Crisis strategies in BP's Deepwater Horizon response

- An image repair and situational crisis communication study

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The BP Deepwater Horizon crisis in 2010 was one of the largest catastrophes in the history of the oil industry. BP was sued over the disaster, and lost several billion dollars. This study examines the crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies, which can be found in BP's press releases following the Deepwater Horizon crisis. In particular, the study looks closer at what established crisis communication strategies could be discerned in the material, and how they are used discursively. The theories used were the Image Repair Theory (IRT) and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The results show that BP utilized a number of different established crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies in their crisis communication work in the press releases. These strategies were concern, corrective action, ingratiation, transcendence, differentiation, denial, shifting the blame/scapegoating, defeasibility, compassion and attacking the accuser. They were used discursively by the CEO by expressing sympathy, promising that a similar event will never happen again, by stating appreciation for and praising the leadership of the U.S. President and public sector. What is more, it is used by describing in detail how the solution process progresses, by stating what the causes of the crisis were, by describing other involved actors' lack of taking responsibility and by establishing a fraud hotline. The main conclusions of the study are that BP used several crisis strategies in their press releases, though rather inconsistently. Additionally, BP used the strategies in an ambiguous manner, and changed strategies over time. Lastly, one main conclusion is also that a company is prepared to utilize crisis communication strategies in their practical communications work, though not entirely in the way prescribed by the theories.
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1 Introduction

Crisis communication can be defined as the "collection, processing and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs, 2010). This field of study is important because it highlights the existence of crises, an often-neglected part of our reality. Thereby, it makes people aware about the existence of crises. Furthermore, it also makes people more aware of how they affect an organization. Not in the least are there crises pertinent to the environment, e.g. such crises which are generated because of industrial accidents (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007). For instance, the industrial accidents in the form of oil spills generated by major oil companies constitute one large form of environmental destruction, also causing many problems and negative consequences in the lives of the people, animals and communities affected (Pallardy, n.d.). Constituting such a type of environmental crisis was the 2010 Deepwater Horizon incident generated by the British oil company BP and its cooperating partners. During April 2010, one of their oil rigs exploded outside the state of Louisiana, subsequently generating an enormous amount of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, and destroying the lives of the people, local communities and animals which happened to get in its way (Pallardy, n.d.). For these reasons, this study will examine the crisis communications strategies which the responsible oil company BP utilized following this crisis, by looking at the press releases issued by BP following the Deepwater Horizon incident.

1.1 Social relevance

The importance from a social perspective of investigating such a crisis as the Deepwater Horizon crisis could not be stressed enough. As already mentioned, the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster and subsequent Gulf of Mexico oil spill was one of the biggest oil industry catastrophes and oil spills in the history of the world, generating extreme amounts of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, contributing to ongoing environmental problems (Pallardy, n.d.). What is more, the Deepwater Horizon crisis generated large amounts of media attention internationally (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2012; Cable News Network [CNN], 2015), as well as public outrage, both from the local communities affected by the oil spill, and from environmentalist groups suing the company (Schleifstein, 2015). In addition, former U.S. president Barack Obama intervened into the BP crisis management process, coercing them to set up an escrow fund for 20 billion dollars (Washington Post, 2010). Finally, since BP is one of the biggest oil companies in the entire world, its activities are important to study in their own right, considering the impact the company has on the world we live in. Therefore, studying from a crisis communications perspective how this particular company has generated crises responses, can add some understanding to how the world we live in has been shaped and is continuing to be shaped, through the private sector, through the media
and through communications. I hope that this particular study will be able to contribute with some insights concerning empirical data relevant to these events and materials, adding yet another piece to the large knowledge puzzle that is the BP Deepwater Horizon incident.

1.2 Disposition

Firstly, a background to BP as a company will be given. Secondly, the aim and research questions of the study will be provided. Thirdly, a description of crisis communications as a research field will be written, and in connection with this, the research gap, which is to be filled, will also be described. Following this, the theoretical framework and concepts, which are going to be used, will be provided. Furthermore, the methodology of the present study will be described. After this, the results and theoretical analysis of the study will be presented. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn from this.
2 Background

In this background section, brief descriptions concerning BP as a company, BP’s way of managing the environment and the Deepwater Horizon crisis in 2010 will be provided.

2.1 Basic facts about BP

BP, formerly called British Petroleum and now called Beyond Petroleum, is a global energy company with operations in more than 70 different countries. It was founded in 1908 as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company with the discovery of oil in Persia (Beyond Petroleum [BP], n.d.). It has its headquarters in London, England. They operate within the energy sectors of oil and gas, by actively looking for and producing oil and gas both onshore and offshore. They manufacture fuels, and market fuels, to be used in many different everyday products and in packaging (BP, n.d.). There are approximately 74,500 people working in BP worldwide, and they have millions of energy customers in total (BP, n.d.). The company earned 185 billion dollars’ worth of sales and other operating revenues in 2016, and produced 3.3 million barrels of oil equivalent per day. BP has approximately 18,000 retail sites around the world, and also produce 14.2 million tones of petrochemicals. Their profit for 2016 was 2.6 billion dollars (BP, n.d.). Their CEO is Robert Dudley, an American and British businessperson. He is 61 years old. He has spent his whole career in the oil and gas industry. He joined Amaco Corporation in 1979, and became a part of BP when the two companies merged in 1999. He held several executive positions in BP prior to becoming CEO in 2010 (BP, n.d.). Their former CEO was the British businessperson Tony Hayward, who needed to resign from his position in BP in connection with the Deepwater Horizon incident in 2010. He holds a Ph.D. in geology from the University of Edinburgh (The Guardian, 2010).

2.2 BP and the environment

BP have marketed themselves as an environmentally friendly company, and received several marketing prices for such marketing efforts, ever since the year 2000 (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013). They have also started to reorient themselves towards solar energy, and have renamed themselves to Beyond Petroleum, or just BP, having previously been called British Petroleum. In connection with this, they have also changed their logo, into a sun symbolizing the Greek sun god Helios (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013). However, there are several environmental organizations, which consider or at least have previously considered BP to be one of the worst companies in the world when it comes to environmental protection. For instance, the corporation watch list Corp Watch listed BP as one of the 10 worst companies during the year 2000 (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013). What is more, Mother Jones Magazine considered BP to be "one of the worst companies during both 2001 and 2005" because of their record of
accomplishment concerning human rights protection and environmental protection (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013). It has been labeled the "leading company in the US" concerning the emergence of chemical accidents, and was considered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) back in 1991 as one of the worst companies in the entire nation concerning environmental friendliness (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013). In addition, BP has spent approximately 625 million dollars on representation of their interests through political lobbying in Washington D.C. – and has been considered to be one of the most prominent companies in this particular area between the years 2004 to 2010. What is more, it was suspected that BP had spent 16 million dollars on lobbying Congress in the United States in order to block stricter safety regulations during the year 2009 alone (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013). Critics argue that the company is in the business of "greenwashing", meaning that they are focusing on portraying themselves as an environmentally friendly company, while in reality destroying the environment (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013).

2.3 The Deepwater Horizon crisis in 2010

On April 20, 2010, an explosion occurred in connection to the Deepwater Horizon oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico located approximately 41 miles (66 km) outside the coast of Louisiana in the US. The explosion caused a massive blowout from an oil well deep below surface in the Gulf of Mexico, which generated a cascade of fire destroying the oil rig while it was still in the ocean (Pallardy, n.d.). On board the oil platform were, among others, 11 workers who were killed and 17 more workers who were injured (Pallardy, n.d). The explosion led to the subsequent sinking of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig on April 22nd, and to an offshore oil spill into the Gulf of Mexico so enormous, that it was unprecedented in the history of the entire oil industry (Pallardy, n.d). In other words, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion and the subsequent Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster generated an unprecedented catastrophe in the United States of America in the year 2010, particularly to the four coastal states of Texas, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida. What is more, the crisis generated highly negative consequences, such as destruction of livelihood, lives and property, for the people involved in the local fishing industries and local businesses, the people living alongside the coastal areas and the animals in the Gulf of Mexico (Pallardy, n.d.)

2.3.1 BP's communications efforts during the Deepwater Horizon incident

In terms of communications, BP responded to this crisis by issuing several statements in both traditional and social media forms (Chewning, 2013; Harlow & Harlow, 2013). They were active on several different platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, where they were trying to communicate to concerned individuals, companies, states and organizations, by issuing information statements of various sorts (Chewning, 2013). They
also participated in traditional interviews and press conferences with the media on many different occasions in connection with these events (BBC, 2012).

2.3.2 The legal ramifications of the Deepwater Horizon incident

BP immediately accepted parts of the legal responsibility for the disaster. In addition, BP has also been put on trial for its actions, more precisely by being sued by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) for its Deepwater Horizon incident, alongside companies Transocean and Anadarko in 2010 for violations of several U.S. laws protecting clean water against oil pollution (Pallardy, n.d.). As a result, BP was found guilty and coerced into paying at least 7.8 billion dollars in victim compensation (Pallardy, n.d.). BP tried to appeal the agreement unsuccessfully (Pallardy, n.d.). What is more, BP also pleaded guilty to 14 criminal charges, among them 11 counts of manslaughter, in addition to violations of the Clean Water and Migratory Bird Treaty acts (Pallardy, n.d.). This meant that BP was coerced into paying approximately 4.5 billion dollars in fines. In addition, BP admitted to having mislead its shareholders concerning the oil spill's magnitude (Pallardy, n.d.), and was suspended from entering into any new contracts by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Finally, BP was also the subject of a civil trial which began in 2013 in New Orleans, where they were ultimately found guilty of having been “grossly negligent” before the Deepwater Horizon incident (Pallardy, n.d.), and sentenced to pay 20.8 billion dollars in fines, the largest penalty ever required from a single company in the United States (Pallardy, n.d.).
3 Aim and Research Question

The following section will present the aim of the study, as well as the research question associated with the study. What is more, the section will outline some arguments in favor of the aim.

3.1 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to examine which crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies can be found in the BP press release material following the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010.

3.2 Motivation of the aim

Firstly, one can argue in favor of the importance of doing further research within the area of BP’s crisis communication following the Deepwater Horizon incident in 2010 by stating that it is important to look at the matter more in-depth than what has previously been done. This, in order to be able to know what crisis response strategies and image repair strategies can actually be found in the actual press release materials. Secondly, it is important to study the strategies in question, in the BP Deepwater Horizon press releases, since it can contribute to the understanding of how this particular company behaves in a severe crisis. Thirdly, it is important to study the BP case since it brings additional understanding to the general field of crisis communication, by displaying how a company actually uses crisis communication in practice. It is one thing to say that an established theory should be used in a certain way, another to look at how an actual company has actually applied crisis communication in a real situation.

What is more, the aim can be motivated by stating that crisis communication competence and knowledge is important in a number of different situations. For instance, when working for a company or organization, knowing how to properly respond to a crisis can mean the difference between the survival or death of the company or organization (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007). Additionally, there are many different types of crises in the world (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007), that not knowing anything about how to manage or respond to such situations could potentially be disastrous. Studying the crisis communication field can help bring increased awareness to the general problems which crises actually constitute.
3.3 Research questions

The aim is specified in the following research questions:

RQ1: What established crisis communication strategies can be discerned from the BP press releases following the Deepwater Horizon incident in 2010?

RQ2: How are the crisis communication strategies used discursively in the BP press releases following the Deepwater Horizon incident in 2010?
4 Previous research

This section starts by introducing the general field of crisis communication and a brief overview of other studies. Following this, several studies focusing on the particular BP Deepwater Horizon case are summarized. Lastly, this study positions itself based on the previous research, outlining a research gap, which is to be filled with this particular study.

There is a vast amount of research, which has already been done concerning BP’s crisis communications. Also concerning BP’s press release materials, several previous studies have already been done (Choi, 2012; Harlow & Harlow, 2013; Wickman, 2013). Some of the most important of these studies are summarized in this chapter, and are included because of the relevance to the study at hand.

4.1 The crisis communication field – a brief introduction

The crisis communication field is a field dealing with crisis in many different types. The field often focuses on case studies and it is common to utilize a qualitative method of research, such as using textual analysis, but there are also studies (Coombs, 2006) based on more quantitative research methodologies. Some of the most central theories within the field are the Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997) and the Situational Crisis Communications Theory (Coombs, 2006). The field can be applied to many different situations. In addition, the crisis communications field is a field with many connections to other fields, not in the least to Public Relations, but also to Risk Communication, Issues Management, Reputation Management, Disaster Communication and Business Continuity (Coombs, 2010).

4.2 Other crisis communication studies – a brief overview

There have been many studies in crisis communication worth mentioning. For instance, one study looked at the crisis communication efforts from Bridgestone/Firestone after their tire failure scandal, which had caused the death of 270 people (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002). The aim was to analyze if the crisis efforts were successful or not (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002). The theory used to analyze the empirical data was the Image Repair Theory, in addition to rhetorics (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002). The results were that the companies did not properly utilize the Image Repair Theory or similar crisis communication theories, in order to communicate during the crisis. For instance, they did use corrective action, but they started to use it too late. They also used mortification and bolstering in combination with each other (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002). The conclusion was that Bridgestone/Firestone were unsuccessful in their crisis communications efforts (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002).
The Exxon Valdez case is also worth noting, since it constitutes a case, which is close to the BP Deepwater Horizon case. In one study, researchers focused on the Exxon Valdez case by examining their communication strategies using several research-based effective crisis communication criteria as an evaluative basis (Williams & Treadaway, 1992). The result was that Exxon Valdez did not properly utilize such effective crisis communication insights in order to manage their communication response to the oil spill, but rather had a problematic slow response to the oil spill, taking a reactive rather than a proactive crisis communications approach (Williams & Treadway, 1992). What is more, they did not properly take responsibility for the crisis themselves, rather trying to blame the captain of the ship for the crisis, by utilizing a scapegoating strategy (Williams & Treadway, 1992).

4.3 Crisis communication studies of the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010

There are many studies, which have hitherto been carried out concerning the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion. For instance, one study looked at the relationship between PR, news and politics when it comes to the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 (Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz & van Atteveldt, 2012). Their aim was to analyze the connections between agenda building and strategic framing in PR and news concerning the BP Deepwater Horizon case (Schultz et al., 2012). Their method was quantitative content analysis through the usage of automated data processing, analysing 126 BP press releases, among other things (Schultz et al., 2012). The theories used in the study were those of strategic framing, associative framing and third-order agenda setting. Their results were that BP used frames to focus on the oil spill itself, and on the solutions to the oil spill rather than on the causes of the spill (Schultz et al., 2012). They concluded that BP tried to use a "decoupling strategy" in their way of framing the crisis, meaning that they were disassociating themselves with the causes of the crisis, while simultaneously focusing on the solutions (Schultz et al., 2012).

Another study has looked at the BP crisis response to the Deepwater Horizon incident over time (Harlow & Harlow, 2013). The aim was not stated explicitly, but can be construed as to fill the research gap concerning the lack of studies investigating the medium and long-term responses from BP to the crisis. As a method, they chose to collect BP’s press releases from BP’s official website, and to use two undergraduate students in order to code the material in accordance with Benoit’s 14 crisis response strategies (Harlow & Harlow, 2013). The chosen theory for the study was the Image Restoration Theory (IRT) by Benoit (Harlow & Harlow, 2013). The results were that BP used the strategies of compensation (25, 20.2 per cent) and corrective action (67, 54 per cent) the most, while using the strategies of sympathy (1, 0.8 per
cent) and technical description (4, 3.2 per cent) far less. What is more, they found that the contents of the press releases varied by month (Harlow & Harlow, 2013). They conclude that BP shifted strategy when President Obama started to address the issue (Harlow & Harlow, 2013).

What is more, one study examined the BP press releases plus the BP Facebook posts and Twitter tweets, through the means of quantitative methods (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). The aim is not stated explicitly in the study, but can be taken to be about examining BP's multimedia response (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). As research method, they focused on the collection of BP's press releases, Facebook posts and Twitter tweets, and used quantitative methods to analyse the material. In the study, they provide the readers with a Taxonomy of Crisis Response Strategies Potentially Used by Organizations. This includes several tactic categories (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). They present two hypotheses (that BP's messaging during the crisis will differ based on platform and that BP's response messages to the crisis will predominantly employ positive/pro-social messaging) and two research questions (what message strategies BP used across each platform, and if BP's messaging during the crisis differed based on platform) in the study (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). Their results showed that both hypotheses were confirmed. Their results also showed that BP used an "affirming amplification strategy", meaning tactics concerning self-enhancement, framing the organization, accomodative tactics and excellene or renewal tactics (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). They also found that BP utilized to other tactics, in the forms of routine communication and defensive (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). They conclude, among other things, by presenting a synchronized model of crisis communication (Diers-Lawson, A.R., & Donahue, J., 2013).

In addition, one study looked at the press release genre as a sort of strategical rhetorical framing device (Wickman, 2013). The aim was to show that press releases as a genre constitute a constructive rhetorical frame, and to show how press releases increasingly provide a means to shape public understanding over time (Wickman, 2013). The results show that BP used the press release genre to construct as sort of "restoration narrative" which served both long-term and short-term interests which BP had, in other words to characterize the oil spill as a problem solved by BP using their innovative solutions (Wickman, 2013). BP relies on self-reference – responding to, but not necessarily taking responsibility for, the crisis (Wickman, 2013). What is more, the study also construes the press release headlines and subsections as part of a deliberate narrative strategy, in order to highlight BP's efforts to capture the ruptured well (Wickman, 2013). The content is used to categorize BP as an environmentally conscious organization, argues the author (Wickman, 2013). The study
concludes that BP accepts responsibility for what can be controlled and evades responsibility for that which cannot be controlled (Wickman, 2013).

In another study, the authors set out to explore how social and environmental disclosures were used to manage reputation during a major incident, exemplified through BP (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). The theoretical perspective used in the study is that of Reputation Risk Management (RRM), based on the notion that companies use disclosures to maintain their reputation (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). RRM also consists of the Image Restoration Theory (IRT) suggested by Benoit (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). The results were that BP used reputation risk management in their crisis communication. The study also looked at BP’s management of social/environmental disclosures from the perspective of the IRT. Here, they found that BP predominantly used bolstering in order to restore their image, meaning disclosing information about its good traits (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). They also used transcendence, minimization, compensation and apology as image restoration strategies (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). They conclude that the RRM can give important insights into the social and environmental reporting by making it easier to reach in-depth understanding of information disclosures (Arora & Lodhia, 2016).

There have also been studies looking at the frames, in connection with the themes and keywords in the press releases. For instance, one study had as its aim to analyze the kinds of frames, which BP used in their press releases in order to deal with the oil spill (Choi, 2012). The study uses content analysis to identify five frames, which BP used during the crisis. The method used in the study was framing analysis (Choi, 2012). The five frames were informational frame (provided basic technical information), philanthropic frame (monetary donations), social responsibility frame (BP’s efforts to make things right), defensive frame (responses to news media allegations) and the official BP updates frame (what BP was doing to contain the oil well flow) – these frames were the basis of the results (Choi, 2012). The discussion and conclusion state different things in different parts of the article. On the one hand, that is was a success. On the other hand, that it was difficult to say whether the framing was successful or failed, because the results were ambivalent and that BP should have refrained from using highly technical language (Choi, 2012).

There have also been several previous studies, which have focused on the BP Deepwater Horizon incident from a mistakes perspective. For example, one study focused on BP’s crisis communication mistakes following the disaster (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013). More precisely, the aim of the study was to describe BP’s serious communication mistakes with its stakeholders managing a serious hit to BP’s reputation (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013). The methodology used in
the study was that of an "in-depth investigation of secondary data" in the form of newspapers, audiovisual materials and social network sites, using a qualitative method (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013). The theory used was the Situational Crisis Communication Theory developed by W. Timothy Coombs (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013). The results showed that BP used denial, scapegoating and diminishing in their disaster communication strategies in order to lower their responsibility for the crisis (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013). The paper concludes that crisis communication management was a weak link at BP and that practitioners should learn from the leadership, culture and PR mistakes of BP (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013).

Finally, one study looked a BP's way of managing the Deepwater Horizon crisis through social media by means of William Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011). The method used was content analysis, where posts, tweets, videos and photos from BP's official communication channels were collected, and coded using systematic selection (Muralidharan et al., 2011). They found that BP predominantly used corrective action as their image restoration strategy on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, followed by compensation and mortification (Muralidharan et al., 2011). They concluded that BP did not respond to the crisis in time, that the dominant image restoration strategy used by BP was corrective action and that BP has taken actions to accept their mistakes, compensate affected individuals and businesses and pay for the clean-up efforts (Muralidharan et al., 2011).

4.4 Research gap

There are other studies having previously focused on the crisis response strategies and/or image restoration strategies, which can be found in BP's press releases (Arora & Lodhia, 2016; Choi, 2012). However, the perspective of looking more in-depth at the empirical data in question using the same theories as have been previously utilized, with a closer examination, might shed some new insights from the crisis communication theories. Previous studies have shown a large variety of case studies concerning the BP oil spill crisis in 2010. For instance, there have been studies on BP's way of framing press releases (Schultz et al., 2012) and studies on BP's social media communication management (Diers-Lawson, A.R., & Donahue, J., 2013) and more. This study will try to contribute with new empirical data concerning the press releases issued by BP following the crisis, as there seems to be lacking a more in-depth examination of those releases from a crisis communications theoretical perspective.
5 Theoretical framework and concepts

The following part of the study will describe the theoretical perspectives, which will be utilized in the study. The theories, which have been selected for the examination of the BP Deepwater Horizon case, are William Benoit’s Image Repair Theory (IRT) and W. Timothy Coombs’s Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Advantages and disadvantages with the theories will be evaluated briefly.

5.1 Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT)

The American crisis communication researcher W. Timothy Coombs developed the Situational Crisis Communications Theory (SCCT). It is made up of three different parts, namely:

The crisis situation

The crisis response strategies

A system for matching the crisis situation and crisis response strategies

(Coombs, 2006)

One can divide different crises into three main categories based on the amount of responsibility, which the organization has for it. In connection with this, an organization should create a list of different types of crisis, and create responses in line with such different levels of seriousness (Coombs, 2006). The severity of a crisis is determined by several different factors. Firstly, by the amount of damage it causes, emotionally, environmentally, financially or physically, to somebody or something. If the crisis is severe, it will increase the perceptions of responsibility (Coombs, 2006). In connection with this, Coombs talks about three different clusters, which can be used to determine the seriousness of the crisis, and consequently the appropriate response to it. Firstly, the victim cluster, in which the organization is the victim, such as in a disaster (Coombs, 2006). Secondly, the accidental cluster, meaning that it was not deliberately created in order to cause harm to somebody else or something else, such as a technical breakdown accident (Coombs, 2006). Thirdly, the preventable cluster (Coombs, 2006), which is the most severe type, since it comprises an organization knowingly having put other people at risk, taken inappropriate actions or violating regulations, e.g. as in organizational misdeed management misconduct (Coombs, 2006). Coombs divided the crisis into four different types, meaning the crisis type, the severity of the damage, the crisis history and the relationship history (Coombs, 2006). SCCT assesses the reputational threat associated with the particular crisis, and gives advice concerning the response strategy, which is the most appropriate.
What is more, the crisis manager should provide the stakeholders with crisis basics information, meaning a brief description of what happened during the crisis events. Additionally, the crisis manager should also provide them with protection information and correction information, meaning that they should take measures to make sure that the problem never happens again, and to communicate to anybody concerned, that such measures have been taken (Coombs, 2006). Finally, different clusters match different crisis responses – the victim cluster matches the deny response option, the accident cluster matches the diminish response option and the preventable cluster matches the deal response option (Coombs, 2006).

5.2 Image repair theory (IRT)

According to William Benoit’s Image Repair Theory (IRT), attacks can be broken down into two main components:

5.2.1 The two main components of attacks

The accused is held responsible for an act
The act is considered offensive

(Benoit, 1997)

According to the IRT, relevant audiences (Benoit, 1997) must consider an image threat offensive. What is more, an individual or organization must be held responsible for the act in question, in order for it to threaten the image (Benoit, 1997). In addition, a perceived offensive act is enough to generate the need for image repair, irrespective of the act actually being offensive or not (Benoit, 1997). What is more, an organization seeking to repair its image must communicate with multiple audiences, using different ways of communicating with them (Benoit, 1997). Benoit’s Image Repair Theory does not set out to describe different crises, nor different stages of a crisis, but rather focuses on message options when it comes to actual crises (Benoit, 1997).
5.2.2 The five crisis response strategies

Concerning these options, there are five different general categories mentioned by Benoit (1997):

(1) Denial
This is made up of two main components: a simple Denial, meaning that an individual or organization e.g. denies to having performed the act (Benoit, 1997), and shifting the blame, meaning that one can argue that somebody else is responsible for the act (Benoit, 1997)

(2) Evasion of responsibility
This is outlined in four subcategories: Provocation – meaning that the act in question is viewed as a response to somebody else’s offensive, provocative act, and constitutes a reasonable response to that act. Defeasibility, meaning that one can assert a lack of information or lack of control over the situation. What is more, one might respond by saying that the offensive act occurred by accident, rather than by intention. Finally, one can argue that the act was carried out with good intentions (Benoit, 1997).

(3) Reducing offensiveness
Furthermore, IRT also explains that should an individual or organization be accused of an offensive act, they can try to reduce the perceived offensiveness of those acts by using the following techniques (Benoit, 1997)
Bolstering – describing positive things which they have done in the past (Benoit, 1997). In addition, the usage of minimization can be employed in order to try to lower the negative feelings associated with a crisis (Benoit, 1997). Furthermore, differentiation means that one can distinguish the act from similar acts, which are more offensive than the original act (Benoit, 1997). What is more, transcendence means trying to place the act in a more favorable context than the original context (Benoit, 1997). Additionally, attacking the accuser, meaning to attack those who are accusing an individual or organization of a wrongful act, could also be utilized in order to accomplish the goal of reducing the offensiveness (Benoit, 1997). In addition, of course, one could always use compensation as a means of repairing one’s image, meaning e.g. to pay money to the persons or organizations affected by the offensive act (Benoit, 1997).

(4) Corrective action
In connection with this, corrective action could also be employed, meaning that the corporation promises to correct the problem in order to make sure it never happens again (Benoit, 1997).

(5) Mortification
Finally, a company can use mortification by confessing and ask for forgiveness. (Benoit, 1997)
5.2.3 The management of a crisis situation

Benoit also gives advice concerning what to do in a crisis (Benoit, 1997). Firstly, he emphasizes the importance of preparing before the crisis. For instance, this might be accomplished by using crisis contingency plans, which should contain efforts to lower the response time, prevent mistakes from being made and a clear description of who is the responsible crisis manager within the organization (Benoit, 1997). In addition, the plan should be able to manage different types of crises, and be updated frequently (Benoit, 1997). What is more, he also writes about the importance of finding out what the crisis is, to know which accusations are being made, and to tailor the crisis response to the alleged offense, not in the least by knowing how serious the offensive and/or accusation is (Benoit, 1997). Furthermore, the audiences involved should be known beforehand, the organization should make priorities between them by level of importance to one’s own organization, and make sure to send different messages to different sub audiences (Benoit, 1997). Finally, it might be wise for an organization to refrain from responding to an attack on certain occasions (Benoit, 1997). The organization could ignore the accusations being make or refocus by trying to shift the attention to something else, which is deemed more important (Benoit, 1997).

5.2.4 Effective Image Repair Discourse

General advice on persuasion also apply to image repair theory (Benoit, 1997). For instance, one should avoid making false claims, and provide support for the claims made (Benoit, 1997). In addition, one should develop recurring themes throughout a campaign, avoiding arguments, which may backfire later (Benoit, 1997). Even more important, one should admit that one is at fault immediately, since it is the morally right thing to do, and since anything else can backfire (Benoit, 1997). What is more, one should also remember that those who are accused might be innocent rather than guilty (Benoit, 1997). Furthermore, it is possible to shift the blame for some offensive act (Benoit, 1997). In addition, one should mention any and all factors beyond one's own control and openly explain which measures are being taken in order to prevent the problem from ever happening again, even in the cases where one is innocent (Benoit, 1997). However, it should be emphasized that taking corrective actions cannot guarantee success (Benoit, 1997). Nor can minimization always be said to function properly, since trying to make a serious problem seem trivial can backlash (Benoit, 1997). Finally, several strategies can work together, and while strategies might be important, they do not have omnipotent powers to repair all images either (Benoit, 1997).

5.3 Advantages and Disadvantages with the IBT and the SCCT

There are several advantages to both the IBT and the SCCT. For instance, the IBT mentions several important responses (Benoit, 1997) which can, should or are in fact going to be made,
when an organization faces a crisis. Arguably, Benoit manages to cover the responses, which are made during such events, effectively charting the discourses, which characterize such situations. The same is true for the SCCT – Coombs also manages to cover a plethora of responses to crises (Coombs, 2006) which will probably occur or can be used in such situations. What is more, both theories have the advantage of also bringing up important insights concerning the actual management of actual crises (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006), such as the importance of using crisis planning, a designated crisis manager and of knowing about different crisis types. However, the IRT seems to be more explicit in its emphasis on the importance of being honest in a crisis (Benoit, 1997), arguably an advantage, since anything else could potentially backfire upon the organization or individual, and since it is morally justifiable to be honest (Benoit, 1997). On the other hand, the SCCT has the advantage of including a sort of categorization of the different crisis types there are (Coombs, 2006), which is arguably also a disadvantage with the IRT, which does not include nor aims to include any such thing (Benoit, 1997). What is more, the SCCT also seems to be more aware of the need for matching certain types of crises to the appropriate crisis response type (Coombs, 2006), which is also lacking somewhat in the IRT (Benoit, 1997), one could say. This is arguably an advantage to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory over the Image Repair Theory - that it is situational. However, one could argue that the IRT contains certain crisis responses which the SCCT does not, for instance the provocation response (Benoit, 1997). In addition, the IRT is also more oriented towards individuals in addition to organizations (Benoit, 1997) than the SCCT, which only focuses on and only sets out to focus on organizations (Coombs, 2006).
6 Method and material

This part of the study will describe the materials and methods used for the purposes of the investigation. What is more, it will include a description of the analytical tools being used for the study, as well as a discussion concerning reliability, validity, population and sampling. Finally, it will address some strengths and weaknesses to the approaches being used.

6.1 Textual analysis as a research method

This particular study uses a qualitative textual analysis in order to investigate the relevant empirical data. Such a method can be used in order to analyze texts and other written, printed or published materials, concerning the meaning of the texts by means of content focus (Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson & Wängnerud, 2010). In a qualitative study, the person doing the research will interpret the texts being analyzed, which separates it as a research method from quantitative methods (Esaiasson et al., 2010). The method of choice – the qualitative textual analysis – is appropriate for the purposes of analyzing and examining the BP press releases because those releases are textually based materials, rather than being, for example, videos or sound clips. It was also deemed suitable for creating a study examining which crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies be found in the BP press release materials, rather than examining to what extent they can be found, or similar quantitative approach.

6.2 Tools of analysis

The press releases issued by BP on their official website were analyzed with a view concerning which crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies could be found in them. They were coded by myself, by first putting them in a large pool, summarizing their contents and then observing which press releases contained which strategies. The theories were utilized as the analytical tools for the study by first looking through the press release summaries, which I had written, to see which ones matched any crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies described by the IRT and/or SCCT, and then writing this down in the Results part, press release by press release. Further, based on the theoretical descriptions found in the Theoretical Framework and Concepts part of the study (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006), the SCCT and IRT as analytical tools will be outlined in more detail below. Both tables have been designed by myself based on the theories and summarizes outlined in the respective works of Coombs and Benoit.
TABLE 1. Coombs’s Crisis Response Strategies (SCCT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deny Response Option</th>
<th>Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack the accuser</td>
<td>Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scapegoat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diminish Response Option</th>
<th>Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deal Response Option</th>
<th>Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>Crisis manager expresses concern for the victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern</td>
<td>Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Crisis manager indicates the organization feels bad about the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td>Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Coombs, 2006)
TABLE 2. Benoit’s Image Repair Strategies (IRT)

Denial

- Denial
  - Did not perform act
- Shifting the Blame
  - Act performed by another

Evasion of Responsibility

- Provocation
  - Responded to act of another
- Defeasibility
  - Lack of information or ability
- Accident
  - Act was a mishap
- Good Intentions
  - Meant well in act

Reducing Offensiveness

- Bolstering
  - Stress good traits
- Minimization
  - Act not serious
- Differentiation
  - Act less offensive
- Transcendence
  - More important considerations
- Attack the accuser
  - Reduce credibility of accuser
- Compensation
  - Reimburse victim
- Corrective Action
  - Plan to solve or prevent problem
- Mortification
  - Apologize for act

(Benoit, 1997)

6.3 Materials

The material being used for the study are the press releases issued by BP following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon incident (BP, 2010a; BP, 2010b; BP, 2010c). The reasons why this particular study focuses on these materials, are that they constitute an important part of the overall BP crisis response, that they are shaped entirely by BP themselves, and finally, that they are meant to be taken up by the media. This means that they are meant to be used as a basis for press material produced by media and communication outlets (BP, 2010a; BP, 2010b; BP, 2010c). The BP press releases consist of 185 releases created following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon incident, which can be found on BP’s official website www.bp.com. They are usually structured along the lines of a few descriptive headlines, and contain textual information regarding the BP response to the incident in question. They are generally rather
short, comprising statements by the CEOs from BP, the Chairman of the Board and other leading executives. Their main purpose seem to be to release and communicate information about BP’s response to the oil rig explosion and subsequent oil spill, to its concerned stakeholders (BP, 2010a; BP, 2010g). The press releases contain information concerning the oil rig explosion, but mostly concerning the oil spill and the aftermath management process (BP, 2010a; BP, 2010g). The press releases consist of several different kinds of texts, including CEO statements (BP, 2010d), descriptions of the oil well containment process (BP, 2010g) and legal claims filed against BP (BP, 2013). They have mostly been released during the year 2010 when the oil spill occurred.

6.4 Population and sample

The texts, which will be analyzed in this particular study, consist of several different kinds of press releases, which have been sampled, from the total population of BP press releases concerning the Deepwater Horizon crisis. The total number of press releases issued by BP on their official website following this event was 185. However, for the purposes of a qualitative study, a sample of press releases is more suitable, meaning a fraction of the total number of press releases issued. The sample was done using strategic selection, meaning that the press releases containing the clearest examples of crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies were deliberately selected in order to be able to investigate what strategies could be found in the material. Thus, a sample of 8 texts were selected as the basis for the analysis, in the form of press releases concerning e.g. the initial oil spill response and the continued releases dealing with the oil containment process. This also means that many texts were left out of the analysis.

6.5 Strengths and weaknesses to the study

There are both strengths and weaknesses to the chosen approach. One strength is that I have chosen theories, which are arguably important to utilize, in order to be able to comprehend how the crisis communications practices took place in an actual company. Another strength is that I have picked a relatively easy way of examining whether it has been applied or not, by using a qualitative textual analysis approach. One weakness is perhaps the focus on the press releases, since several things might be relevant to study concerning BP’s crisis communication research: social media, press conferences and similar, might be as important to study. Another potential weakness concerns the textual analysis, as it is a method sometimes criticized for its subjectivity in interpreting the empirical data (Esaiasson et al., 2010). However, as I will explain below, I have tried to lower the degree of subjectivity by going through which strategies can be found in which press releases, arguably a rather objective approach after all.
6.5.1 Reliability and validity of the study

On the one hand, some would argue that validity and reliability of a study is relevant only to quantitative studies, and not to qualitative studies (Esaiasson et al., 2010). For instance, the study does not set out to measure anything, but rather to examine something qualitatively. One could argue that concepts such as validity and reliability are quantitative concepts, which are not fulfilled within the framework of a qualitative study, since such studies rather focus on the interpretation of the empirical data made by the researcher, not necessarily any particular measurements. On the other hand, one could argue that the reliability of the study is ensured, through the usage of correct descriptions of the materials included in the study, namely the press releases. Since the press releases and their crisis communications strategies are correctly described in the study, meaning that it is likely that anybody who was to examine the same press releases using the same analytical tools is likely to find the same or approximately the same results, the reliability of the study is also rather high.

And perhaps one could argue against the notion of validity only belonging to the quantitative domain, by saying that the study does set out to test the existence of some theories, the IBT and SCCT (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006), concerning whether or not they can be found in the empirical data. This does have validity (in one sense of the word), since it does 'measure' the crisis responses through the ways it has been operationalized in the theories’ crisis response typologies, by testing whether or not they exist in the empirical data material (a sort of "yes" or "no" measurement). While the insights from a case study cannot generalized statistically in the same way as the results from a well-made quantitative study can (Esaiasson et al., 2010), the insights from such a study can still contribute with something important concerning the understanding of and knowledge about the phenomenon in question (Esaiasson et al., 2010). A case study makes it easier to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question, and to explain why and/or how something has been done. This cannot be explained in the same way, using a quantitative study looking at frequencies, for instance (Esaiasson et al., 2010).

6.5.2 Research ethics

No private persons were included as a part of this study. For this reason, it was not relevant to apply the principles of information, consent etcetera. Neither was it relevant to limit any data collection to the purposes of the study, since it does not manage any personal data in the sense that it concerns private citizens. The only persons referred to in the study are the CEO and Chairman of the Board, both of which are public figures.
7 Results

The results part consists of an examination of the BP press releases concerning the crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies, which can be found in them.

7.1 IRT and SCCT crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies in the BP press releases

7.1.1 "BP offers sympathy to the families of those lost in the US oil rig fire" (23 April 2010)

In this press release, BP makes a statement through their CEO Tony Hayward concerning the people who have died or been injured in the Deepwater Horizon explosion (BP, 2010d, first paragraph). He also makes a statement concerning BP’s response to the explosion, more precisely what BP will do in response to the Deepwater Horizon crisis, together with the government and other companies involved (BP, 2010d, fourth paragraph).

One can argue in favor of the existence of several crisis response strategies and/or image repair strategies in this press release. One crisis response strategy, which can arguably be found in this particular BP press release, is the concern strategy (SCCT), which means that the crisis manager expresses concern for the victims of the crisis (Coombs, 2006). Arguably, this is evident from the statement made by CEO Tony Hayward that BP offers "its deepest sympathy and condolences to the families, friends and colleagues of those who have been lost" (BP, 2010d, first paragraph). In other words, this is also a part of the "Deal response strategy" (SCCT) which can mapped to the Preventable crisis cluster (Coombs, 2006). What is more, one can argue that the press release also expresses a sort of corrective action (IRT) on the part of BP. This is because they inform the stakeholders that they will "be working closely with Transocean and the authorities to find out exactly what happened so lessons can be learnt to prevent something like this from happening anywhere again" (BP, 2010d, fourth paragraph).

This press release expresses concern (SCCT) and corrective action (IRT) from BP – the former which can be mapped to the deal response option - through the means of the introductory part of the press release, and quotations made by BP's CEO.
7.1.2 "Hayward applauds president’s statement" (1 May 2010)

In this press release, BP's CEO Tony Hayward makes a statement concerning the interventions being done by the President of the United States of America into BP's response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill process (BP, 2010e, first paragraph). He states his appreciation for an agreement with the President (BP, 2010e, first paragraph). He also expresses appreciation for the advice given by the public sector, and ends by saying that their and BP's teams are working closely together on this operation (BP, 2010e, first paragraph).

"The US government leadership here has been excellent since day one" (BP, 2010e, first paragraph) begins this press release from BP following the Deepwater Horizon incident. Based on this quotation, one can argue that BP is applying the "deal response option" (Coombs, 2006) in the form of ingratiation (SCCT) by having the crisis manager and CEO Tony Hayward praising the stakeholder. This takes the form of Hayward praising the U.S. government on the issue, particularly concerning *their* leadership following the crisis, and not that of BP's own leadership in the form of Tony Hayward and other BP top management figures. Further, he explains that he agrees with the president that ending the leakage and reducing the damage being done is "the top priority" (BP, 2010e, first paragraph).

What is more, BP also thanks the "tireless efforts of the many federal, state and local responders and the volunteers, men and women" (BP, 2010e, first paragraph) whose work has contributed in the reduction of the damage. Arguably, this could also be viewed as a form of ingratiation (Coombs, 2006), where the crisis manager praises the stakeholders, but this time around, in the form of the volunteers and public sector responders, rather than the public sector leadership. Finally, one can argue that the press release in question displays the usage of "corrective action" (IRT) as a form of image repair strategy (Benoit, 1997), meaning that BP stresses their commitment to the oil well containment process, and how this process is the top priority for BP. This can arguably be seen when CEO Tony Hayward states "I reiterated my commitment to the White House today that BP will do anything and everything we can to stop the leak, attack the spill off shore, and protect the shorelines of the Gulf Coast" (BP, 2010e, first paragraph).

This press release contains ingratiation (SCCT) and corrective action (IRT) as crisis response strategies / image repair strategies, which can be illustrated by several quotations where BP's CEO praises the U.S. government, and by a quotation where the CEO says that BP is doing everything they can to stop the leak.
7.1.3 "Update on Gulf of Mexico oil spill – 13 May" (13 May 2010)

The press releases describes in detail how BP is trying to seal the oil well from leaking (BP, 2010f, first paragraph). It contains information on BP's way of trying to use the so-called Blow out preventer (BOP), and to contain the oil at the source in order to prevent it from leaking onto the shores (BP, 2010f, second paragraph). They describe their attempted procedures of containing the well, for instance by a so-called "junk shot" of various materials into the BOP. They also describe a second system for containing the well, a so-called "top hat" to be put onto the well (BP, 2010f, third paragraph). They also provide brief statistical data concerning the oil spill, more precisely how many barrels of oil have been recovered (BP, 2010f, tenth paragraph), how much boom is used, how many people are involved, how many legal claims which have been made and how much money has been spent on the oil spill response (BP, 2010f, thirteenth paragraph).

In this press release, one could argue that BP focuses on putting the Deepwater Horizon incident and the subsequent Gulf of Mexico oil spill into a more positive context, in the sense that they focus on putting it in a more solution-oriented context rather than a problem-oriented context. For example, BP writes "[w]ork on the first relief well, which began on Sunday May 2, continues" (BP, 2010f, seventh paragraph). This could arguably be construed as a form of transcendence (IRT) being done by BP (Benoit, 1997), meaning that they are trying to put the Deepwater Horizon act in a more favorable context than the original context. One can argue that they do not write about the original context – how the crisis erupted from the oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico – as much as they write (BP, 2010f, second paragraph) about the newer, to BP more favorable context of responding to and trying to solve the crisis. What speaks against this interpretation, on the other hand, is that BP is using a problem-oriented approach within the solution-oriented context in which they put the crisis. They write about their problems when it comes to the response, that "[s]uch a system has never been used in water depths of 5,000 feet and its successful operation is not certain" (BP, 2010f, fifth paragraph).

On a different note, one could also argue in favor of BP's usage of differentiation (IRT) as a repair strategy (Benoit, 1997) in this particular press release, since they are focusing on the similar act of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill explosion, rather than the original act. The latter, which is far worse –the Deepwater Horizon oil platform exploded and killed 11 people, injuring 17. For example, they write about the "Subsea Source Control and Containment" (BP, 2010f, first paragraph) and the "Surface Spill Response and Containment" (BP, 2010f, eighth paragraph). What is more, this is arguably the case since they describe the lethal
Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion and subsequent massive oil spill into the Gulf of Mexico as "the MC252 oil well incident in the Gulf of Mexico" (BP, 2010f, first paragraph). This is arguably a testimony to their focus on the similar act, which is not as bad as the original.

This part of the analysis shows that BP could be construed as utilizing a sort of transcendence (IRT) and a sort of differentiation (IRT) when it comes to their communication efforts, by putting the crisis in a more positive context instead of the original bad context.

7.1.4 "BP briefs US government on initial perspectives of Deepwater Horizon investigation - focus is on seven control mechanisms" (24 May 2010)

In this press release, BP provides its explanation as to what caused the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion and subsequent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (BP, 2010a, first paragraph). They write that it was caused by a number of different failures in combination with each other (BP, 2010a, third paragraph), and that BP had been involved when it happened (BP, 2010a, fifth paragraph). The CEO makes several statements in the press release (BP, 2010a, fifth and sixth paragraphs).

In this press release, one can argue that BP is utilizing several crisis response strategies. For example, the CEO Tony Hayward states that he understands that "people want a simple answer about why this happened and who is to blame" (BP, 2010a, fifth paragraph). What is more, he adds that a "number of companies are involved, including BP, and it is simply too early – and not up to us – to say who is at fault" (BP, 2010a, fifth paragraph). One could argue that this statement is a way of using the denial strategy (Benoit, 1997), since the CEO does not explicitly state that BP is to blame for the crisis. In addition, one could argue that it is to be construed as an example of trying to shift the blame (Benoit, 1997) as a repair strategy, since the quotation from Hayward is that a "number of companies are involved" and not just BP (BP, 2010a, fifth paragraph). On the other hand, one could in fact also argue that BP is trying to accept responsibility for the crisis, meaning corrective action (IRT) as a strategy (Benoit, 1997), in order to prevent it from ever happening again. This is because the press release is about BP trying to determine the causes of the crisis, and since BP explicitly states that "this was a tragic accident and we need to understand the causes of it to try to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again" (BP, 2010a, sixth paragraph).

This press release contains denial, shifting the blame and corrective action on the part of BP. This is displayed through the quotations that it is too early to say who is at fault for the crisis since there is a number of companies involved, and by the quotation that BP needs to
understand the causes of the crisis in order to be able to prevent it from ever happening again.

7.1.5 "Update on Gulf of Mexico oil spill - 29 May" (29 May 2010)

The press release contains information concerning BP's continued efforts to seal the well from leaking (BP, 2010g, first paragraph). It reports about the unsuccessful attempts to seal the well using the injection of heavy mud into the Blow out preventer (BOP). BP also writes about their next step in the containment process because of this, meaning that they are moving on to the next phase of utilizing a so-called Lower Marine Riser Package (LMRP) cap containment system, in order to prevent the well from leaking (BP, 2010g, fourth paragraph). Finally, they briefly write about the continued efforts to drill a relief well to contain the leakage (BP, 2010g, seventh paragraph).

In this press release, BP emphasizes that their operations are not guaranteed to work: "This operation has not been previously carried out in 5,000 feet of water and the successful deployment of the containment system cannot be assured" (BP, 2010g, sixth paragraph). Arguably, this quotation can be construed as BP stating that the company is not in total control over the situation. For this reason, it could furthermore be argued that this press release contains the image repair strategy of defeasibility (Benoit, 1997), meaning that BP is trying to argue that parts of the crisis happen without their control over the situation, or that they were lacking information. Since BP does not know whether the new methods will actually work, they lack information concerning the response to the crisis. In addition, since BP does not know whether the methods will actually work, they are not in one hundred percent control over the crisis response, thus trying to say that since the crisis is out of control for them; their responsibility is not as big as it otherwise would have been (Benoit, 1997).

This part of the analysis shows that BP employs a strategy of defeasibility in order to evade parts of the responsibility for the crisis, by portraying it as partly out of their control, illustrated by BP’s quotation that the operations have never been tested before at such depths as 5000 feet.
7.1.6 "BP establishes $20 billion claims fund for Deepwater Horizon spills – outlines dividend decisions" (16 June 2010)

This press release contains information concerning BP’s financial response to the Deepwater Horizon crisis, following a meeting with the President of the United States (BP, 2010c, first paragraph). It contains information on how the financial response is going to be shaped, and what the Board thinks about it (BP, 2010c, third paragraph). Finally, both the CEO and the Chairman of the Board make statements regarding the issue (BP, 2010c, eighth and ninth paragraphs).

On the one hand, one could argue that BP employs the compassion crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2006) when dealing with the crisis. This strategy means that the crisis manager offers money or gifts to victims (Coombs, 2006). This is because BP explains that they will be setting up a claims fund of the amount of 20 billion dollars, in order to satisfy legitimate claims including natural resource damage, and state and local response costs (BP, 2010c, third paragraph). However, one can argue against this by saying that there are no actual passages included in the press release, which express any compassion towards those affected. In other words, no actual compassion is actually expressed (BP, 2010c). What is more, the claims fund is to be oriented towards natural resource damage, in combination with state and local responses, and not explicitly towards individual victims (BP, 2010c, third paragraph). For this reason, it can be argued that it is not entirely clear whether BP actually employed the compassion crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2006) or if they did not. On the one hand, they set up a claims fund for 20 billion dollars; on the other hand, they did not explicitly state any actual compassion in the press release.

This press release contains a more ambiguous crisis response, since it emphasizes the existence of a 20 billion dollar compensation fund (compassion strategy according to the SCCT), while not expressing any explicit actual compassion.

7.1.7 "BP emphasizes that disagreement with other parties, will not diminish its promise to clean up the spill and pay legitimate claims" (17 June 2010)

The press release is about a dispute concerning the costs involved in paying for the spill, and who is legally responsible for it (BP, 2010b, first paragraph). The press release outlines that BP is taking its part of the responsibility for the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion incident, while other companies are not (BP, 2010b, first paragraph). One of these companies is Anadarko Petroleum Corporation, which co-owned a minority of the leasehold interest. According to the press release issued by BP, they as a company takes its share of the responsibility for cleaning-up the oil spill, and the costs of doing so, while Anadarko
Petroleum Corporation refuses to accept any legal or financial responsibility (BP, 2010b, first paragraph). Finally, the press release outlines the legal matters concerning this (BP, 2010b, sixth and seventh paragraphs).

In this press release, BP arguably tries to utilize the "deny response option" (Coombs, 2006) in the form of scapegoating (Coombs, 2006), which means that BP is trying to blame some other group or organization outside of their own company for parts of the crisis. This is the case, since they state that Anadarko as the co-owner of the leasehold interest in the well, which started to leak, signed legal documents "clearly certifying that each would be jointly and severally liable, together with any other responsible parties, for oil spill removal costs and damages" (BP, 2010b, sixth paragraph). In addition to the scapegoating mentioned earlier, this is arguably a form of shifting the blame (Benoit, 1997) as well. What is more, one can also argue in favor of the view that the press release can be construed yet another way for BP to attack the accuser, since Anadarko is reportedly accusing BP of having been "grossly negligent" and engaged in "willful misconduct" as operator in the Gulf of Mexico (BP, 2010b, second paragraph). In this way, one can argue that BP manages to attack the accuser by claiming responsibility on part of the accuser, for the crisis, which emerged. "BP strongly disagrees with these allegations and will not allow the allegations to diminish its commitment to the Gulf Coast region", as they put it (BP, 2010b, third paragraph).

This press release contains the crisis response strategies and image repair strategies of scapegoating (SCCT), attacking the accuser (IRT/SCCT) and shifting the blame (IRT), since BP is trying to attack Anadarko for not taking its responsibility for the costs involved with the oil spill cleanup, while simultaneously writing that Anadarko is responsible for part of the costs.

### 7.2.8 "BP launches Gulf claims fraud hotline" (15 July 2013)

In the press release, BP writes about their efforts to create a claims fraud hotline, in order to make sure that only legitimate legal claims are made to its legal claims office (BP, 2013, first paragraph). They explain that they are launching the fraud hotline in the wake of the U.S. government clamping down on frauds in the Deepwater Horizon legal claims process throughout the country (BP, 2013, third paragraph). BP finishes the press release by stating that they are themselves working against fraud and corruption in the legal claims process (BP, 2013, eighth paragraph), and that they have paid more than 300 000 claims to the amount of 11 billion dollars to help restore the Gulf economy (BP, 2013, eighth paragraph).
In this press release, one can argue that BP applies the crisis response strategy of attacking the accuser (Coombs, 2006), by writing that "the company remains committed to the Gulf and to the payment of legitimate claims for real losses" (BP, 2013, eighth paragraph). This could arguably be construed as implicitly attacking the accuser (Coombs, 2006) because those who are accusing BP for damages in connection with the Deepwater Horizon incident are depicted by BP as a part of fraudulent claims corruption management (BP, 2013, second paragraph). This means that BP does not consider the legal claims filed against it as legitimate, actual claims. This is part of the "deny response option" according to the SCCT (Coombs, 2006), in which the accuser is attacked, in order to deny the claim which is being made (Coombs, 2006). What is more, it is also a part of "attacking the accuser" as an image repair theory (Benoit, 1997) meaning that BP is trying to reduce the offensiveness of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill by saying that not all claimants are legitimate claimants. In other words, everybody who is accusing the company of negative consequences for the Deepwater Horizon crisis, are not in fact actually affected by such negative consequences. Rather, BP views them as illegitimately filed legal claims in order to try to gain money from BP following the crisis. They attack the credibility of the accuser, by saying that the accuser is actually not a very negatively affected victim (BP, 2013, third paragraph).

In this press release, BP is attacking the accusers in the legal process, affectively trying to deny some of the negative consequences claimed because of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and trying to reduce its offensiveness.
8 Conclusion

This final part of the study will answer the research question at hand. What is more, it will describe how the results are to be interpreted, in relation to the theoretical framework used in this study, and in relation to previous research in the field. Additionally, an evaluation of the method will be performed. Suggestions for future research within the field will be provided, in connection to some conclusions.

8.1 RQ1: What established crisis communication strategies can be discerned from the BP press releases following the Deepwater Horizon incident in 2010?

This study found that there were many crisis communication strategies in the form of crisis response strategies and image repair theories present in the BP press release material. Firstly, the usage of concern as in SCCT (Coombs, 2006) and corrective action as in IRT (Benoit, 1997) could both be found in the press release issued on the 23rd of April 2010, after it had just been confirmed that the Deepwater Horizon oil rig had exploded into the Gulf of Mexico, whereupon the large oil spill problems followed. Secondly, ingratiation as in SCCT (Coombs, 2006) and corrective action as in IRT (Benoit, 1997) were found in the second press release analyzed for the purposes of this study. Thirdly, there was also one press release utilizing a sort of transcendence as in IRT (Benoit, 1997) and differentiation as in IRT (Benoit, 1997) strategy in which the Gulf of Mexico oil spill was put in a more positive context than the original bad context of the Deepwater Horizon explosion.

What is more, one press release concerning what caused the crisis interestingly contained traces of denial, shifting the blame and corrective action simultaneously (BP, 2010a). In one sense, this could arguably be construed as rather strange, since the combination of trying to correct the actions which one does not admit to have been responsible for, arguably does not make for an entirely compatible way of doing crisis communications. On the other hand, one could perhaps counter-argue by saying that BP is realizing that they have at least part of the responsibility for the crisis. Therefore, that they take it upon themselves to try to correct matters afterwards, even if it has not entirely been established who exactly bore exactly which parts of the crisis to exactly what extent.

What is more, the existence of traces of denial and shifting the blame in the press release dealing with the causes of the crisis (BP, 2010a) could perhaps be construed as a sort of lack of responsibility on the part of BP. This is because they did not explicitly state that they were responsible for the crisis, rather referring to the future results of an ongoing investigation. Likewise, there were press releases in which BP employed a strategy of defeasibility in order
to evade parts of the responsibility for the crisis, by depicting parts of the crisis/problem as out of their control (BP, 2010g).

Additionally, some press releases were also ambiguous in their communication, but in a different way. For instance, one press release was about the setting up of an escrow fund for 20 billion dollars, in order to pay for legitimate legal claims arising from the Deepwater Horizon crisis (BP, 2010c). This could be construed as a way for BP to express compassion to the affected stakeholders, since they were paying money to them (Coombs, 2006: 248). At the same time, however, BP did not express any actual compassion in the press release in question, resulting in a sort of communication ambiguity BP’s part.

In addition, perhaps one could argue, based on this communication ambiguity, that it was not particularly likely that BP felt any true compassion for the communities, animals or peoples who had been affected by the catastrophe. At least not to the extent which they tried to portray it as, since the escrow fund was a result of President Obama’s coercion rather than BP’s own initiative.

Similarly, this study has also found press releases where BP tries to utilize the strategies of scapegoating (SCCT), attacking the accuser (IRT/SCCT) and shifting the blame (IRT) in the same press release. This implies that BP in one sense does not recognize the entire responsibility for the crisis at hand, but rather tries to attack those who accuse them of being responsible for the entire crisis. What is more, BP puts parts of the blame on the minority leasehold owner Anadarko (BP, 2010b), since they had signed a contract according to which they were to be held responsible for any oil spill emerging from the oil well. In this way, BP is also reducing the offensiveness of the crisis at hand (Benoit, 1997).

8.2 RQ2: How are the crisis communication strategies used discursively in the BP press releases following the Deepwater Horizon incident in 2010?

They used them in several different ways. For instance, the CEO used them discursively by expressing sympathy, promising that a similar event will never happen again (BP, 2010d, fourth paragraph). Generally, the CEO is the major statement person in the press releases, giving addition weight to the press release material by adding his commentary concerning the events. He is a discursive key figure in the material and in the crisis communication effort, since he is responsible for several of the crisis discourses, which BP actually utilizes.

In addition, they stated appreciation for and praising the leadership of the U.S. President and public sector (BP, 2010e, first paragraph). This could arguably be construed as rather
strange, since BP is a private company arguably not interested in the public sector interventions into its business operations. Again, the CEO made statements concerning this matter, and was one of the main discursive persons in this part of the crisis communication effort.

What is more, they were used discursively by describing in detail how the solution process progresses. This press release was not necessarily a particularly CEO driven release, in the sense that the CEO made a lot of statements in it (BP, 2010f). Rather, it was a sort of descriptive release, in which BP explained the procedure concerning their solution work. They were also used discursively by stating what the causes of the crisis were (BP, 2010a), by describing other involved actors' lack of taking responsibility (BP, 2010b) and by establishing a fraud hotline (BP, 2013). These were messages mainly consisting of legal information and/or science information, providing even more technical descriptions to the press releases.

In addition, the chronological ordering of the press releases makes it possible to chart how BP’s crisis communication strategies seems to have developed over time. Firstly, in the immediate aftermaths of the crisis, BP focused on the usage of concern and corrective action (BP, 2010d) in order to honor the memory of those who had died in the tragic accident/explosion. On a critical note, perhaps this is rather disingenuous or at least problematic, considering the fact that there are other sources stating that BP had in fact done extensive lobby work in the U.S. Congress against stricter safety regulations in the oil industry just a year before the crisis (De Wolf & Mejri, 2013). Secondly, the usage of ingratiation and corrective action in one sense makes for a proper response (BP, 2010e), since BP were in the initial stages of the crisis response, and since they were at least partly to blame for the emergence of the crisis. However, the usage of ingratiation in particular can be construed as a way for BP to – perhaps rather unwillingly – pay a sort of homage to President Obama after he had intervened in the crisis management process and pushed BP into doing things, the company would not have done themselves. BP continues the usage of corrective action (IRT) in order to communicate that they are taking actions against the problem at hand (BP, 2010e).

BP’s strategy seems to have changed over the course of time, at least concerning the press releases analyzed in this particular study. Where BP had initially responded to the crisis by utilizing the strategies of concern, ingratiation and corrective action, they proceeded by using transcendence and differentiation, trying to put the crisis in a more positive context, emphasizing themselves as the solution to the crisis (BP, 2010f). This is a rather interesting shift, since it means that BP is not only focusing on corrective action any more, but rather on
corrective action as a form of positive context or positive change. This could perhaps be construed as BP learning from their past mistakes, correcting themselves after the crisis, which had emerged, while also framing the crisis in their own way. However, BP seems to have completely shifted their strategy in the press releases, which were to come. From having used concern, ingratiation and corrective action initially, over a bridge of differentiation and transcendence, they ended up on the other side, using denial, shifting the blame, defeasibility, scapegoating and attacking the accusers (BP, 2010b) in a rather inconsistent mix.

8.3 Connections to previous research

This study has focused quite in depth in the crisis response strategies and image repair strategies present in the BP press release material. There have been other studies looking into the same or similar matters, which are worth mentioning in this conclusion. Firstly, while the study, which looked at the relationship between PR, news and politics when it comes to BP’s press release material (Schultz et al., 2012), did not investigate exactly the same things as the present study, there are still several similarities between them. For instance, both studies looked at BP press releases, BP’s way of dealing with the crisis through them, and both reached similar conclusions to a certain extent. They found that BP used a "decoupling strategy" (Schultz et al., 2012) which was such, that BP was trying disassociate themselves from the cause of the crisis, while at the same time focusing on the solutions. A similar result is displayed in the present study, in the form of BP using transcendence and differentiation as strategies, meaning that BP was trying to reframe the crisis into a more positive light, emphasizing the positive solutions, rather than the negative problems and causes of the crisis. In this regard, the study upholds the results and conclusions from the first previous study (Schultz et al., 2012) which looked at BP’s framing of the crisis in the press releases.

In addition, when it comes to the second study referenced as previous research in this study (Harlow & Harlow, 2013), some of the results can be upheld and supported. For instance, they speak about the existence of corrective action and compensation as the overall dominant crisis responses by BP (Harlow & Harlow, 2013). As evident in the Results part of this study, such strategies could also be found in the BP press releases when investigated more in-depth. For example, this study found that corrective action was being used in the early press releases, and that BP was trying to use compensation as a strategy by means of paying money for various causes, which are relevant to the oil spill disaster.

However, there were also many differences between my study and their study. For instance, they focused on the overall crisis strategy patterns discernable when looking at the press releases themselves in their entirety (Harlow & Harlow, 2013). By contrast, this study focused
more in-depth on the press release contents, finding several other crisis response strategies in the press release material, which had not been covered in their study. They also noted themselves that their study has the limitation that it does not investigate the matter of BP press releases concerning crisis communications theories in an in-depth manner by looking at paragraphs, but rather focuses on the overall message of the articles as such. "Of course, it is possible that we failed to capture the nuance of BP’s response by coding entire articles, rather than paragraphs or some other unit of analysis" (Harlow & Harlow, 2013: 198). In addition, this is arguably one of the limitations to their study— they did not include as much information as they could have by analyzing the press releases in depth. Consequently, they did not scrutinize the material deep enough to find out, that there were in fact several other crisis response strategies and image repair strategies being used in the BP press releases besides merely corrective action and compensation. By contrast, study has shown that there were several other IRT strategies present in the press release material, such as transcendence, differentiation, attacking the accuser, shifting the blame and more, which had not been covered by them. For this reason, one can be rather critical of the approach chosen by some other researchers - their result was not as detailed and correct (Harlow & Harlow, 2013) as it could have been.

What is more, the third study, which focused on BP press releases in addition to BP social media content, found that BP’s response message predominantly employed positive/pro-social messaging in their press release materials (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). This took the form of what the authors referred to as "affirming amplification strategy", meaning self-enhancement, framing the organization, accommodative and excellence or renewal (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). They also found that BP utilized to other tactics, in the forms of routine communication and defensive tactics (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013). This study displays similar results. For example, the self-enhancement and framing the organization tactics utilized by BP according to their study could be construed as the same or similar to the transcendence and differentiation strategies referred to in this study. What is more, the excellence or renewal tactics in their study, is arguably similar to the corrective action as in IRT (Benoit, 1997), which is covered in this particular study as a part of the early press releases. In other words, their study’s results can in part be upheld by this study as well. At the same time, however, this study contradicts their study quite flagrantly in certain parts, given the fact that BP has been shown to use attacking the accuser, scapegoating/shifting the blame and more, as strategies in their communication efforts. Their study concluded that BP used mainly used positive/pro-social messaging (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013), while this study reaches the conclusion that BP rather used a mixed approach, of both positive and
negative messages, in their crisis communications. However, perhaps this is because they looked at more press releases ($n = 126$) than I did (Diers-Lawson & Donahue, 2013).

Furthermore, the study, which looked at the BP’s press releases as a strategic rhetorical framing device, found that BP used a "restoration narrative" to construct the problem of the oil spill as a problem to be solved by BP, using innovative solutions (Wickman, 2013). What is more, the study found that BP accepted parts of the responsibility, but not all of it (Wickman, 2013). This study reaches a similar conclusion, based on the transcendence and differentiation strategies outlined in the Results part, meaning that BP did write about the crisis as a problem to be solved by BP. What is more, the existence of corrective action as in IRT (Benoit, 1997) as a strategy from BP also seems to confirm the results, which the strategic rhetorical framing device study reached. It should be mentioned, though, that there are differences between my study and his study, in the sense that my study found more negative parts in the BP press release material, such as attacking the accuser, which were not mentioned in his study (Wickman, 2013).

The fifth study, which looked at the BP press releases using the Reputational Risk Management (RRM) theory, which includes the IRT (Benoit, 1997), found that BP was predominantly using bolstering in order to restore their image, meaning disclosing information about its good traits (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). They also used transcendence, minimization, compensation and apology as image restoration strategies, according to their study (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). This study has the similarity to their study, that we both found the existence of transcendence and compensation in the press release materials. However, this study also displays several differences to their study, in that this study did not find any instances of minimization nor apology in the press release materials examined. More importantly, this study did not find the main type of image repair strategy as outlined by them, namely bolstering (Arora & Lodhia, 2016). Perhaps this is because the study focused on a sample of press releases, which were strategically selected, and that certain releases containing bolstering did not show up in my empirical data material. Perhaps it is also a matter of different interpretations – it is conceivable that they found bolstering since they interpreted certain press releases as bolstering, meaning to stress good traits and deeds in the past, even if I would have interpreted them and construed them quite differently.

Concerning the study which focused on BP’s frames, themes and keywords in the press releases, it found that BP were successful in their crisis communication approach, since they utilized a "social responsibility" frame (meaning roughly a corrective action and compensation approach to communication) to communicate (Choi, 2012). This study
upholds the result that BP used corrective action and compensation as strategies, among other strategies, and in this sense displays a similarity to the frames, themes and keywords study. On the other hand, his study can also be said to be a bit too hastened. This is because he draws the conclusion that "BP opted to accept responsibility by showing great concern for local victims and by displaying efforts to correct the problem, which minimized the damage of its reputation" (Choi, 2012). One could be a bit critical of this conclusion – for how does he know that BP was successful by simply looking at the contents of their press releases? Arguably, whether a company is actually successful or not, when it comes to crisis communication, should be looked at from the perspective of the responding audiences, the responding stakeholders, and not from the perspective of the content exclusively. For this reason, the study's author might be jumping into conclusions when he writes as if it was a fact that BP were successful (Choi, 2012) in their crisis response to the Deepwater Horizon crisis. In addition, he is a bit inconsistent, since he both writes that they were successful, and that it was difficult to say whether their framing was successful or not (Choi, 2012). What is more, my study suggests that BP’s responsibility for the crisis was not as clear as his study suggests that it was. On the contrary, one can find traces of scapegoating / shifting the blame in their press releases (BP, 2010b) which arguably speak against this way of portraying their crisis communication.

The second last study in the previous research section focused on BP in secondary data such as newspapers, audiovisual materials and social networking sites (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013), and found that they tried to diminish their responsibility for the crisis using denial and scapegoating strategies (Valvi & Fragkos, 2013). This study reaches a more balanced, mixed result concerning their responsibility communication. On the one hand, the results in this study show that BP does use corrective action as a form of strategy, meaning that they accept responsibility for the crisis at hand, and that they are not only scapegoating nor denying their responsibility entirely. On the other hand, it is also clear from the empirical data presented in this study, that BP does use scapegoating and does try to diminish its responsibility somewhat, meaning that they are not entirely responsibility accepting either.

Finally, the last study, which looked at BP’s crisis strategies in social media, found that they mainly used corrective action as their strategy, followed by compensation and mortification (Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011). This study upholds the results from this study, in the sense that BP did use corrective action in their press releases, particularly in the early part of the releases, and that compensation was present in the releases. However, the compensation, which BP displayed, was not particularly clear, in the sense that they actually displayed any actual compassion for the victims of the crisis, when they were communicating about the
crisis. On the contrary, they wrote the press release in a rather neutral manner, concerning a meeting with the President. For this reason, I would argue that it is not entirely clear whether or not BP’s purported compensation strategy actually was a compassionate compensation strategy, or created more out of sheer necessity. Lastly, BP’s usage of mortification, according to the social media study discussed here, was not found in any of the press releases analyzed here in, which is a difference between my study and theirs.

8.4 Implications for the wider crisis communication field

The BP Deepwater Horizon case in 2010 has several implications for the wider crisis communication field. Firstly, it clearly shows how a major international company is prepared to utilize crisis response strategies and image repair strategies in a plethora of ways in a severe crisis in order to try to communicate to its stakeholders during the crisis. This has been enumerated in the Results part of this study. In other words, this particular knowledge is interesting for the general crisis communications field since it shows that a company the size of BP is prepared to try to utilize the crisis communications theories (knowingly or unknowingly) in a crisis situation, thereby applied theory in practice. Indeed, it tells us something about how the crisis communications theories are used in practice, namely that the theories state one thing, and that a company can be such that it does follow what the theories state in certain regards, though not always to one hundred per cent. On the contrary, a company might be prepared to modify their practical usage of the theories in accordance with what the company finds appropriate or is more or less required to do in the situation, effectively trying to apply theories in practice, which come out half-heartedly rather than whole-heartedly.

Secondly, it is worth pointing out the obvious fact that even a company like BP, which is not necessarily well known for its skillful crisis management and crisis communications management, is also trying to manage the crisis using established response strategies – knowingly or unknowingly - rather than communicating completely without such strategies in practice. Thirdly, the BP case also shows something important concerning how oil companies relate to crisis communication, which contributes to the subfield of oil industry crisis communication. To the best of my knowledge, the oil industry crisis communications subfield has not documented the existence of certain crisis response strategies and image repair strategies in how the companies involved actually communicate during actual crises. In that way, this particular study contributes to the knowledge in the general field of crisis communication and the particular subfield of oil industry crisis communication by documenting how a company might actually turn out to use certain response strategies, which might be rather unexpected.
8.5 Evaluation of the method

The method, which was applied to this study, was rather successful in managing to answer the research question at hand. This is for several reasons. Firstly, because the method was a qualitative textual analysis method, suitable for the purposes of investigating more in-depth the single case of BP's press releases – which were textual materials – and the crisis communication strategies, which could be found in such materials. Secondly, because it did not attempt to research every single press release there is, concerning the Deepwater Horizon incident. Rather, it focused on a strategic selection of releases, with a particular view towards which releases actually contained any IRT and/or SCCT crisis response strategies, making it easier to find those actual releases and those actual crisis response strategies in the empirical data material.

It should also be noted here, that this study has not set out to critically evaluate to what extent the BP crisis communications strategies were successful or unsuccessful, but has rather delimited itself to focusing on the patterns as such and the crisis communications as such. Such a 'success evaluation' is arguably the next step in the BP press release research process, after the patterns and crisis strategies have been detailed. This study has deliberately focused on the existence of patterns as such and crisis communications strategies as such, since this needs to be done very thoroughly and perhaps more thoroughly than what has previously been accomplished, in order to be able to more fully (closer to fully) answer the research questions at hand.

And while one should be cautious to draw any general conclusions concerning the press release material as a whole from such a strategically sampled material, given that it does not set out to test any theory with regards to its generalizability in a critical extreme case (Esaiasson et al., 2010), it is still the case that the results from this study can say something important and interesting concerning the BP press releases. Indeed, this study still contains important knowledge and insights, which has not, to the best of my knowledge, previously been described in the BP press release research. For this reason, the study has arguably managed to contribute with something important concerning this line of research, even if the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of BP press releases concerning the Deepwater Horizon crisis. Even if the selected population was, only the press releases issued by BP, rather than say a broader population of BP social media, news media coverage, press releases, magazines in different countries etcetera.

Of course, there are some potential problems with the method of using textual analysis. For instance, the method is sometimes criticized for its subjectivity, and for the subjective results,
which it generates. What is more, the results are to a certain extent my own interpretations of the empirical data at hand, meaning that I classify the empirical data in a manner which I myself find reasonable, and which I also consider to be supported by the empirical data found in the study, but which could potentially be open to dispute. Additionally, one could always interpret some of the texts in a different manner from what I have done. Arguably, this is a problem or downside to the study, since this could potentially affect what results are found in the study, to a certain extent. However, at the same time, I do not consider this a major problem with the results. This means that a person who is to perform the same study over again, using the same research questions investigating exactly the same selection of the empirical data material, probably would find more or less the same crisis response strategies and the same image repair strategies. To the extent that this is the case, and I think that it is to quite a large extent, the study is arguably repeatable rather than a onetime phenomenon.

8.6 Suggestions for further research

This study has not managed to cover every single aspect there is, concerning the BP press releases. For this reason, several other studies could potentially be performed, in order to investigate the matter from other perspectives. For instance, the usage of other crisis communication theories besides the ones created by Benoit and Coombs could be utilized in order to create studies with new theoretical perspectives upon the same empirical data material. What is more, one could create further studies, looking more in-depth at the BP social media material, press conferences, traditional news media depictions of the company etcetera.

8.7 Final conclusions

BP knowingly or unknowingly used several crisis response and image repair strategies in connection to their crisis communications, and this developed throughout the crisis communications efforts they made. In connection with this fact, one can and should say something about BP’s way of managing the crisis communications efforts. These have arguably been rather inconsistent, based on the theoretical findings when analyzing the empirical data material. For instance, BP started by using corrective action as a strategy, only to move on to blaming others, scapegoating, attacking the accuser and more, in a rather inconsistent manner. It is arguably the case that BP seems less genuine about what they were saying than how they were portraying themselves in the press release material. They might have been sorry for the loss of life to a certain extent (concern strategy), but they were also the ones whose lobby actions in Congress contributed to the absence of tighter oil industry safety and security legislation in the first place, which arguably contributed to the emergence of the crisis in the first place. What is more, they might have openly taken parts of the
responsibility for the crisis (corrective action strategy), but they clearly thought that other parts of the crisis were actually not their responsibility, but rather the fault of somebody else (scapegoating strategy, shifting the blame strategy) or beyond their control (defeasibility strategy). In addition, they might have tried to crisis communicate, but their ways of doing that were inconsistent, coming across as rather flip-flopping in their approach (first corrective action, then scapegoating). And some of their remarks seemed disingenuous: When former CEO Tony Hayward "applauded" the President's statement concerning the Deepwater Horizon crisis (ingratiation strategy), it was perhaps not a genuine one, but rather a rather strained message from a CEO needing to appear as if he was happy about the President's leadership and interventions, when he probably was not. Evaluating the appropriateness of this way of doing crisis communication is perhaps also an important part of the crisis management process. However, this is a topic for another study.
9 References


