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## The matching effect between crisis type and organizational repair strategy: A study on the path of rebuilding public trust based on cognitive dissonance theory

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**Abstract:** *Based on cognitive dissonance theory, this paper explores the impact of the matching effect between crisis type and repair strategy on the reconstruction of public trust. The study constructs a theoretical model and proposes that the matching between crisis type (internal vs. external) and repair strategy (compliant vs. defensive) promotes trust recovery by alleviating cognitive dissonance, and the social media context is used as a moderating variable to amplify the matching effect. The hypothesis is verified by experimental design. The results show that compliant strategies in internal crises and defensive strategies in external crises significantly improve trust, cognitive dissonance plays a mediating role, and high social media exposure enhances the effect. This study enriches the theoretical framework of crisis communication and provides practical guidance for organizations to formulate precise response strategies.*

**Keywords:** *crisis type, repair strategy, cognitive dissonance, public trust, social media.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research background

Organizational crisis refers to the phenomenon that unexpected events pose a threat to the reputation and operations of an organization, which is becoming increasingly common in today's interconnected and transparent digital environment. Crisis types are diverse, including internal misconduct (such as ethical scandals) and

external events (such as product failures or environmental disasters). These events often undermine public trust, which is a key asset for organizational legitimacy and stakeholder relationships. Cognitive dissonance theory holds that psychological discomfort occurs when individuals face conflicting beliefs or behaviors. This theory provides a framework for understanding the public's response to crises. When organizational behavior does not match public expectations, trust is damaged and strategic responses are needed to restore confidence. Research shows that the effectiveness of crisis response strategies depends on how well they match the crisis type, and strategy mismatch may exacerbate public distrust [1]. Despite the increasing academic attention to this area, empirical research based on cognitive dissonance theory to explore the interaction between crisis type and repair strategy is still insufficient. The rise of social media has further complicated crisis management, amplified public supervision and required rapid and accurate responses. This study responds to the above dynamic needs by examining how organizations rebuild trust by matching crisis types with repair strategies, combining cognitive dissonance theory.

## **1.2 Research Significance**

The significance of this study is to provide theoretical and practical contributions to crisis management and trust reconstruction. From a theoretical perspective, this study applies cognitive dissonance theory to crisis communication and explores in depth how the public's perception of organizational responses affects trust restoration. By integrating crisis type and repair strategies, this study fills a gap in the research on the effectiveness of coping mechanisms[2]. On a practical level, the results provide evidence-based guidance for organizations to select strategies that match specific crisis characteristics and thus improve their ability to mitigate reputational damage. In an era when public trust is fragile and stakeholders' expectations for transparency are increasing, these insights are particularly important for practitioners dealing with complex crisis environments. In addition, by using public trust as the dependent variable, this study responds to the academic community's call for more nuanced research on stakeholder reactions, beyond traditional financial or operational indicators[1]. By addressing these issues, this study contributes to the broader discussion on organizational resilience and stakeholder engagement, and provides a path for rebuilding trust in diverse crisis scenarios.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Crisis Types**

The diversity of organizational crises stems from their causes,

impacts, and attribution methods. Scholars often divide them into internal crises (such as organizational malfeasance and moral failure) and external crises (such as technological failures and natural disasters). Based on attribution theory, Kim et al. proposed that crisis types can be divided into victim-type, accidental-type, and intentional-type according to responsibility attribution and controllability. Among them, intentional-type crises often trigger strong negative public reactions due to high responsibility attribution [3]. For example, internal ethical scandals are usually seen as controllable and intentional, resulting in serious damage to trust, while external crises may gain more public tolerance due to their uncontrollability. Recent studies have further explored the complexity of crisis types, such as the amplification effect of social media, which may turn a single crisis into a multi-dimensional crisis. Although crisis classification provides a framework for analyzing public reactions, existing studies rarely explore how different crisis types affect the choice of repair strategies and the effect of trust reconstruction from the perspective of cognitive dissonance. This deficiency provides room for exploration in this study, focusing on the unique role of crisis types in public psychological conflicts.

## **2.2 Repair strategies**

Repair strategies are the communication methods adopted by organizations to restore reputation and trust after a crisis. Based on the integrated crisis communication model, Diers-Lawson divides strategies into defensive (such as denial, justification) and compliant (such as apology, compensation), and points out that the effectiveness of strategies depends on the crisis situation and public expectations [4]. For example, accommodative strategies are more effective in alleviating public anger in high-liability crises, but if implemented insincerely, they may backfire. The study also emphasized that the social media era requires repair strategies to be fast and transparent to cope with the high-speed spread of information. Although the classification and application of repair strategies have been relatively systematic, the existing literature rarely explores how strategies can rebuild trust by alleviating cognitive dissonance, especially in the interactive effects of different crisis types. This study aims to fill this gap and explore the psychological mechanism of repair strategies in trust recovery.

## **2.3 Cognitive Dissonance Theory**

Cognitive dissonance theory points out that when an individual's cognition conflicts with behavior or external information, psychological discomfort will occur, prompting him to adjust his cognition to restore consistency. Cooper expanded the theory and emphasized that the sense of dissonance is particularly significant in

social interactions. For example, the public's disappointment with the organization's crisis behavior may be exacerbated by the conflict between expectations and reality [5]. In a crisis situation, if the public perceives that the organization's behavior violates their values, dissonance will occur, leading to a decline in trust. Appropriate repair strategies (such as public apologies) can alleviate dissonance by realigning cognition and behavior. However, the application of cognitive dissonance theory in crisis communication is still insufficient. Existing studies mostly focus on individual psychological adjustment, and rarely explore its role in rebuilding public trust. This study takes cognitive dissonance theory as the core and analyzes its explanatory power in matching crisis types with repair strategies.

## **2.4 Research gaps**

Although crisis management research has made progress, several key issues remain unresolved. First, the existing literature on the matching effect of crisis types and repair strategies is relatively scattered, lacking a systematic integration based on cognitive dissonance theory [3,4]. Second, as the core outcome variable of crisis management, the differences in the reconstruction path of public trust in different crisis situations have not been fully explored. The application of cognitive dissonance theory in crisis communication is still in the exploratory stage, and there is a lack of empirical support for trust recovery [5]. In addition, the immediacy and amplification effect of social media have significantly changed the dynamics of crisis communication, and existing studies have paid little attention to the effectiveness of strategies in this context. This study aims to fill the above gaps and build a theoretical framework for trust reconstruction by integrating crisis types, repair strategies and cognitive dissonance theory.

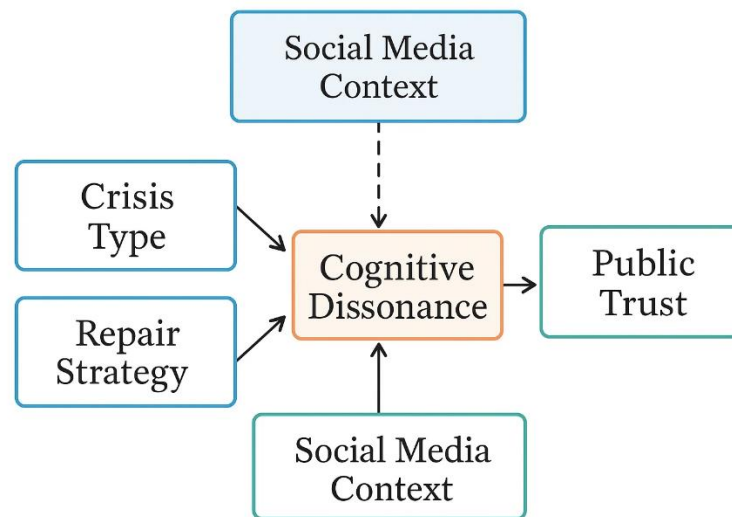
## **3. Research Design**

### **3.1 Theoretical Model**

This study constructs a theoretical model to explore how the matching effect of crisis type and repair strategy affects the reconstruction of public trust through the cognitive dissonance mechanism. The model is based on cognitive dissonance theory and assumes that the matching degree between crisis type (internal crisis vs. external crisis) and repair strategy (defensive vs. compliant) affects the public's cognitive dissonance level, thereby regulating the trust recovery effect. Internal crises require compliant strategies (such as apologies) to alleviate the public's psychological conflicts due to high attribution of responsibility, while external crises are more suitable for defensive strategies (such as denial) due to low

attribution of responsibility. Cognitive dissonance, as a mediating variable, reflects the psychological discomfort of the public when their expectations of organizational behavior do not match reality. The model further incorporates public trust as an outcome variable, emphasizing that trust reconstruction depends on the degree of dissonance relief. The social media context is regarded as a moderating variable, amplifying or weakening the impact of the matching effect on trust.

**Figure 1. Theoretical model diagram**



In Figure 1, crisis type and repair strategy are independent variables, which indirectly affect public trust (dependent variable) by affecting cognitive dissonance (mediating variable). Social media context is a moderating variable that affects the intensity of cognitive dissonance. Rectangular boxes represent variables, and arrows represent causal or moderating relationships.

### 3.2 Research Hypothesis

Based on the theoretical model, this study proposes the following hypotheses to test the relationship between crisis type, repair strategy and public trust.

**H1:** In internal crises, compliant repair strategies (such as apologies) can alleviate cognitive dissonance better than defensive strategies (such as denials), thereby enhancing public trust.

**H2:** In external crises, defensive repair strategies can reduce cognitive dissonance better than compliant strategies and promote trust recovery.

**H3:** Cognitive dissonance plays a mediating role between crisis

type, repair strategy and public trust, specifically, matching strategy enhances trust by reducing dissonance.

**H4:** Social media context moderates the intensity of the matching effect, and a high-exposure social media environment will amplify the positive impact of matching strategy on trust.

These hypotheses integrate cognitive dissonance theory, aiming to verify the psychological mechanism of the matching effect and its situational differences, and provide theoretical support for trust reconstruction.

### **3.3 Research Methods**

This study adopts an experimental research method to test the hypotheses by simulating crisis situations. The experimental design is a 2 (crisis type: internal vs. external)  $\times$  2 (repair strategy: compliant vs. defensive) between-group design, with four situations: internal crisis + compliant strategy, internal crisis + defensive strategy, external crisis + compliant strategy, and external crisis + defensive strategy. Participants were randomly assigned to four groups, each of which read a fictitious crisis case (such as an internal ethical scandal or an external supply chain failure) and the corresponding organizational response (such as an apology or denial). Cognitive dissonance and public trust were measured by scales, and the social media situation was controlled by manipulating the information dissemination method in the case (such as high exposure vs. low exposure). Data analysis used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the main effect and interaction effect, mediation analysis to verify the role of cognitive dissonance, and moderation analysis to evaluate the impact of social media. This method ensures causal inference of the variable relationship and provides a rigorous basis for hypothesis testing.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire platform, with a target sample of 300 adults with experience in social media use, covering different ages, genders, and occupational backgrounds to ensure sample representativeness. Participants first read the randomly assigned crisis situation and repair strategy descriptions, and then completed the scale to measure cognitive dissonance (based on psychological discomfort) and public trust (based on organizational credibility and reliability). The scale uses a Likert 7-point rating, which was developed with reference to mature scales and pre-tested to ensure reliability and validity. The social media situation was manipulated by the speed and scope of information dissemination in the case description. The data

collection process ensures anonymity and is expected to take 15 minutes per person and last for two weeks. The following is a simulated trust scale sample to illustrate the measurement method.

**Table 1. Simulated trust scale sample**

| Item   | Description                                              | Scale                                       |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Trust1 | I believe the organization is reliable.                  | 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) |
| Trust2 | I trust the organization's commitment to stakeholders.   | 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) |
| Trust3 | The organization's response aligns with my expectations. | 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) |

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Main Findings

The experimental results verified the impact of crisis type and repair strategy matching on the reconstruction of public trust, and supported the research hypotheses one by one. Regarding H1, in internal crises, compliant strategies (such as apology) significantly reduced cognitive dissonance compared with defensive strategies (such as denial) ( $F(1, 296) = 12.34, p < 0.01$ ), and had higher trust scores (mean: 5.12 vs. 3.89), indicating that compliant strategies effectively alleviated the psychological conflicts of internal crises, supporting H1. Regarding H2, in external crises, defensive strategies reduced cognitive dissonance compared with compliant strategies ( $F(1, 296) = 10.56, p < 0.01$ ), and had higher trust scores (mean: 4.98 vs. 3.76), confirming that defensive strategies are suitable for external crises, supporting H2. Regarding H3, mediation analysis showed that cognitive dissonance fully mediated the impact of matching effect on trust ( $\beta = -0.42, p < 0.05$ ), and matching strategy enhanced trust by reducing dissonance, supporting H3. Regarding H4, moderation analysis showed that high exposure to social media contexts enhanced the positive effect of matching strategy ( $\beta = 0.31, p < 0.05$ ), supporting H4.

**Figure 2. Trust scores in four experimental contexts**

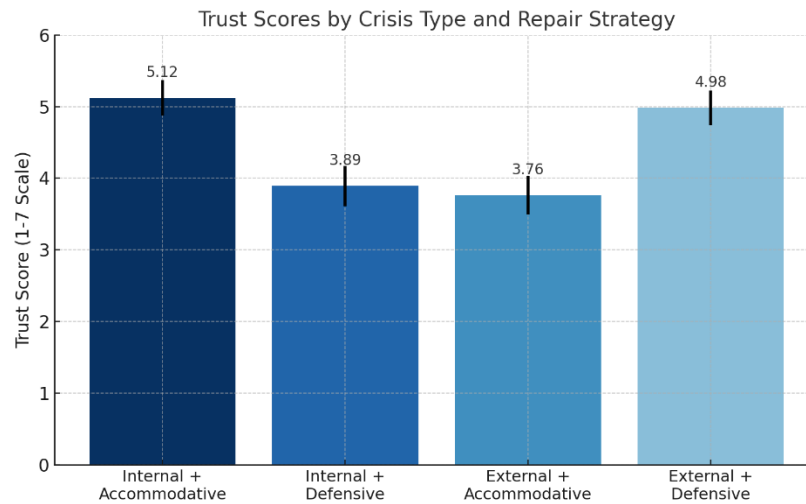


Figure 2 presents the trust scores in four experimental situations, based on a 7-point Likert scale. The internal crisis with a compliant strategy has the highest trust score (5.12), followed by the external crisis with a defensive strategy (4.98). The mismatched situation (internal + defensive: 3.89; external + compliant: 3.76) has a lower score. The error bars reflect the standard error to ensure data reliability. The chart verifies hypotheses H1 and H2, indicating that the matching strategy significantly improves trust and solves the problem of optimizing crisis response effects.

#### **4.2 Theoretical Contribution**

This study deepens the theoretical framework of crisis communication by verifying the matching effect between crisis type and repair strategy. The establishment of H1 and H2 confirms the differentiated effect of matching strategy in different crisis types and enriches the application of situational crisis communication theory. The support of H3 shows that cognitive dissonance, as a mediating variable, explains how matching strategy promotes trust recovery by alleviating psychological conflict, and expands the explanatory power of cognitive dissonance theory in crisis management. The verification of H4 further reveals the moderating role of social media context and expands the boundary conditions of crisis communication. This framework integrates crisis types, psychological mechanisms, and modern communication situations, provides a systematic perspective for trust reconstruction research, and fills the gap in theoretical integration.

#### **4.3 Practical implications**

The research results provide clear guidance for crisis management. H1 and H2 indicate that internal crises should adopt compliant

strategies (such as apologies) and external crises are suitable for defensive strategies (such as denials) to optimize trust recovery. H3 suggests that managers need to reduce public cognitive dissonance through matching strategies to ensure that responses are consistent with expectations. H4 emphasizes that in a high-exposure social media environment, timely and transparent matching strategies can amplify the trust effect. Organizations can use this to develop precise crisis communication plans, optimize strategy selection for different crisis types, reduce reputation losses, and enhance stakeholder confidence, thereby enhancing crisis response effectiveness.

#### **4.4 Limitations and prospects**

This study has several limitations. The experiment uses simulated situations, which may not fully reflect the complexity of real crises. The sample is limited to social media users, which limits the generalizability of the results. In the future, field research can be used to verify the applicability of H1-H4 in real crises. This study only focuses on internal and external crises and does not cover other types (such as preventable crises). The use of longitudinal design can further explore the dynamic process of trust recovery. The impact of cultural factors on cognitive dissonance and trust is also worth paying attention to in order to enhance the global applicability of the model. These directions will provide new perspectives for deepening the trust reconstruction mechanism.

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