclusion that the correct procedures for awarding a pilot's license were followed"* (9/4/15). Together with Lufthansa CEO, the civil aviation authority in Germany the Luftfahrtbundesamt (LBA), said over the conference that it had no knowledge of Lubitz's depression - after the initial report shows the reason behind the plane crash is from the co-pilot. He thinks that the accident is caused by the Organizational misdeed with injuries. The effect is strong attribution of crisis responsibility and requires a severe reputational threat.

Another stakeholder's group are the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), Patrick Ky as the Executive Director said *"The Agency recommends operators to re-assess the safety and security risks associated with flight crew members leaving the flight crew compartment due to operational or physiological needs during non-critical phases of flight. Based on this assessment, operators are recommended to implement procedures requiring at least two persons to be in the flight crew compartment at all times" in 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2015"* (27/3/15). The Europe's aviation authority has tightened its safety recommendations, urging all airlines to always have two people inside the cockpit of a flying aircraft, after a German co-pilot flew an Airbus A320 into a mountainside having locked the captain out in the cabin, in which 150 people lost their lives. He thinks that the cause of the accident is because of Organizational misdeed with injuries. And it effecting the strong attribution of crisis responsibility and requires a severe reputational threat

Kenan Scheib, the Chief Pilot of Germanwings, as employees he doubted the plane's computer played a role in the accident since it was recently upgraded. He said *"There's no reason why fault should have occurred with the computer"* (24/3/15). The cause of this accident is Human-error accident for what he believed. The strong attribution of crisis responsibility and requires a severe reputational threat can be one of the effect from this accident.

Britta Englisch, one of the customers of Germanwings praised the dedicated pilot and crew on Germanwings' As soon as she walked onto the plane, she and the other passengers were personally welcomed by the pilot, who assured them that the pilot will get them to their destination safely. She said *"This flight was the morning after the crash at this time no details were known and everything was mere speculation. Logically it was pretty clear to me, that Germanwings might have been the safest airline at that morning - they doublechecked every plane and pilots and crew were free to choose if they were feeling able to fly or not. Nevertheless, I had this feeling in my stomach. Feelings are not logical, are they?"* (27/3/15). She believes that organizational misdeed with injuries is the cause of the Germanwings incident, which effecting on the strong attribution of crisis responsibility and requires a severe reputational threat.

Fabrice Bregie as the CEO of Airbus Jetline Division, is the representatives of the supplier (Airbus), said that *"Having pilots in the loop will still have a critical role in assuring aircraft security"*



(20/4/15). The Airbus CEO warns against reducing pilot's role after Germanwings crash. He argued that pilots should be able to recover planes that encounter such conditions and technology shouldn't replace the pilots. He thinks that this is Organizational misdeed with Injuries incident. With Strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat effect.

As the press and Media, Daily Mail believe that *"Suicide Pilot Had a Long History of Depression: Why On Earth Was He Allowed to Fly"* (27/03/15). While Daily Mirror said *"Killer Pilot Suffered from Depression: Flew Who Deliberately Crashed Packed Jet into alps had a burn out"* (27/03/15). Both media believe that this is a human-error accident with strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat effect.

Richard Aboulafia, the aviation expert and vice president of aerospace consultancy teal group corp, as the representative of special interest group, state that *"In terms of accident rates, it's one of the safest jets built. There are no reasons to question its record"* (25/03/15). During the investigation on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2015, Richard Aboulafia stated that he is doubt the reason of plane crash is because of is the technical failures of the aircraft, considering in the low of rate of the fatal accidents in other similar series of Airbus. Human-error accident is what he believes that happened and strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat effect.

Easy-Jet as one of Germanwings' competitors said *"This decision has been taken in consultation with the Civil Aviation Authority (to require two crew members in cockpit). The safety and security of its passengers and crew is the airline's highest priority"* (26/3/15). British low-cost airline EasyJet said it will from Friday require two crewmembers to be in the cockpit at all times, following the Germanwings crash accident. While Air-canada said *"Following initial reports on the Germanwings accident, we are implementing without delay a policy change to ensure that all flights have two people in the cockpit at all times"* (26/3/15). Air Canada have been ordered to maintain two crew in the cockpit at all times after the following initial reports on Germanwings accident, that prove Germanwings co-pilot apparently caused the crash of Flight 4U9525 after preventing the pilot from returning to the cockpit. Both competitors think that this accident is caused by the organizational misdeed in injuries. They also think that the effect is strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat effect.

Oliver, as the victims, whose his wife, Sonja Cercek died in the crash, sadly thinks that *"I feel they are not taking the responsibility, not acknowledging that one of their own employees knowingly did this"* (10/10/15). When Oliver says *"their own employees"* meaning that he knows the reason behind the Germanwings accident is by human-error of their co-pilot.

Families Lawyer and the Victims Parents Letter, express their feelings by saying *"One of your pilot has kills our children... You published large ads in many daily newspapers during the memorial service in Cologne. You saw us during the funeral service in Haltern, during the memorial service in Cologne. A few personal words during a conversation with you would have shown us, that you care not only for the public, but for us as well. We, and especially our children, are deeply insulted that you measure the life of each of our children and our pain that we suffered with €45,000. This is the amount that you personally get paid every work week by Lufthansa as a salary. Every week"* (21/7/15). The

German-language letter made public by the families' lawyer, the victims' parents accuse Carsten Spohr, CEO of parent airline Lufthansa, of neglecting them in the aftermath of the March 24 crash.

### **Germanwings Response Strategy to the Crisis**

When the worldwide media speculating about incident occurred on the Germanwings Flight 9525 plane crash accident, Germanwings CEO take place on the first news conference and employed a combination of apology and victimage response strategies regarding on the crisis response type by (Coombs, 2007c). Germanwings CEO acknowledge that an accident occurred, and the accident is also not only afflicting the victims' relatives, but also afflicting the organization. At a news conference at Cologne Bonn airport on 24 March 2015, the Germanwings CEO, namely Thomas Winkelmann clarifies that: *"Right now the most important, however, is our deep sorrow for our passengers, their relatives as well as relatives of our crew members since they have lost their dear loved ones. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims. At the same time, understand we will work with authorities to find out reasons why this plane crashed as quickly as possible."* (International Business Times, 24/03/15)

On the same date, the press releases in Lufthansa official website showed the official statement regarding the cause of Germanwings Flight 9525 plane crash accident on 24 March 2015, where Lufthansa stated that: *"Germanwings announces with the deepest regret that, according to the information currently available, its Airbus A320 aircraft operating Flight 4U 9525 from Barcelona to Düsseldorf suffered an accident above the French Alps at around 11:00 local time today (Tuesday 24 March). According to current information, there were 144 passengers and six crew members on board. Members of the families of the passengers involved can obtain personal information by calling the toll-free hotline on 00800 11 33 55 77. Everyone at Germanwings and Lufthansa is deeply shocked and saddened by these events. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the passengers and the crew members"*. (Lufthansa Group Press Release, 24/03/15)

According to crisis response types by (Coombs, 2007c), again, at this point Lufthansa Group implied a combination of apology and victimage crisis response strategies. At the press release, Lufthansa now acknowledge that the truly accident happens with knowing where is the actual incidents take place. Moreover, the next date on 25 March 2015, Lufthansa posted another official statement in press release, were stated that: *"Lufthansa will provide two special flights to Marseille for the relatives and friends of passengers of Germanwings flight 4U 9525. The flights operated by Lufthansa on behalf of Germanwings will depart Dusseldorf en route to Marseille tomorrow at 8.40 CET and take off from Barcelona to Marseille at 8.45 CET. Relatives and friends will be taken care of by Lufthansa and Germanwings employees at a special assistance center in Marseille. Next of kin of the Germanwings passengers are currently being contacted directly by the airline and informed about the special flight details individually. Within the safety parameters of the investigation, relatives who decide to travel to Marseille will be taken to a location as close to the accident site as possible. Accommodation in Marseille as well as return flights as needed will be provided by Lufthansa on behalf of Germanwings at the discretion of the individual relatives. Germanwings and Lufthansa will continue to provide all the care and assistance needed by relatives and friends of passengers of flight 4U 9525 in this difficult situation"*. (Lufthansa Group Press Release, 25/03/15)

According to crisis response types by (Coombs, 2007c), Lufthansa Group attempt to take positive actions to offset the crisis by offering compensation for relatives and friends of passengers of flight 9525 during the difficult situation on the crisis, or on the other words Lufthansa Group employed a compensation crisis response strategy.

At a press conference in the morning of 26 March 2015, the CEO of Lufthansa as the parent's company of Germanwings, Carsten Spohr clarifies that: *"My ladies and gentlemen after the analysis of the voice recorder of our tragic flight, there has been a new tragic turn. We have to, and I think we speak for everyone, we have to accept that a plane was crashed on purpose presumably by the by co-pilot of the plane. The recording and voice recorder leave us to assume the captain left the cabin for a short period of time and could not return unfortunately. It seems to be true the colleague who remained denied him access back to the cockpit in order to start the fatal descent into the French Alps. Six years ago there had been an interruption to his training. We checked his skills, his competence and he went back to training school. After that he was successful. He went through all of that with flying colors and he was fit in all areas, 100 percent. This is the worst possible time, the worst possible moment, the darkest chapter in the history in our airline and yet we have full confidence in our pilots, so this is totally incomprehensible."* (Independent, 26/03/15)

According to the above press conference Carsten Spohr uses the combination of reminder strategy by claiming that Lufthansa Group is had an excellent record in the recruitment process to each of their pilots and have a full confidence to them. Moreover, he also employs the victimage strategies by saying the accident as the worst possible moment in their airline history.

Moreover, on 27 March 2015, Lufthansa CEO Carsten Spohr gives a president statement about the accident of Germanwings Flight 4U 9525 on March 24, 2015 in the French Alps and broadcast through Lufthansa Group YouTube channel. On the video statement that lasts for nearly two minutes, the Lufthansa CEO expresses his sorrow and mourning on behalf of Germanwings and Lufthansa and commemorates the relatives of the passengers and crew members who lost their lives. Also, at the end of his speech he also praises all the stakeholders and to recalled to the public if Lufthansa and Germanwings the decent history and record that either Lufthansa and Germanwings is an airline that always put safety in the top priority. Furthermore, Carsten Spohr in constant always stated that Lufthansa Group is also become the victim during this crisis. This can be seen from the following quotes: *"Dear customers and partners around the world. Less than 24 hours ago, a tragedy happened which all of us at Lufthansa hoped we would never experience. Something happened which we work so hard against that it would never hit us: We lost a Germanwings aircraft with 150 passengers and crew on board. Our thoughts and prayers in this very moment are with the relatives of those passengers and the crew members who lose their lives. We support them whichever way we can around the world. Visiting the crash site yesterday, I was once again in a shocking moment made aware of the fact that all of us in Lufthansa know so well: safety in aviation is not a given, its something which we have to work hard for everyday and every night. And this is why this terrible accident hits us in Lufthansa even more. Because in our sixty years of history, we've always said safety is our top priority. And it's my promise and the promise of those 120,000 people at Lufthansa working around the world that this priority will continue to be our top target. And we will work day and night also in the next days and weeks to make sure that flying*

*is once again made even safer. Thank you very much for your sympathy and thank you very much for your loyalty". (Lufthansa Group YouTube Channel, 27/03/15).*

According to crisis response types by (Coombs, 2007c), Lufthansa CEO, Crasten Spohr used the combination of rebuild strategy by defined the crisis a shocking moment and the organization's promise to working even more harder to continuously improve the safety aspect in aviation is considered as the indirect apologetic expression, and bolstering strategy that included reminder, victimage and ingratiation.

### **Overall Crisis Communication Response by Germanwings According to the SCCT Model**

As the previous analysis on the stakeholders' responses are generated, the flight 9525 plane crash incident represented a severe reputational threat to Germanwings and Lufthansa as the parents' company of Germanwings. When an organization perceived a high responsibility for such a crisis, the SCCT recommends organization to employing crisis responses strategy with a high levels of responsibility acceptance. Therefore, based on the SCCT, the appropriate responses to be the accommodative on rebuild on organization reputation is rebuild strategy, because responses such compensation or apology should work to improve the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007c). In additions to the rebuild strategy, an organization also might use the secondary bolstering strategy such as reminder, ingratiation and victimage.

Therefore, in order to make a comprehensive analysis on the overall crisis communication in accordance to the SCCT model that Lufthansa Group's implied during the crisis occurs, thus this paper generate four questions based on the secondary data from content analysis, that taken from five articles (2 press release, 2 press conference and 1 online video broadcast) during certain period from 24 - 27 March 2015. Which the four questions were:

- Question 1: What response strategies did Germanwings & Lufthansa employ in dealing with the flight 9525 crisis during certain period from 24 - 27 March 2015?
- Question 2: What is the most frequent used crisis communication strategy from the SCCT model?
- Question 3: Does Germanwings & Lufthansa achieve consistency in regard of crisis communication strategy, across all sources for all outgoing crisis communication messages?
- Question 4: What is the response strategies selected by Germanwings & Lufthansa that match with the options of response strategies suggested by the SCCT model?

#### ***Question 1: What response strategies did Germanwings & Lufthansa employ in dealing with the flight 9525 crisis during certain period from 24 - 27 March 2015?***

Based on the content analysis in several different sources (2 press release, 2 press conference and 1 online video broadcast video), which taken from certain period from 24 - 27 March 2015, this study found of the total 11 strategies used by Germanwings and Lufthansa: 36% (n = 4) were from the rebuild cluster and 64% (n = 7) were from the bolstering cluster (See Table 5).

**Table 5. Crisis communication strategies in clusters used by Germanwings & Lufthansa**

Crisis response strategy	N	Percentage (%)
Rebuild cluster	4	36
Bolstering	7	64
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Own Depiction, November 21, 2015 (SPSS 20)

**Question 2: What is the most frequent used crisis communication strategy from the SCCT model?**

The study found “the victimage strategy” is the most common crisis response strategy used by Germanwings & Lufthansa and was used 37% of the time (n = 4), followed by “the apology strategy” used 27% of the time (n = 3), “reminder strategy” used 18% of the time (n = 2), and 9% of the time (n = 1) for “compensation strategy” and “ingratiating strategy” (See Table 6).

**Table 6. Crisis communication strategies used by Germanwings & Lufthansa**

Crisis response strategy	N	Percentage (%)
<b>Rebuild strategy</b>		
Compensation	1	9
Apology	3	27
<b>Bolstering strategy</b>		
Reminder	2	18
Ingratiation	1	9
Victimage	4	37
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Own Depiction, November 21, 2015 (SPSS 20)

**Question 3: Does Germanwings & Lufthansa achieve consistency in regard of crisis communication strategy, across all sources for all outgoing crisis communication messages?**

As shown in Table 7 below, the study found a consistent message strategy of Bolstering cluster strategies. The victimage response strategy was the most frequently used strategy in press conference (n = 2), press release (n = 1) and the YouTube Broadcast (n = 1). Where the other amount of compensation, apology, reminder and ingratiating have almost the same frequency in communication messages (press conference, press release and YouTube broadcast).

**Table 7. Number of strategies used by Germanwings & Lufthansa in each media formats**

Crisis response strategy	Press Conference (2)	Press Release (2)	YouTube Broadcast (1)
<b>Rebuild strategy</b>			
Compensation	0	1	0
Apology	1	1	1
<b>Bolstering strategy</b>			
Reminder	1	0	1
Ingratiation	0	0	1
Victimage	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

Source: Own Depiction, November 21, 2015 (SPSS 20)

**Question 4: What is the response strategies selected by Germanwings & Lufthansa that match with the options of response strategies suggested by the SCCT model?**

As the previous analysis on the stakeholders’ responses are generated, the flight 9525 plane crash incident represented a severe reputational threat to Germanwings and Lufthansa as the parents’ company of Germanwings. When an organization perceived a high responsibility for such a crisis, the SCCT recommends organization to employing crisis responses strategy with a high levels of responsibility acceptance. Therefore, based on the SCCT, the appropriate responses to be the accommodative on rebuild on organization reputation is rebuild strategy, because responses such compensation or apology should work to improve the organization’s reputation (Coombs, 2007c), as additions to the rebuild strategy, an organization also might use the secondary bolstering strategy such as reminder, ingratiation and victimage.

Overall, as seen in Table 8 below, according to the analysis of crisis response strategy in SCCT model in this paper, Germanwings and Lufthansa is found to response the flight 9525 crisis precisely followed with the prescriptions of the SCCT model recommendations (options). During the crisis occurred Germanwings and Lufthansa combined both rebuild and bolstering crisis response strategy in order to employed communication to the stakeholder’s group.

**Table 8. Summary of the reputational threat, the overall responses from Germanwings and Lufthansa and SCCT recommendation**

Common stakeholders perception	Reputational threat of crisis	Germanwings and Lufthansa Response	SCCT recommendation (options)
Preventable cluster: Organizational misdeed with injuries	Strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat	<b>Rebuild crisis response strategy:</b>	<b>Rebuild crisis response strategy:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compensation</li> <li>• Apology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compensation</li> <li>• Apology</li> </ul>
		<b>Bolstering crisis response strategy:</b>	<b>Bolstering crisis response strategy:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reminder</li> <li>• Ingratiation</li> <li>• Victimage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reminder</li> <li>• Ingratiation</li> <li>• Victimage</li> </ul>

Source: Own Depiction, November 15, 2015

**Discussions**

The SCCT model provides a framework for the organization facing different complex case of crisis to protect reputational organization’s assets. The organization ability to select the most appropriate and beneficial response is considered help them deal with a crisis situation and crisis (Coombs, 2007c). Simultaneously, in this paper SCCT model was used to examine the stakeholder’s perception about the organization action and response during the flight crash crisis by Germanwings on March 24, 2015.

In conclusion, this paper found that Germanwings and Lufthansa is followed the recommendations of SCCT model by combine rebuild and bolstering strategy, such as compensation, apology, reminder, ingratiation and victimage to respond the wide varieties of

stakeholder's group. Regarding the perception of SCCT model by Coombs & Hollaway (2002) a corrective action and response such as rebuild as well as bolstering strategy are considered as the most effective communication of crisis response strategy when an organization perceived a strong attribution of crisis responsibility and require a severe reputational threat (Coombs, 2007c).

By reviewing the situation that Lufthansa and Germanwings faced, it can be deduced that Lufthansa and Germanwings was under strong reputational threat. In refer to overall stakeholder's perception to the crisis, where the primary, secondary and additional stakeholders of Germanwings and Lufthansa are considered the flight 9525 crisis is labeled as a preventable clustered that includes organizational misdeed with Injuries and human-error accident, the appropriate responses to be the accommodative on rebuild on organization reputation is rebuild strategy, because responses such compensation or apology should work to improve the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007c).

Regarding the apology response strategy, the example of apologetic expressions by Lufthansa and Germanwings can be shown at the first official Luthansa Group press release on March 24, 2015 which stated that: *"Germanwings announces with the deepest regret that, according to the information currently available, its Airbus A320 aircraft operating Flight 4U 9525 from Barcelona to Düsseldorf suffered an accident above the French Alps at around 11:00 local time today (Tuesday 24 March)"*. At first glance this could seem to be a sufficient crisis response strategy, seeing as the crisis was deemed as the crisis that maybe could have predicted before. Thus, by making apologies to every elements of stakeholder group as well as showing concern and express compassion, Lufthansa and Germanwings clarify the media speculation and explain the detail crisis on what happened to flight 9525 to eliminate the paradigm of status quo in during the catastrophe. Moreover, in connection with the apology response strategy, compensation is an effective strategy which can be used anytime when victims suffer serious harm because compensation and apology represent the highly accommodative strategies that suggested to be used during crisis that under strong reputational threat (Coombs, 2007d). Germanwings and Lufthansa offer their first compensation on the same day of the first official press released on March 24, 2015 by provide two special flights to Marseille for the relatives and friends of passengers of Germanwings flight 9525.

The most imperative thing in managing with crisis is the crisis response strategy must mirror a more the prominent sympathy toward casualties and assume more responsibility to the crisis. Therefore, in line with the recommendation of SCCT model to combining both primary and secondary response strategy to generate an effective communication, Germanwings and Lufthansa also conduct bolstering strategy as the secondary response strategy, such as reminder, ingratiation and victimage. A quote from Lufthansa CEO, during the official statement that have been broadcast through YouTube on March 27, 2015 stated: *"Because in our sixty years of history, we've always said safety is our top priority. And it's my promise and the promise of those 120,000 people at Lufthansa working around the world that this priority will continue to be our top target"* as the part of organization's reminder strategy. Reminder strategy considered very useful to the organization to show the good works of Lufthansa and Germanwings history and records in the aviation industry to every level of their stakeholders. Moreover, additional strategy such as ingratiation can be used anytime to help the organization addressing the crisis. A praise by Lufthansa CEO

such as: *"Thank you very much for your sympathy and thank you very much for your loyalty"* as a part of ingratiation strategy to thank their stakeholders in regard of their help, sympathy and loyalty to had placed their trust in Germanwings and in its parent's company as well - Lufthansa. Moreover, rather than blaming to others, Lufthansa and Germanwings in this case also positioned the organizations also part of the victims during the crisis because the crew on board is also become the victim on the crisis. This can be seen from the following quotes: *"This is the worst possible time, the worst possible moment, the darkest chapter in the history in our airline"* or *"Something happened which we work so hard against that it would never hit us: We lost a Germanwings aircraft with 150 passengers and crew on board. Our thoughts and prayers in this very moment are with the relatives of those passengers and the crew members who lose their lives"* are considered refers to a situation where the Lufthansa and Germanwings claims to be part of the victim of a crisis too. Victimage strategy also considered as the most frequent strategy that Lufthansa and Germanwings used in every communication response.

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