

THE INFLUENCE OF A CAREER CRISIS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
CAREER SUPPORT PERSUASIVE MESSAGES

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, there has been an unprecedented change in the working lives of people around the globe, which has increased the likelihood of people suffering from career crises. The high prevalence of such crises in populations poses a risk of serious social and economic consequences. Although the understanding of how to effectively promote career support initiatives is imperative, little is known about how people who are in a career crisis perceive career-related persuasive communication. The present thesis aims to address this research gap by drawing upon self-discrepancy, regulatory focus, and message framing theories. The thesis proposes that career crisis severity moderates the relationship between message framing (promotion vs. prevention) and message effectiveness (operationalised as message attitude, initiative attitude, and service use intention). In addition, the thesis suggests a mechanism behind this moderating effect. Specifically, the thesis proposes that: career crisis severity affects self-discrepancy magnitude (i.e., the incongruity between actual and desired self-states); self-discrepancy magnitude, in turn, determines regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention); and regulatory focus moderates the relationship between message framing and message effectiveness.

This thesis is comprised of three empirical studies. The first study involved 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were used to develop a quantitative instrument. The second study employed an online survey with an element of experimental design ($N = 123$) to pre-test and pilot the designed quantitative instrument. The third study involved an online survey with an element of experimental design ($N = 302$) that tested the conceptual model of the thesis and was analysed employing partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). While the results, for the most part, supported the specified model, the moderating effects of

crisis severity and regulatory focus on the relationship between message framing and message effectiveness were only partially supported. A simple main effects analysis revealed a more complex picture compared with what was initially hypothesised. The results showed that when people are in a mild career crisis, promotion-framed career support persuasive messages are more effective than those with a prevention frame. The same trend is observed when people are in a severe crisis but only for those who are prevention-oriented. Being in a severe crisis and being promotion-oriented, however, eliminates the effects of message frame on message persuasiveness. The results advance the literature on crisis, self-discrepancy, regulatory focus, and message framing. Implications for marketing practitioners, policymakers, career support and counselling organisations are discussed.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CB-SEM – Covariance-based structural equation modelling
CDT – Cognitive dissonance theory
CR – Critical Realism
DV – Dependent variable
ELM – Elaboration likelihood model
GCQ – Generalised Contentment Questionnaire
IV – Independent variable
MC – Manipulation Check
MMR – Mixed-methods research
MMRD – Mixed-methods research design
NHS – National Health Service
PLS-SEM – Partial least squares structural equation modelling
RFT – Regulatory focus theory
SD – Self-discrepancy
SDT – Self-discrepancy theory
TPB – Theory of planned behaviour
TRA – Theory of reasoned action
UK – United Kingdom
USA – United States of America

INTRODUCTION

The present thesis develops and tests a mechanism through which a psychological crisis can influence the effectiveness of persuasive messages related to the domain of crisis. While the concept of a psychological crisis has been the focus of multiple studies in a wide range of disciplines, including psychology (Erikson, 1956; Caplan, 1961; Greer, 1980), sport psychology (Buchko, 2005; Stambulova, 2011; Cosh, McNeil and Tully, 2021), vocational psychology (Hutri and Lindeman, 2002; Rehfuss, 2003), psychiatry (Eastham *et al.*, 1970; Baldwin, 1978), nursing (Brownell, 1984), and social work (Rapoport, 1962; Lukton, 1974), it remains largely neglected by marketing, consumer behaviour, and advertising scholars. Little is known about the impact a psychological crisis (e.g., career crisis) can have on the effectiveness of persuasive messages related to the theme of the crisis (e.g., career support persuasive messages). The present thesis addresses this research gap focusing on career crisis.

Crisis is a notoriously hard-to-define concept due to its widespread and indiscriminate use. While different definitions of a psychological crisis exist, crisis scholars generally agree that a crisis is a psychological state provoked by a situation that is perceived as threatening to an individual's important life goals and that, for the time being, cannot be resolved by customary problem-solving methods (Caplan, 1961; Rapoport, 1962; Bloom, 1963; Halpern, 1973; Lukton, 1974; Flannery and Everly, 2000; Brown and Rainer, 2006). High prevalence of such crises in populations poses a risk of severe social and economic consequences since psychological crises often lead to mental health problems (Rapoport, 1962; Miller and Iscoe, 1963; Lewis and Roberts, 2001), which, in turn, result in poor quality of life, turnover intentions, an increase in sick leave days, absenteeism, poor performance and low productivity of employees, and unemployment (Lerner *et al.*, 2004; Mitra and Jones, 2017;

Din *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, developing and promoting crisis prevention, intervention, and support initiatives is imperative.

Increasingly, contemporary careers are pursued in turbulent and volatile environments (Callanan, Perri and Tomkowicz, 2017), making it difficult for individuals to attain their career goals and creating favourable conditions for the onset of career-related psychological crises among many people. Economic turmoil and disruptions, global competition, digitisation and automation of work, the deregulation and liberalisation of labour markets, and the ‘gig economy’ have contributed to occupational uncertainty, including job insecurity and difficulties with career planning (Kalleberg, 2009; Pavlova and Silbereisen, 2014; Callanan *et al.*, 2017; Hirschi, 2018). Additionally, the increasing costs of education (Hubble and Bolton, 2018) and housing (Property Data, 2023) add pressure on young workers to succeed financially in their careers. To help individuals navigate the complex work landscape, governments have been providing substantial funding for employment and career support initiatives, especially for young people. The UK Government has invested £1.6 billion in training, apprenticeships, and employment support schemes for job seekers (HM Treasury and The RT Hon Rishi Sunak MP, 2020). Additionally, £2 billion of funding was invested in the ‘Kickstart Scheme’ to subsidise jobs for young people across the country (HM Treasury and The RT Hon Rishi Sunak MP, 2020). However, investments alone do not guarantee the effectiveness of those initiatives. Those in the biggest need of support (e.g., young adults in a career crisis) are often unaware of the support services they can receive or lack trust in public authorities (OECD 2021). Therefore, proactive outreach in the form of social campaigns may be essential to raise awareness and increase trust in career support services. Although an understanding of how to promote career support services effectively is critical, there is scant

research on how being in a career crisis may impact the persuasiveness of messages promoting such services. This research gap is addressed in the present thesis.

In addition, in order to explain a mechanism through which a psychological crisis can influence the effectiveness of persuasive messages related to the domain of crisis, the present thesis develops and tests a model assessing the impact of psychological crisis severity on the effectiveness of message framing through self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) and regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997). While multiple studies have demonstrated that message persuasiveness can be improved by matching message framing to the recipient's self-discrepancy (Tykocinski *et al.*, 1994; Brendl *et al.*, 1995; Evans and Petty, 2003; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009) and regulatory focus (Aaker and Lee, 2001; Cesario *et al.*, 2004; Jain *et al.*, 2006; Kim, 2006; Zhao and Pechmann, 2007; Cesario and Higgins, 2008; Chang and Chou, 2008; Yi and Baumgartner, 2008; Basu and Ng, 2021), scant research exists on how these recipient characteristics can be related to or shaped by psychological crises.

Self-discrepancy (SD) is an incongruity between self-states (e.g., the discrepancy between actual self-state and desired self-states). Different types of self-discrepancy (actual:ideal vs. actual:ought) have been argued to be associated with different regulatory foci (promotion vs. prevention; Higgins *et al.*, 1994; Higgins, 1997). Specifically, people with an incongruity between their actual and ideal self-states are more concerned with approaching matches to their desired self-states. In contrast, people with an incongruity between their actual and ought self-states are more concerned with avoiding mismatches to their desired self-states. The crisis literature suggests that the initial stage of crisis starts with the perception of threat to important life *goals* and needs, and to *the person's sense of integrity* (Rapoport, 1962; Miller and Iscoe, 1963; Geissler, 1984), which can be expected to affect both regulatory focus and self-discrepancy. Moreover, crises, especially those triggered by life transitions (e.g.,

university-work transition), can be seen as liminal periods. Existing literature suggests that, during liminal periods, consumers are more likely to have a higher self-concept discrepancy and may be less psychologically healthy than people in non-liminal states (Noble and Walker, 1997). Therefore, it is logical to suppose that crisis severity, self-discrepancy, and regulatory focus are interconnected.

The theoretical contribution that the present thesis makes is threefold. Firstly, by examining persuasive communication through the lens of crisis theory, the thesis foregrounds the profile and role of message recipients' vulnerable psychological states in persuasive communication research. In particular, the research contributes to the existing literature by integrating the notion of psychological crisis severity in the spectrum of segmentation bases used in persuasive communication. The thesis demonstrates that people with the same condition (i.e., crisis) but different severity of the symptoms can react differently to persuasive messages targeted towards them, thereby highlighting the importance of the crisis subgroups' characteristics and allowing more effective message targeting.

Secondly, the thesis develops and extends message framing theory. Previous studies have found conflicting results for framing (see Thorsteinson and Highhouse, 2003). Consequently, researchers have been attempting to identify moderators of the framing effect. The thesis establishes a new moderator for framing by demonstrating how a psychological crisis can influence the effectiveness of goal framing when the message is related to the theme of the crisis. This is important as lack of persuasiveness in crisis intervention/prevention campaigns can lead not only to the ineffective use of resources but also a decreased likelihood of crisis sufferers seeking support – which could increase risk for severe mental health problems.

Thirdly, by developing and testing a model assessing the impact of psychological crisis severity on the effectiveness of message framing through self-discrepancy and regulatory focus, the thesis contributes original insights on the determinants of self-discrepancy and regulatory focus. While both self-discrepancy and regulatory focus have been found to play an important role in consumer motivation (Higgins *et al.*, 2020), research on their determinants is still in its infancy. The thesis extends knowledge on self-discrepancy formation by establishing a link between psychological crisis severity and self-discrepancy magnitude – a relationship which lacked empirical evidence prior to this research. The importance of this is that the knowledge of self-discrepancy determinants can aid consumer profiling. Unlike self-discrepancy, which is largely an unobservable characteristic, the presence of a psychological crisis can potentially be predicted and identified based on demographic data (e.g., age and education history in the case of a career crisis), online search history, social media activity (Agarwal *et al.*, 2020) and data gathered by fitness tracking wearable devices (Pedrelli *et al.*, 2020). Further, the thesis extends the seminal work of Tory Higgins (Higgins *et al.*, 1994; Higgins, 1997) on the relationship between self-discrepancy and regulatory focus by demonstrating that self-discrepancy *magnitude*, as opposed to self-discrepancy *type*, can act as a determinant of regulatory focus. This is important because people often possess more than one dominant self-discrepancy (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009), which renders self-discrepancy type less effective as a determinant of regulatory focus compared to self-discrepancy magnitude.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, the thesis also makes a methodological contribution by developing an effective and easy-to-use instrument (vignettes) which can help with the assessment of an important, yet under-researched, recipient characteristic, i.e., career crisis severity. This is significant because existing literature lacks career crisis severity

assessment tools, especially those that could be used for self-assessment. The vignettes could also be adapted to other (non-career) contexts and further tested to examine their suitability for other types of psychological crises.

The research also has important practical implications. A combination of message targeting and message tailoring is considered the most optimal communication strategy for message effectiveness and resource efficiency when the promoted behaviour is not overly complex (Schmid *et al.*, 2008). The present thesis shows how both persuasive message targeting and message tailoring can be improved, especially in the context of career crisis sufferers and career support initiatives. In terms of message targeting, the research offers an effective approach to the segmentation of career support message recipients, as well as a career crisis severity assessment tool to aid such segmentation. In terms of message tailoring, the research demonstrates which message frame (if any) should be used with which target audience, thereby offering insights that can help advertising practitioners make informed decisions about career support message design. Thus, the thesis offers specific guidelines and message design tactics for advertising practitioners and policymakers who seek to improve the effectiveness of persuasive messages aiming to support crisis sufferers – and, importantly, in the context of career crises. This is a timely topic, especially following the recent COVID-19 jobs crisis, an ongoing trend of a pandemic-induced mass resignation, also known as ‘the Great Resignation’ in the United States (Norris-Green and Wheatley, 2022; Sull, Sull, and Zweig, 2022), and the cost-of-living crisis (Johnson, 2023).

The thesis starts with a review of relevant existing literature, based on which thesis hypotheses have been developed. What follows is a discussion of the methodology of the thesis, including research philosophy, approach to theory development, research design, and

methods justification. Then, three studies and their results are presented. The thesis ends with a discussion of the research results and a conclusion.

PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW

1. CRISIS

The objective of the present chapter is to unpack the concept of crisis and explain its relation to consumer research. Section 1.1 of this chapter introduces the phenomenon of crisis by discussing foundational theoretical perspectives on crisis and relevant definitions. Based on the foundational theoretical perspectives, the section also develops an integrative perspective on crisis as well as a working definition of crisis for the purpose of the present thesis. Section 1.2 introduces existing typologies of crisis, which when unpacked, neglect to offer clarity on the issue of crisis conceptualisation. Section 1.3 explains the differences between crisis and crisis-related concepts (e.g., stress, depression, problem, emergency, and predicament) to reduce the definitional ambiguity of the crisis concept in the current thesis. Section 1.4 discusses the issue of crisis measurement that stems from the issues discussed in Sections 1.1-1.3. This problem will be subsequently addressed in the methodology chapter and Study 1. Section 1.5 discusses the state of crisis studies in the consumer research literature. Section 1.6 focuses on career-related crises among consumers in early adulthood. Finally, Section 1.7 provides a chapter summary.

The literature search for this chapter was conducted in two stages. The *first stage* involved searching for relevant literature by keywords on a university library system (the primary source), Google Scholar, and within academic journals. The list of keywords was continuously updated based on new search results. The identified articles were subsequently used to locate further articles through their reference lists as well as by using the electronic citation and author tracking functions on Google Scholar. Scholars recommend Google

Scholar for initial literature searches because, compared to some of the specialist databases (e.g., PubMed), its results are more likely to have higher numbers of citations, be classified as relevant, and be published in higher impact factor journals (Nourbakhsh *et al.*, 2012). The first stage of the literature search returned a good number of relevant results and helped to identify seminal and foundational crisis studies. However, most of the literature was dated 1960-80s.

To ensure that the review does not overlook later studies, a *second stage* of the literature search was introduced, which involved a systematic literature search on Scopus. Scopus is considered “one of the most comprehensive databases of indexed academic publications” (Mariani, Perez-Vega and Wirtz, 2022: 757). It covers over 23,452 peer-reviewed journals from more than 5,000 international publishers (e.g., Elsevier, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, Sage, Taylor & Francis, and Emerald) in social sciences, health sciences, physical sciences, and life sciences (Elsevier, 2020). The search was limited to academic journals as they undergo rigorous peer review *and* contribute to scholarly advancement (Paul *et al.*, 2021).

Initially, the search was limited to two keywords – “crisis” and “crises”, which were searched within article title and author keywords. Crisis synonyms were not included to avoid contributing to the conceptual fuzziness of the crisis concept, which will be discussed in Section 1.3. However, due to the widespread use of the term crisis, the search returned 37,718 articles. The examination of the first 100 results showed that this approach was not suitable as it produced a considerable number of irrelevant results, including but not limited to a humanitarian crisis, economic crisis, Covid-19 crisis, financial crisis, organisational crisis, destination crisis, healthcare crisis, migrant crisis, water crisis, climate crisis, housing crisis, and Russia-Ukraine crisis. As a result, it was decided to adopt a more nuanced approach using keywords that would be more likely to be associated with psychological crises. Specifically,

the keywords were chosen based on the terms which, according to the first stage of the literature search, were typically used by crisis scholars to refer to a psychological crisis.

The final keywords for this systematic literature search and their results can be found in Table 1. The keywords with a broader focus (e.g., “career” AND “crisis/crises”) were searched within article title and author keywords. The keywords with a narrower focus (e.g., “career crisis/crises”) were searched within article title, abstract, and author keywords. The search returned 2,736 results. While the search helped to locate a few newer crisis studies which complemented the studies discovered in the first stage of the literature search, most of the 2,736 results were found of limited use for the purpose of the thesis. For example, some papers did not define crisis (e.g., Fuschillo, Cayla and Cova, 2022), and some papers used the concept of crisis interchangeably with other related concepts, such as negative life events (Westmaas and Silver, 2001) and severe mental health problems (Zeng, Zheng and Wang, 2020), among others. Such papers were less valuable to the thesis because it was unclear whether what the authors called “crisis” constituted a psychological crisis. There were also papers that examined crisis in the context of psychotic crises (Tostes and Cury, 2021), psychiatric emergencies (Perlmutter and Jones, 1985; Limone and Toto, 2022), bereavement (Wang *et al.*, 2010), and suicide prevention (Gilead and Mulaik, 1983) – the topics which were not the primary focus of the present thesis. Finally, some papers were focused on crises that were clearly beyond the scope of the thesis, e.g., organisational crises (Van der Meer and Verhoeven, 2014; Brummette and Fussell Sisco, 2015; Schoofs and Claeys, 2021).

Thus, the literature search has revealed that, although valuable work has been done on psychological crises over the years, the development of crisis theory has slowed down significantly since the 1980s. This lack of development, and hence accuracy, of established theories is not uncommon in psychology. Psychological science has been criticised for its

obsession with innovation, which is characteristic of explorative research (Burghardt and Bodansky, 2021). Studies that are not seen as novel enough are often rejected by journals because they are “merely incremental” (Giner-Sorolla, 2012), which incentivises bad research practices such as ignoring previous research, imprecise theorising, and parallel theories, among others (Burghardt and Bodansky, 2021). The focus on innovation undervalues research that “draws attention to old but ongoing problems for which a solution has already been suggested” (Burghardt and Bodansky, 2021: 4). It is possible that crisis theory has not been significantly developed since the 1980s because it is perceived by psychology scholars as an area with little room for innovativeness. Nevertheless, as evidenced by the following literature review, crisis theory still lacks accuracy (e.g., in terms of conceptualisation, measurement, and taxonomy). Accuracy, by its nature, requires continuous evaluation, which justifies the focus of the present chapter.

Table 1. Literature search keywords and their results.

Keywords	Type of search	Results returned
“Psychology” AND (“crisis OR crises”)	Title and author keywords	365
“Career” AND (“crisis OR crises”)	Title and author keywords	103
“Occupation” AND (“crisis OR crises”)	Title and author keywords	24
“Identity crisis OR identity crises”	Title and author keywords	690
“Sport” AND (“crisis OR crises”)	Title and author keywords	149
“Athlete” AND (“crisis OR crises”)	Title and author keywords	34
“Psychological crisis OR psychological crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	300
“Career crisis OR career crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	30
“Life crisis OR life crises” (the results also covered midlife and quarter-life crises)	Title, abstract, and author keywords	594
“Emotional crisis OR emotional crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	189
“Developmental crisis OR developmental crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	150
“Occupational crisis OR occupational crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	4
“Professional crisis OR professional crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	50
“Transitional crisis OR transitional crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	18
“Maturation crisis OR maturational crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	10
“Typology of crisis OR typology crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	12
“Classification of crisis OR classification of crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	10
“Taxonomy of crisis OR taxonomy of crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	4
“Categorisation of crisis OR categorisation of crises”	Title, abstract, and author keywords	0
		Total: 2,736

1.1 FOUNDATIONAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CRISIS

This section discusses the concept of crisis by reviewing relevant seminal papers and highlighting four main theoretical perspectives on crisis, namely homeostatic, cognitive, dialectic, and psychoanalytic perspectives. These perspectives are explained and critically analysed, subsequently serving as a basis for an integrative perspective on crisis in the present thesis.

1.1.1 The origins of crisis theory: The homeostatic perspective

Crisis theory traces its roots to the work of Lindemann (1944) and Caplan (1960, 1961, 1964). First, Lindeman's (1944) seminal study on acute grief introduced the basic framework for defining the symptomology of the crisis of bereavement. Then, Caplan's work on parental response to the crisis of premature birth (1960) and his subsequent studies (1961, 1964) provided a basis for the development of crisis intervention theory and practice (Poal, 1990). Caplan's crisis model is based on the concept of emotional homeostasis (i.e., equilibrium) (Poal, 1990). The homeostatic crisis model suggests that people endeavour to maintain an emotional homeostatic balance with the external environment. When this balance is disturbed by psychological or physiological forces, people attempt to restore it by engaging in problem-solving activities. Thus, a crisis can be seen as 'an upset of a steady or homeostatic state' (Poal, 1990: 124).

Caplan's work introduced one of the first definitions of a psychological crisis. According to Caplan (1961: 18), a 'crisis is provoked when a person faces an obstacle to important life

goals that is, for a time, insurmountable through the utilisation of customary problem-solving methods'. This is followed by a period of psychological disequilibrium that involves upset, inner tension, and disorganisation of the individual's functioning. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to resolve the problem in a variety of ways, eventually, an emotional equilibrium or adaptation is normally achieved. Caplan's (1961) definition of crisis has been adopted by many researchers (Rapoport, 1962; Bloom, 1963; Lukton, 1974; Dembińska, 2014; Kalb et al., 2018; Everly and Lating, 2019; Wang et al., 2010; Zeng, Zheng and Wang, 2020; Bullock et al., 2021), and many later definitions of crisis stem from it (Poal, 1990). For example, Rapoport (1962) describes a crisis as a hazardous situation in which a person faces a problem in the form of a threat, a loss or a challenge and struggles to find an appropriate solution for this problem because the required solution is new in relation to the person's previous life experience. Bloom (1963: 499) suggests that 'a crisis occurs when an individual finds himself unable to deal effectively with an emerging problem'. Lukton (1974: 385) explains the concept of crisis in the following manner: 'external and internal stimuli repeatedly produce stress, which in turn creates problem-solving situations for the individual. If the individual's usual means of problem-solving do not work in a given situation, the result is called a crisis'.

Thus, the homeostatic perspective suggests that crisis is a period of psychological disequilibrium. Nevertheless, despite its popularity, Caplan's homeostatic model of crisis is not without criticism. Homeostatic theories, having the homeostatic balance in their theoretical core, do not account for essential aspects of human behaviour, such as development, growth, actualisation, and change (Taplin, 1971). A homeostatic model as a foundation for crisis theory does not discuss personality or concepts typically associated with personality (e.g., feelings, relationships, ideas). The model isolates crisis theory from other

important psychological constructs, including perceptions, learning, emotions, and communication, among others. As a result, instead of approaching crisis theory from a homeostatic perspective, some scholars suggest using a cognitive perspective to develop knowledge about crisis (e.g., Taplin, 1971).

1.1.2 The cognitive perspective

According to the cognitive perspective, an individual in crisis not only reacts to a stressful stimulus but also experiences a temporary interruption of cognitive processes such as perception, thinking, evaluation of situations, and decision-making (Taplin, 1971). The cognitive perspective emphasises that a state of crisis depends on particular combinations of various factors (e.g., type of event, situation, personality characteristics, and expectancies). For example, a person who is a high-achiever and a perfectionist may have higher career expectations compared with people who do not possess these qualities. Therefore, if faced with unemployment, that person is more likely to find themselves in a state of crisis. The cognitive perspective, however, does not necessarily conflict with the homeostatic model. In fact, Caplan's homeostatic model (1960, 1961, 1964) resonates with Lazarus's (1968) theory of emotion (Halpern, 1973).

Lazarus (1968) theorises that the nature of an emotional response is determined by two appraisal processes – *primary* and *secondary*. In *the primary appraisal*, individuals assess whether the situation they are facing is threatening or non-threatening to them. This assessment involves the evaluation of: 1) whether the situation has ‘goal relevance’ or motivational implications (e.g., ‘Does this situation affect me?’); and 2) whether the situation has negative or positive implications, i.e., ‘goal congruence’ (e.g., ‘Is this situation helpful or

harmful?') (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). When the situation is considered goal-relevant and goal-incongruent, the individual identifies the situation as threatening and, therefore, experiences stress. This leads to *the secondary appraisal* when the individual assesses their potential behavioural response to a threat. This appraisal involves the evaluation of 'coping confidence' (i.e., assessment of one's ability to cope with a threat) that directs the individual's efforts toward coping. The cognitive perspective has been adopted by several crisis scholars. For example, Halpern (1973: 343) states that an individual in crisis is 'a person who appraises a given situation as extremely threatening and who, in his secondary appraisal, can find no way of coping with his situation'. Similarly, Parad (1965, 1966) advocates that before a hazardous life event becomes a crisis, it must be recognised by the individual as a stressful situation (cited in Poal, 1990). France (1982) suggests that people encountering similar challenges may react differently since the subjective evaluation of a hazardous event depends not only on the nature of the event but also on personality traits (cited in Poal, 1990). Cederblad *et al.* (1995: 323) argue that '[h]ow a certain situation is experienced by an individual is influenced by personality factors, previous experiences and the personal meaning ascribed to it'. In other words, 'one man's crisis is another man's thrill' (Forer, 1963: 276).

However, there is still a lack of consensus among crisis researchers on whether a crisis can be acknowledged if there is no awareness of a stressful preceding event by the person in crisis; and whether an individual needs to be aware of his inner tension or discomfort to be considered to be in crisis (Bloom, 1963). Some scholars allow that, when the crisis has been negotiated effectively, and the anxiety caused by the crisis has been masked by inner defensive mechanisms, people can be in crisis without showing any signs of the condition and without being aware of it (Lukton, 1974). A successfully negotiated developmental crisis can serve as an example. The identity crisis of adolescence may be resolved in such a way that the

only evidence of its existence is the post-factum evidence that the person passed onto the next developmental stage, and hence has effectively addressed their identity crisis at some point in the past. Thus, it is possible that, depending on the nature of crisis, people in crisis may or may not be aware of their crisis. Nevertheless, crises that have been negotiated adaptively do not constitute ‘active’ crises (Golan, 1969; Lukton, 1974). Here it is necessary to reiterate that the goal of the present research is to examine the relationship between a crisis and crisis-related communication. Since people who have negotiated their crisis effectively are likely to react differently to crisis-related persuasive communication compared with people who are in an active state of crisis, it has been decided to limit the focus of the present thesis to active crises only. Thus, while it is acknowledged that, in some instances, people can experience crises without being aware of them, such crises are beyond the scope of the current research.

In summary, the cognitive perspective can be seen as an extension of the homeostatic perspective in that for a crisis to take place, an obstacle to an important life goal needs to be *perceived* as threatening by the individual. It must be acknowledged that this extension does not apply to crises that have been negotiated adaptively (e.g., successfully negotiated identity crisis). However, for the reasons discussed above, such negotiated crises are not the focus of the present thesis. Instead, this thesis focuses on ‘active’ crises only (i.e., crises of which people are aware) and, therefore, embraces the cognitive perspective.

1.1.3 The dialectic perspective

One of the most severe criticisms of the homeostatic perspective comes from dialectical psychology (Greer, 1980). Unlike the cognitive perspective, which can complement the homeostatic model, the dialectical perspective on crisis is normally considered the antithesis

of the homeostatic view (Riegel, 1976). The dialectical model suggests that life is never static, and stability is 'a transitory condition in the stream of ceaseless changes' (Riegel, 1976: 690). Crises are inevitable since the process of living continuously imposes a variety of social and biological pressures which challenge habitual mechanisms of adaptation (Forer, 1963). Dialectical psychologists see human development as a simultaneous movement along at least four dimensions: '(a) inner-biological, (b) individual psychological, (c) cultural sociological, (d) outer physical' (Greer, 1980: 25). When changes along these different dimensions are not synchronised or coordinated, it produces a conflict between them, and this, in turn, leads to a crisis. However, according to the dialectic perspective, life is not only characterised by change and contradiction but also by a constructive evolutionary process (Greer, 1980). Forer (1963) argues that crises are a prerequisite to growth because, by challenging old forms of adaptations, they stimulate psychological changes. Therefore, people who do not suffer from crises can only stagnate and deteriorate (Forer, 1963).

Although some scholars consider the dialectic perspective the opposite of the homeostatic perspective (e.g., Forer, 1963; Greer, 1980), the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. The homeostatic model neither suggests that life is static (only that people endeavour to maintain a homeostatic balance) nor does it exclude the possibility of growth in crisis. On the contrary, the author of the homeostatic perspective states: '[t]he discontinuity and imbalance of the customary patterns of behaviour and feeling during the crisis period are associated with an increased susceptibility to change, which may be in the direction either of improved mental health or mental illness' (Caplan, 1960: 365). According to the homeostatic view, the growth-promoting outcome is determined by whether adaptive or maladaptive responses are employed in crisis resolution (Caplan, 1960, 1961, 1964). However, while both perspectives acknowledge the possibility of growth in crisis, they still differ in how they portray the

relationship between crisis and growth. Compared with the homeostatic perspective, the dialectic perspective focuses more strongly on the growth-promoting potential of crisis. That is, crisis is not seen merely as an opportunity for growth but as a prerequisite to growth.

In summary, the dialectic perspective has more in common with the homeostatic perspective than it might first appear. Although these two perspectives have been presented as opposites in the past, treating them as such may not be fully justified. Both perspectives allow for the possibility of growth in crisis. However, unlike the homeostatic perspective that portrays crisis as an opportunity for growth, the dialectic perspective sees crisis as a prerequisite to growth. Although the present thesis acknowledges that crises have the potential to change someone's life drastically and can stimulate growth, it rejects the idea that without crises individuals can only stagnate and deteriorate (Forer, 1963). Growth does not always come from crises or extreme events. Growth can take place, for example, because of the gradual transformation that comes from learning. Thus, crises can act as prerequisites to growth for some people in certain circumstances, but they are not the only possible prerequisites to growth.

1.1.4 The psychoanalytic perspective

Another theoretical perspective on crisis stems from psychoanalytic theory. According to Greer (1980), who criticises the psychoanalytic perspective, suggests that this perspective sees crises encountered in adulthood as unresolved psychological conflicts of the past and the extensions of crises encountered early in life. Therefore, the perspective promotes a closed system view of crisis. However, Jacobson (1967: 94-95), who advocates for the application of psychoanalysis to crisis intervention, states that '[crisis] outcome is viewed as not inexorably

dependent on the outcome of previous similar conflicts, including those in infantile period. Rather, each crisis represents a renewed opportunity to attain a more effective psychological balance of forces'. Therefore, the psychoanalytic perspective does not necessarily promote 'a closed system' view on crisis but rather offers a complementary insight in that it suggests that previously unresolved crises can contribute to present crises as well as present crises can help attain a better resolution of previously unresolved crises.

In addition, the psychoanalytic perspective has been criticised for placing a strong emphasis on pathology and the failure of coping rather than on development and growth (Greer, 1980). This emphasis contradicts the homeostatic and cognitive models, which promote a more positive, growth-oriented view of crisis rather than a primary concern with psychopathology (Greer, 1980). Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that Caplan's (1964) homeostatic model falls short of explaining the role of crisis in the life course development (Greer, 1980), and it was psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1959) who introduced the notion of developmental crises (these crises will be further discussed in Section 1.2). The psychoanalytic perspective has also been criticised for its strong focus on intrapsychic factors and disregard for social, interpersonal, and situational factors (Taplin, 1971). However, the development of ego psychology has increased the attention psychoanalysts pay to the interplay between internal and external factors in addition to the analysis of intrapsychic conflicts (Chrzanowski, 1977).

In summary, although crisis and psychoanalysis were viewed as opposites in the past (Chrzanowski, 1977), the application of the psychoanalytic perspective to crisis theory can add valuable insight in that the psychoanalytic perspective suggests that past and present crises can be interrelated. That is, previously unresolved crises can contribute to present crises as well as present crises can help attain a better resolution of previously unresolved crises.

The founders of the homeostatic perspective, Gerald Caplan and Eric Lindemann, acknowledge that previous failure to address threats that resulted in a psychological conflict or vulnerability may act as an additional burden in the current crisis (Rapoport, 1962), which resonates with the psychoanalytic perspective. Moreover, with its focus on defence mechanisms and anxiety reduction, the psychoanalytic theory is compatible with crisis notions of equilibrium and tension reduction (Greer, 1980). Therefore, despite being insight-oriented, the psychoanalytic perspective can still be compatible with and complementary to the homeostatic model of crisis. Additionally, understanding unconscious conflicts can be helpful for successful crisis intervention (Jacobson, 1967).

1.1.5 The integrative perspective on crisis in the present thesis

Crisis is one of those fuzzy concepts which are plentiful in the social sciences (Eastham, Coates and Allodi, 1970). As evidenced in the above sections, there is more than one perspective on and definition of what constitutes a crisis. Nevertheless, while existing theoretical perspectives on crisis are often presented as rivals and potentially incommensurate, in the present thesis, homeostatic, cognitive, dialectic, and psychoanalytic perspectives are seen as complementary rather than competing. Thus, the present thesis develops an integrative perspective on crisis by suggesting that people are motivated to maintain emotional balance and that a crisis represents a state of disequilibrium of that emotional balance (homeostatic perspective); to be in a crisis, a person has to perceive an encountered problem as threatening to their important goals (cognitive perspective); crises can be, but not necessarily are, prerequisites for individual development (dialectic perspective); and previously unresolved

psychological conflicts can exacerbate subsequent crises as well as current crises can help attain a better resolution of previously unresolved crises (psychoanalytic perspective).

Moreover, although those who research crises and work in the area of crisis intervention are hesitant to commit themselves to a single definition (Eastham, Coates and Allodi, 1970), it is possible to delineate a general definition of crisis for the purposes of this thesis based on this review of the crisis literature. Despite their diverse perspectives, crisis scholars generally agree that crisis, in a broad sense, is a psychological state that is provoked by a situation that is perceived as threatening to important life goals of the individual and that, for the time being, cannot be resolved by customary problem-solving methods (Caplan, 1961; Rapoport, 1962; Bloom, 1963; Halpern, 1973; Lukton, 1974; Flannery and Everly, 2000; Brown and Rainer, 2006). This is the definition of crisis adopted in the present thesis.

1.2 EXISTING TYPOLOGIES OF CRISIS

While the previous section has introduced foundational theoretical perspectives on psychological crisis in general, the present section focuses on different types of psychological crisis and their characteristics. Scholars in the field of crisis theory have adopted Erikson's (1956) classification, which suggests two major types of crises: *developmental*, also known as *maturational crises*, and *accidental*, also known as *situational crises* (Poal, 1990). The distinction between these crises is typically based on whether they have been driven by externally or internally imposed triggers and the level of their predictability. Developmental crises are integral elements of personality growth and are linked to specific maturational stages and their corresponding developmental tasks (Rapoport, 1967), and, therefore, they can be predicted. These crises are traditionally called psychosocial crises because they are

precipitated by the tensions between the individual's psychological needs and society's pressures; they are a conflict between the self and society (Erikson, 1959; 1963). Successful resolution of these crises results in a positive outcome for personality development and the acquisition of psychological strengths that can be used to resolve subsequent crises (Erikson, 1964). Failure to resolve these crises leads to a less healthy personality and reduced ability to complete subsequent developmental stages. Accidental crises, on the other hand, are triggered by unexpected, externally imposed trauma or stress (Geissler, 1984), and can happen to anyone at any point in life (Rapoport, 1967).

However, drawing on the life-span development and crisis intervention literature, Greer (1980) theorises that both developmental and accidental crises should be considered in the context of developmental progression. Similar to developmental crises, accidental crises provide opportunities for growth, acquisition of new psychological skills, and psychological change and, therefore, have developmental significance. Moreover, the death of a loved one, a change of a career, the loss of a job, or a terminal illness are normal and arguably inevitable experiences in the sense that most individuals experience at least one of them at some point in their lives. Hence, they can, to some extent, be expected and perhaps should be seen not as accidental crises but rather as developmental tasks over the life span. Thus, Greer (1980) emphasises the importance of helping people develop certain expectations towards these events and recommends shifting the focus of crisis intervention from crisis prevention to crisis anticipation. While Greer's (1980) arguments are reasonable, the original developmental versus accidental crisis distinction proposed by Erikson (1956) continues to receive widespread usage within the field of crisis research.

Some scholars have not only adopted but also extended Erikson's (1956) crisis classification. For example, Rapoport (1967) extends Erikson's (1956) typology by adding crises of role transition. According to Rapoport (1967), compared with developmental crises that are fundamentally biological (i.e., they are linked to a biological age), crises of role transition are not related to developmental stages and are more socially determined than biologically based (e.g., retirement, being promoted or downgraded at work). Among other scholars who have extended Erikson's typology (1956) are Hoffman and Weiss (1986). They divide crises into situational, developmental, and psychopathological. Brammer (1985) identifies developmental, situational, and existential (e.g., crises triggered by a failure to achieve certain goals by a certain age) crises. James (2008) extends Brammer's (1985) typology by adding a fourth type of crises, namely eco-systemic crises (i.e., crises brought by natural or human-caused disasters). In addition, Baldwin (1978) isolates six classes of psychological crisis: 1) dispositional (triggered by a problematic personal situation, for example, losing a job); 2) crises caused by anticipated life transitions (e.g., retirement); 3) crises resulting from traumatic stress; 4) maturational/developmental; 5) crises reflecting psychopathology; and 6) psychiatric emergencies. Overall, as shown in Table 2, existing crisis typologies differ in terms of their categories, the logic used to derive those categories, as well as the number of those categories, which further complicates the task of crisis conceptualisation.

An alternative view to the above is that crises should be placed on a continuum rather than divided into distinct types or classes (McGee, 1968). According to McGee (1968), on such a continuum, normal developmental crises should be at the lower end of the continuum, and more severe crises (e.g., a bereavement coinciding with the loss of a job) should be at the upper end and treated as psychiatric emergencies.

Table 2. Typologies of crisis

Authors	Typology
Erikson (1956)	1. Developmental 2. Accidental
Caplan (1964)	1. Developmental 2. Accidental
Forer (1963)	1. Situational 2. Crises in secondary narcissism 3. Crises in primary narcissism
Rapoport (1967)	1. Developmental 2. Accidental crises 3. Crises of role transition
Schwartz (1971)	1. Developmental 2. Accidental 3. Psychiatric Emergencies
Aguilera and Messick (1974)	1. Maturational 2. Situational
Morrice, J. (1976)	1. Developmental 2. Accidental
Baldwin (1978)	1. Dispositional 2. Transitional 3. Traumatic 4. Maturational/Developmental 5. Crises reflecting psychopathology 6. Psychiatric emergencies
Brammer (1985)	1. Developmental 2. Situational 3. Existential
Hoffman and Weiss (1986)	1. Developmental 2. Situational 3. Crises reflecting psychopathology
James (2008)	1. Developmental 2. Situational 3. Existential 4. Ecosystemic

In summary, this section suggests that most of the existing crisis typologies either adapt or draw upon Erikson's (1956) crisis typology that delineates accidental and developmental crises. Despite having the common 'parent', existing crisis typologies still differ in terms of their categories, the logic used to derive those categories, as well as the number of those categories. When unpacked, instead of offering clarity about the crisis concept, existing crisis

typologies make the task of crisis conceptualisation arguably harder. For example, despite the differences in the nature of their triggers (externally or internally imposed) and predictability, different types of crises are not mutually exclusive. They can coincide and overlap. Therefore it can be difficult to separate them from one another. Therefore, since, definitionally, the psychological features of the above crises are largely similar (Greer, 1980), instead of limiting the research to any specific type of psychological crisis, the present thesis uses the general conceptualisation of crisis indicated in Section 1.1. Focusing only on one type of crisis in the present research would be not only challenging from a practical point of view but also unlikely to contribute anything of substantial value to the research goals.

1.3 CRISIS AND RELATED CONCEPTS

The conceptualisation of crisis is challenging not only because there are several theoretical perspectives on and different types of psychological crisis, but also because the concept of crisis is closely related to and often confused with other psychological concepts. The term crisis is often used interchangeably with such terms as ‘stress’ or a ‘stressful event’ (Rapoport, 1962; Hoff, 1978; Geissler, 1984; Westmaas and Silver, 2001), ‘problem’ (Rapoport, 1962), and ‘emergency’ (Hoff, 1978; Geissler, 1984). In addition, the distinction between ‘crisis’ and ‘depression’ is also not immediately apparent. Crisis often involves depression, so separating one from the other can be difficult. Since crisis is different from the above concepts and should not be confused with them, the present section focuses on the explanation of the differences between crisis and its related concepts.

One of the concepts that is closely related to the concept of crisis is stress. Despite being often used interchangeably (Rapoport, 1962; Eastham, Coates and Allodi, 1970), stress and

crisis are two distinct concepts. '[S]tress refers to the relation of the stressful stimulus, the individual's reaction to it, and the events to which it leads' (Rapoport, 1962: 211). Stress (or a stressful event) can be a *trigger* for a chain of reactions that lead to a crisis (e.g., getting redundant at work) (Lukton, 1974; Auerbach and Kilmann, 1977; Hoff, 1978). Some researchers call these types of stressors 'critical incidents' or 'crisis events' (Flannery and Everly, 2000). Stress can also be a *response* to a crisis (e.g., being stressed about one's career direction).

As described in Section 1.1, crisis is produced when an individual repeatedly fails to overcome an obstacle to an important life goal by using habitual coping skills (Caplan, 1961). Unlike crisis, stress does not necessarily require an individual to develop new coping skills. To manage a stressful situation, the individual can use existing coping skills (e.g., meditating, doing sports, spending quality time with loved ones) or a new combination of existing coping skills. In addition, although stress can be related to something important, it is not always related to an obstacle to an important life goal. For example, being a parent, student and/or employee can be stressful. However, it does not necessarily mean that the stress is caused by obstacles to important goals in these areas or that the stress will necessarily result in a crisis. Stress has the potential to lead to a crisis, but whether that will happen depends on the individual's ability to cope with the stress and the relevance of that stress to an important life goal (Golan, 1969; Lukton, 1974; Hoff, 1978).

Another difference between crisis and stress is that a crisis is time-limited (i.e., it is a *period* in someone's life that does not last indefinitely), whereas, in the case of stress, it is not necessarily implied (e.g., chronic stress) (Caplan, 1964). Finally, according to Rapoport (1967), stress typically implies a pathogenic or negative state, whereas crisis can have a growth-promoting effect if necessary favourable factors are operating, such as the absence of

pre-existing psychopathology, successfully resolved past crises or preference for adaptive rather than maladaptive coping strategies. However, it should be mentioned that in the early '70s, Selye (1974) introduced the terms 'distress' (i.e., negative, unpleasant stress) and 'eustress' (i.e., positive, stimulating stress). Consequently, more recently, some scholars started making a distinction between 'bad stress' and 'good stress' (O'Sullivan, 2011; Aschbacher *et al.*, 2013; Karmakar, 2017; Rudland, Golding and Wilkinson, 2020), advocating that an adequate amount of stress can be beneficial for work and academic performance (Hargrove, Nelson and Cooper, 2013; Travis *et al.*, 2020); the so-called 'Yerkes-Dodson Law' (Benson and Allen, 1980). Nevertheless, increasingly, the concept of 'eustress' and the Yerkes-Dodson Law have been criticised, and empirical evidence supporting the phenomenon of 'good stress' is insufficient (Le Fevre, Matheny and Kolt, 2003; Corbett, 2015; Bienertova-Vasku, Lenart and Corbett, 2020).

In addition to the notion of eustress, when positive psychology started gaining popularity as a paradigm in psychology in the 1990s (Khademi and Najafi, 2020), the concepts of *posttraumatic growth* (Aldwin and Levenson, 2004; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004) and *stress-related growth* (Park *et al.*, 1996; Park, 2004) became a focus of interest among some psychology researchers. These concepts appear to be problematic for at least a couple of reasons. Firstly, there does not seem to be any consensus on what kind of stressors are growth-stimulating. While some scholars suggest that only traumatic stressors can result in growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004), others argue that even minor everyday stressors can promote growth (Aldwin and Levenson, 2004; Park, 2004). Secondly, the researchers who employ the concept of posttraumatic growth fail to give it a clear definition and explain how this concept is different from the idea of crisis' growth-promoting potential. Indeed, in their paper on posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004: 1, emphasis in original) state:

‘We use the words *trauma*, *crisis*, *highly stressful events*, and other similar terms interchangeably, as roughly synonymous expressions. Our usage of these terms is a bit broader and less restrictive than their usage in some literatures’.

In summary, crisis and stress are closely related terms, and their distinction is not immediately apparent. Some scholars believe that crisis theory incorporates concepts from both stress theories and disaster theories and, therefore, falls conceptually between stress and disaster (Kalis and Adelson, 1970). Other scholars suggest that there is a possibility that crisis is ‘a special and acute kind of the more general class of stress’ (Eastham, Coates and Allodi, 1970: 463). In view of the above, it must be noted that while crisis and stress are treated as separate concepts in the present thesis, it is acknowledged that crisis may be a special and acute form of stress.

Crisis and depression are another pair of closely related concepts. Although depression is a common emotional consequence of crisis (Rapoport, 1962; Miller and Iscoe, 1963; Lewis and Roberts, 2001), crisis scholars tend to agree that the assessment of severe psychological states, such as depression, does not adequately capture the construct of crisis (Golan, 1987; Parad and Parad, 1990; Ell, 1995; Roberts, 1996, 2000). Neither are all people who suffer from depression necessarily in crisis, nor do all people who are in crisis suffer from depression. Compared with clinical depression, crisis is not psychopathology, even though it can result in or be superimposed on the latter (Rapoport, 1967). People in crisis and suffering from depression could have started experiencing the latter before their crisis. Depression may also be the result of unsuccessful crisis resolution rather than the manifestation of a crisis state itself.

Clinical depression and crisis also differ in terms of their symptoms and treatment. Crisis does not necessarily significantly affect the global functioning of an individual. However, both major depressive and adjustment disorders (also known as reactive or exogenous depression) normally involve significant ‘impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning’ (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 161, 286). Thus, while clinical depression is typically impairing, crisis does not need to be. In addition, a crisis would normally have a particular theme or cause. Thus, to overcome a crisis, people need to find a way to eliminate an obstacle to an important life goal or change their attitude toward the goal. Causes of clinical depression, on the other hand, can be more complex (e.g., genetic predisposition, chemical imbalance, lack of social support, and stressful life events). Therefore, depression treatment may require more than just eliminating an obstacle to an important life goal (e.g., therapy sessions and medication). Thus, while depression is often an emotional consequence of a crisis, it cannot be equated with the latter.

Besides stress and depression, problem, emergency, and predicament are other terms that have been used interchangeably with crisis. Cumming and Cumming (1963) make a distinction between a problem and a crisis (cited in Rapoport, 1967). The authors suggest that while a problem involves some element of novelty, it can still be solved by using new combinations of *existing* coping mechanisms available to the individual. In contrast, a crisis requires the acquisition of *new* coping mechanisms. As for an emergency, it is defined as ‘a serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action’ (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). Although an emergency situation typically involves an impediment to a desired goal, it does not necessarily involve a period of psychological instability (Geissler, 1984). Compared with a crisis situation, the decision-making process in an emergency situation is less complex. It typically suggests two options – to act or not to act – rather than

deciding between multiple alternatives. The decision to be made is often evident in the nature of the situation. Both crisis and emergency often have a specific cause or triggering event, but unlike emergency, which has a specific effect, crisis has a nonspecific effect that differs among individuals (Geissler, 1984). Nonetheless, emergency leads to stresses which, as discussed above, have the potential to become crises (Hoff, 1978).

In summary, this review of the crisis literature reveals that the distinction between crisis and crisis-related concepts may not be immediately clear. Indeed, crisis scholars suggest that the concept of crisis is not only widely used but also widely misused by researchers and professionals (Rapoport, 1962; Geissler, 1984). The discussion in the present section has added more clarity to the crisis concept by explaining what it is and what it is not.

1.4 CRISIS MEASUREMENT

The definitional ambiguity of the crisis concept and its wide misuse are also linked to another problem, the problem of measurement. Empirical crisis literature indicates a lack of meaningful crisis measurement, making effective crisis intervention challenging (Bonyngne and Thurber, 2008). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify two common forms of crisis assessment tools: paper and pencil rapid assessment instruments (RAIs) and structured interviews. RAI is essentially a standardised questionnaire designed to capture the subjective experience of an individual (Lewis and Roberts, 2001). Despite RAI's advantages (short and easy-to-use), there are certain concerns about its validity and reliability. Firstly, RAI requires a crisis sufferer to complete a self-assessment form and, therefore, the severity of the person's crisis state may affect the results (Lewis and Roberts, 2001). For example, depending on its severity, crisis-related stress can impair cognitive function in crisis sufferers (Sandi, 2013). As

a result, they may struggle to think clearly while filling in an RAI form. That, in turn, puts at risk the validity of the results. Secondly, crisis self-assessment may involve impression management issues (Bonyng and Thurber, 2008). That is, crisis sufferers completing a self-assessment form may consciously or subconsciously alter their answers to influence a clinician's or researcher's perception of them. Thirdly, most self-report RAIs consist of suicide inventories focused on the potential for suicide (Lewis and Roberts, 2001). Although the assessment of suicidal potential is an important part of crisis assessment, it is not the only aspect for assessment (Lewis and Roberts, 2001; Bonyng and Thurber, 2008). Not all people in crisis are suicidal.

To assess the magnitude or resolution of a crisis state, some clinicians also measure a precipitating event, the stress caused by the event, and/or the emotional consequences of the crisis event (e.g., anxiety and depression) (Lewis and Roberts, 2001). However, there are several problems with measuring the magnitude and resolution of a crisis by these variables. Measuring a crisis state in terms of a precipitating event is challenging because it is usually the individual's subjective response to an event, and the context in which the event takes place, that determine whether a specific event is or is not a crisis (Lewis and Roberts, 2001). For similar reasons, a crisis should not be measured in terms of the stress caused by the event. Not all stress has the potential to lead to a crisis, and whether that would happen depends on the individual's ability to cope with the stress and the relevance of that stress to an important life goal (Golan, 1969; Lukton, 1974; Hoff, 1978). Measuring a crisis state purely in terms of emotional consequences such as depression, anxiety, or significant mental distress (e.g., Zeng, Zheng and Wang, 2020) is also problematic because not all people who suffer from those conditions are necessarily in crisis, and not all people who are in a crisis suffer from those conditions because of the crisis. Thus, the assessment of severe psychological states such as

anxiety, depression, and significant mental distress does not adequately capture the construct of crisis (Golan, 1987; Parad and Parad, 1990; Ell, 1995; Roberts, 1996, 2000).

An alternative to RAIs is crisis assessment by trained clinicians. In this case, the clinicians, not the clients, assess a crisis state using semi-structured interviews, which limits demands upon people in crisis (Bonyng and Thurber, 2008). Among such crisis assessment methods are the Psychiatric Emergency Service Interview (Perlmutter and Jones, 1985), which assesses families in psychiatric emergencies. As the name suggests, this approach is designed to help emergency services practitioners to assess individuals in psychiatric emergencies in the presence of and with the help of their client's family members. There are also several clinician-rated scales, which are often employed during interviews with crisis sufferers to measure three or more aspects of a crisis. One of the popular clinician-rated scales is the Crisis Triage Rating Scale (CTRS) (Bengelsdorf *et al.*, 1984), which assesses crisis reactions along three dimensions: dangerousness, support system, and ability to cooperate. This instrument is essentially designed to assess one's suitability for outpatient crisis intervention treatment vs. hospitalisation (i.e., cases of psychiatric emergencies). The use of the CTRS in crisis contexts has been limited to a few studies (Bonyng and Thurber, 2008). Another clinician-rated crisis assessment scale is the Triage Assessment System (Myer and Conte, 2006), previously known as the Triage Assessment Form (Myer *et al.*, 1992). This assessment system (form) has been developed to aid clinicians in assessing the severity of people's affective, behavioural, and cognitive reactions to crisis events. The main drawbacks of all these clinician-administrated tools are their narrow focus on psychiatric emergencies and suicidality, as well as their reliance on clinician administration (Kalb *et al.*, 2018). Due to the associated costs, the latter limits the instruments' use in large-scale research.

The most recent development in the area of crisis measurement is the Developmental Crisis Questionnaire (DCQ-12) (Petrov, Robinson and Arnett, 2022). This questionnaire was developed as a psychometrically valid, brief tool “to measure the perceived presence and extent of a developmental crisis” (Petrov, Robinson and Arnett, 2022: 267). It constitutes a significant step forward from the previous measures of crisis, which were mainly focused on situational crises (i.e., unpredictable and externally imposed crises). However, although the scale was published after the completion and submission of this thesis, its retrospective use would be of limited value to the present work as this thesis focuses on both situational (e.g., losing a job) and developmental (e.g., career identity crisis) types of career crises.

In the absence of reliable crisis scales, crisis vignettes may be a helpful tool to identify whether someone is or was in crisis. For example, in their study on the types, prevalence, and perceived outcomes of crisis episodes, Robinson and Wright (2013: 410, emphasis added) used the following crisis vignette based on crisis literature to assess the presence of crisis experience: *‘A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more difficult, stressful and unstable than normal, and is an important turning point in your life due to changes that occur during it. Crisis episodes typically last for several years, but may be shorter or longer’*. After being presented with the vignette, research participants were asked, ‘Have you experienced any times of crisis in your adult life?’ (Robinson and Wright, 2013: 410). Because of the lack of a measurable definition of crisis and the resultant lack of instruments to measure crisis, a vignette is considered the most adequate approach to measuring a crisis in the context of the present research.

Having discussed theoretical perspectives on crisis, existing crisis typologies, related concepts, and crisis measurement, the following section focuses on the state of crisis studies in the consumer research literature.

1.5 CRISIS AND CONSUMER RESEARCH

The concept of a psychological crisis has been the focus of studies in a wide range of disciplines, including psychology (Erikson, 1956; Caplan, 1961; Greer, 1980), sport psychology (Buchko, 2005; Stambulova, 2011; Cosh, McNeil and Tully, 2021), vocational psychology (Hutri and Lindeman, 2002; Rehfuss, 2003), psychiatry (Eastham et al., 1970; Baldwin, 1978), nursing (Brownell, 1984), and social work (Rapoport, 1962; Lukton, 1974), but it remains largely neglected by marketing, consumer behaviour, and advertising scholars. Although some marketing scholars mention the concept of crisis in their study, they do not define it and do not make it central to their research (e.g., Fuschillo, Cayla and Cova, 2022). Nevertheless, scholars in the consumer research field have investigated proxies for crises such as life events, life status changes, and life transitions. Researchers have examined the effect of life status changes and life events (Andreasen, 1984; Lee *et al.*, 2001; Mathur *et al.*, 2008; Moschis and Ong, 2012) on consumer preferences. Andreasen (1984) introduced one of the first studies demonstrating that life status changes may be an important predictor of changes in brand preferences. Building on Andreasen's (1984) model and drawing on stress theory, Lee *et al.* (2001), Mathur *et al.* (2003), and Mathur *et al.* (2008) proposed models that explain the mechanism behind the relationship between life status changes and changes in consumer preferences. Lee *et al.* (2001) and Mathur *et al.* (2003) demonstrated that life events that represent markers of life transitions can lead to changes in consumers' preferences for stores and products through life-event-induced stress and resultant changes in consumption lifestyles. That is, life events are stressful because they demand readjustment, and consumers are likely to change their preferences for stores and products as they seek to change their consumption-related lifestyles to adapt to stressful changes in their lives. Thus, changes in

patronage preferences can act as coping mechanisms to manage stress produced by life events as well as means to meet new consumption needs. In a similar vein, Mathur *et al.*'s (2008) model suggests that stressful life status changes produce stress that evokes consumption coping behaviours, which, in turn, leads to changes in consumer preferences. However, it must be acknowledged that changes in consumption patterns can reflect not only coping but also the acquisition of new roles (Mathur *et al.*, 2008). That is, consumers may change their consumption habits due to changes in their self-concept consistent with their new roles. Indeed, Moschis and Ong (2012) found that stress-free events and transitions can result in changes in consumer preferences due to consumers' transitions into new roles. Thus, the existing studies on the relationship between life events or transitions and consumer preferences suggest two mechanisms accounting for the relationship – stress-based and self-concept-change-based.

In addition to the studies focused on life events and transitions in general, consumer researchers have also studied specific types of transitions and life events such as household consumption patterns during grief (Gentry *et al.*, 1995), consumption and production in empty nest households (Hogg, Folkman Curasi and Maclaran, 2004), consumption responses to job loss (Roberts, 1991), consumer lifestyle in the transition to adulthood (Weinberger, Zavisca and Silva, 2017), the effect of divorce on consumer behaviour (McAlexander *et al.*, 1993), the role of possessions in bereavement (Turley and O'Donohoe, 2012), loss of possessions in a natural disaster and its effect on consumer identity (Sayre, 1994) and buying behaviours (Sneath *et al.*, 2009). Overall, similar to the abovementioned general studies, these studies suggest that different role transitions and stressful events tend to lead to changes in consumer behaviour, and those changes are likely to reflect coping with stress and negative emotions

(McAlexander *et al.*, 1993; Sneath *et al.*, 2009) or the redefinition of self-concept (Roberts, 1991; Gentry *et al.*, 1995; Hogg, Folkman Curasi and Maclaran, 2004).

While the reviewed studies demonstrate that crisis proxies such as role transitions, life status changes, and stressful events can have implications for consumer behaviour, it has to be pointed out that role transitions, life status changes, and stressful events should not be equated with crises. Forer (1963: 275) argues that ‘it is fallacious to attribute crisis experience solely to events’. There should be a clear differentiation between stressful events, transitions, life status changes and psychological crises because the former do not necessarily result in a state of active crisis.

Thus, although valuable work has been done to examine the effect of crisis proxies on consumer behaviour, there is still untapped potential for theoretical contributions where crisis intersects with consumer behaviour. One of the promising research avenues can be examining how people who suffer from a crisis respond to persuasive messages related to the crisis theme. Considering the substantial funding the Government invests in career-support initiatives (HM Treasury and The RT Hon Rishi Sunak MP, 2020), the effective promotion of those initiatives is imperative. However, there is scant research on how people who suffer from a career crisis perceive and respond to career support persuasive messages, for example, which is one of the theoretical gaps this work seeks to address.

1.6 CAREER CRISIS AMONG CONSUMERS IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

Career crisis is arguably one of the most prevalent themes of psychological crisis. Work plays an important role in people’s lives. The average person spends one-third of their life (approximately 90,000 hours) at work (Gettysburg College, n.d.; Skoulding, 2018). Work

enables people to participate in the marketplace as consumers and helps individuals to satisfy a wide range of needs such as basic needs (e.g., food), safety needs (e.g., shelter), social needs (e.g., being part of a work team), esteem needs (e.g., recognition and status), and self-actualisation needs (e.g., reaching one's full career potential) (Maslow, 1943). Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of work and careers for psychological well-being (Sheeran, Abrams and Orbell, 1995; Goldsmith, Veum and Darity, 1997; Thern *et al.*, 2017), social identity (Selenko, Mäkikangas and Stride, 2017), self-esteem (Kinnunen, Feldt and Mauno, 2003), and financial security (Howell, Kurai and Tam, 2013). Failure to meet career goals, therefore, can lead to career crises.

There are environmental factors that are likely to fuel the feeling of career crisis in many people. Over the past decades, there has been an increase in occupational uncertainty (Pavlova and Silbereisen, 2014). Economic and financial crises, global competition, and the deregulation and liberalisation of labour markets have contributed to career instability, job insecurity, and difficulties with long-term career planning in many industrialised countries (Hofäcker, Buchholz, and Blossfeld, 2010; Kalleberg, 2011). The nature of work and the employment relationship have undergone significant transformations as evidenced by alternative work arrangements, the 'gig economy', shorter and more frequent career cycles, and the loss of low- and medium-skilled jobs (Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Callanan, Perri and Tomkowicz, 2017). While there is an abundance of career options in the labour market, that paradoxically often problematises decision-making processes and causes stress, anxiety, indecision, and dissatisfaction with the choices made, a phenomenon known as 'a paradox of choice' (Schwartz, 2004). The widespread adoption of digital technologies at workspace has also come with dark side effects such as technology-related stress, anxiety, overload, addiction and excessive use, interruption and distraction (Marsh, Vallejos and Spence, 2022).

Further, as discussed in the introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic has also created favourable conditions for the onset of a career crisis in people around the globe. Thus, it is evident from the above that there are multiple reasons why a career-related crisis is a topic worthy of scholarly attention.

Despite its importance, research on career crisis is scant. The emerging body of literature on career crisis mainly consists of the studies that do not help to overcome the definitional, conceptual, or measurement problems of a career crisis. Some studies are explanatory rather than exploratory in nature, and therefore do not contribute original knowledge to the career crisis discourse (e.g., Clark and Thompson, 2018). Other studies have a narrow focus – e.g., are based on a single case study (Rehfuss, 2003), or interview shipyard workers (Joelson and Wahlquist, 1987), or conduct a netnography research focused on accountants (Tomo, 2022), or research the career crises of athletes (e.g., Bar-Eli and Tenenbaum, 1989; Sparkes, 1998; Stambulova, 2011; Stambulova, 2017; Cosh, McNeil and Tully, 2021), or are focused on a specific culture with a distinct social class system such as the Indian culture (Bakshi, 2011). Therefore, the findings of these studies are not generalisable to the target population of the thesis, neither do they develop knowledge that could be applied herein.

Studies exist on occupational crises (Huttri, 1995; Huttri, 1996; Huttri and Lindeman, 2002). However, a career-related crisis cannot be equated with an occupational crisis. Occupational crisis is defined as ‘a state in which employees feel intense work-related anxiety, are unable to solve their problems and want to escape the threatening situation by changing job or occupation’ (Huttri and Lindeman, 2002: 20). Thus, by definition, occupational crisis concerns only employed people. Career-crisis, however, can affect the employed, the unemployed, students, recent graduates, and anyone who encounters career-related challenges. In addition, a body of research exists on work-related crises (e.g., Kozan et al., 2019), where crises are

defined as “the deterioration of decent work conditions with growing instability in the workplace, an erosion of protections for workers, wage compression, anxiety about the future of work, and a shift toward short-term, contract work” (Kozan et al., 2019: 601). In this instance, crisis is discussed from a macro-environmental perspective rather than from an individual (psychological) perspective and, therefore, such literature does not present a significant value for the discussion of a career crisis.

In the present thesis, career-related crisis is not seen as a separate type of crisis. Instead, it is argued that career concerns can be a theme of different types of crises. For example, a person in a career crisis can have a transitional crisis because they are a recent graduate undergoing a student-employee role transition, and/or a situational crisis due to a lack of job opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic, and/or a career identity crisis (i.e., developmental crisis) due to transition from adolescence to adulthood. As noted before, definitionally, the psychological features of different types of crises are largely similar (Greer, 1980). Therefore, there is little value in focusing on any specific type of career crisis.

However, while different types of crises manifest themselves similarly, the emotional reaction and coping skills of career crisis sufferers may vary with their age and life stage. Life stage, lifespan, and life course perspectives have a long tradition in the field of vocational behaviour research (Zacher and Froidevaux, 2021). Depending on their age, individuals may have different work experiences, perceived occupational security, level of income, financial obligations, coping processes and strategies, cognitive ability, and goal orientation in terms of gain versus loss (Folkman *et al.*, 1987; Ebner, Freund and Baltes, 2006; Trouillet *et al.*, 2011; Pavlova and Silbereisen, 2012; Hertel *et al.*, 2015; Strittmatter, Sunde and Zegners, 2020). All these factors can potentially affect how people cope with their career-related crisis, and how they will react to career-related materials in the present research. Due to many potentially

confounding variables, conducting career crisis research across different age groups and life stages would be challenging and pose a risk of overgeneralised explanations. As a result, it has been decided to limit the focus of present research to career-related crises in *early adulthood*. Although there are no strict age boundaries denoting early adulthood, it is normally defined as the approximate age range of 20 to 39 (Golembiewski, 1978; Robinson *et al.*, 2017).

While mid-life career crisis has been relatively well documented in relevant academic literature (Golembiewski, 1978; Cardinell, 1981; Entekin and Everett, 1981; Thomas, 1982; Perosa and Perosa, 1983; Perosa and Perosa, 1985; Bejian and Salomone, 1995; Elliott, 1994; Sterns and Gray, 1998; Ackers, 2014; Setiya, 2019), career crisis in early adulthood has received substantially less scholarly attention, which is the theoretical gap the present thesis aims to address. Early adulthood is a critical developmental period of a person's life because the most significant life events typically occur in this period of life (Martin and Smyer, 1990). In early adulthood, people normally attain their university education, first job, financial independence, first marriage, first house, and first child. Since the most significant part of identity establishment takes place during adolescence and early adulthood (Vondracek, 1992), it is reasonable to suggest that critical events during those periods play a significant role in identity formation. In addition, compared with people in their 40's and older (i.e., middle adulthood [Levinson, 1977]), younger adults tend to have less work experience, lower income, and lower perceived occupational security (Pavlova and Silbereisen, 2012), which makes them most vulnerable in the face of a career crisis.

Thus, the above discussion highlights that, in the current volatile global economic environment, career crisis is a timely and important research topic. While the prevalence of career crises can be expected to be high and continue to grow in the future for all people of

working age, young adults are the most vulnerable group. Despite its importance, career-crisis in early adulthood has received limited attention from scholars, especially in the marketing and consumer research fields. This is another theoretical gap the present thesis aims to address.

1.7 SUMMARY

The literature review demonstrated that there are different theoretical perspectives on and definitions of crisis. While existing theoretical perspectives on crisis are often presented as rivals and as potentially incommensurate, in the present thesis, homeostatic, cognitive, dialectic, and psychoanalytic perspectives are seen as complementary rather than competing. As a result, the present thesis proposes an integrative perspective on crisis by suggesting that people are motivated to maintain emotional balance and that a crisis represents a state of disequilibrium of that emotional balance (homeostatic perspective); to be in a crisis, a person has to perceive an encountered problem as threatening to their important goals (cognitive perspective); crises can be prerequisites for individual development (dialectic perspective); previously unresolved psychological conflicts can exacerbate subsequent crises and current crises can help attain a better resolution of previously unresolved crises (psychoanalytic perspective).

However, despite their differences, crisis scholars would generally agree that a crisis, in a broad sense, is *a psychological state that is provoked by a situation that is perceived as threatening to important life goals of the individual and that, for the time being, cannot be resolved by customary problem-solving methods* (Caplan, 1961; Rapoport, 1962; Bloom,

1963; Halpern, 1973; Lukton, 1974; Flannery and Everly, 2000; Brown and Rainer, 2006). This is the definition of crisis adopted in the present thesis.

Moreover, the review of crisis studies has also shown that there is a great variety of crisis typologies in the crisis literature. Most of those typologies were found to either adapt or draw upon Erikson's (1956) crisis typology, which distinguishes between accidental and developmental crises. However, since definitionally the psychological features of both crises are largely similar (Greer, 1980), this chapter adopts a more general conceptualisation of crisis that builds on existing foundational literature, and it does so to refrain from limiting the research to any specific type of psychological crisis.

In addition, the review of the crisis literature revealed that the concept of crisis is not only widely used but also often confused with related concepts such as stress, emergency, and problem. The differences between crisis and those concepts were identified and discussed to reduce the definitional ambiguity of the crisis concept in the current thesis. The literature review also highlighted the problem of crisis measurement, which stems from the definitional ambiguity of the crisis concept. This problem will be addressed in the methodology chapter.

The review of crisis studies in the consumer research literature has demonstrated that this is indeed an important topic of enquiry for consumer researchers that warrants further attention. Finally, the discussion on career-related crisis in early adulthood has revealed that, despite its prevalence and importance, such crisis has received limited attention from scholars in the consumer research field. This is especially the case in relation to how young adults experiencing career-related crises might respond to persuasive marketing communications for interventions seeking to help this group of people. Therefore, this constitutes one of the theoretical gaps that the present thesis addresses. To address this gap, it is necessary first to

review the persuasive communication literature and identify the key factors that determine the effectiveness of persuasive messages.

2. PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

The main objective of the present chapter is to review persuasive communication studies and identify theoretical perspectives, which can help to explain the relationship between career crisis and the persuasiveness of career support advertisements. The chapter also lays a foundation for the conceptual model of the current thesis. Section 2.1 of this chapter introduces the definition of persuasion. Section 2.2 discusses foundational theoretical perspectives on persuasive communication. This section particularly focuses on Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Festinger, 1957) and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), which are the most relevant persuasive communication theories in the context of the present thesis. These theories help to explain how a career crisis can influence the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages and lay the foundation for a conceptual model of the thesis. However, while CDT and ELM show a link between a career crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages, they lack specificity around what type of career support messages and under what conditions will result in increased or decreased persuasion. To address this issue, a different, yet consistent with CDT and ELM, model was developed based on the review of the factors affecting message persuasiveness (Section 2.3-2.5). Section 2.6 provides a chapter summary.

The literature search for this chapter was carried out by searching for relevant literature on a university library system, Google Scholar, and in specialist academic journals, including but not limited to the Journal of Advertising, the Journal of Advertising Research, the Journal of

Consumer Psychology, the Journal of Consumer Research, and Psychology and Marketing. The list of keywords was continuously updated based on new search results. The identified articles were subsequently used to locate further articles through their reference lists as well as by using the electronic citation and author tracking functions on Google Scholar.

2.1 THE DEFINITION OF PERSUASION

Persuasion remains a loosely defined concept. Nevertheless, according to O’Keefe (2016), persuasion is characterised by five main features. Firstly, persuasion implies a *successful attempt to influence*, i.e., to say that someone was persuaded means that the persuasion attempt was successful. Secondly, persuasion involves the presence of *intention* on the persuader’s part, i.e., a person cannot accidentally persuade. Thirdly, the presence of *freedom* on the persuadee’s part. That is, in the instances where the persuadee’s free will or free choice or voluntary action is limited, it becomes questionable whether it is a genuine case of persuasion or coercion. Fourthly, persuasion involves the use of *communication* to achieve the persuasive effects. Fifthly, persuasion implies a change in the *mental state* of the persuaded person. In persuasion theory and research, this mental state has been commonly referred to as ‘attitude’ (O’Keefe, 2016).

Thus, based on these key characteristics, O’Keefe (2016: 4) suggests the following definition of persuasion: ‘a successful intentional effort at influencing another’s mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom’. It is necessary to point out that while this definition conveys the core meaning of the concept of persuasion, it does not eliminate the concept’s fuzziness. For example, it is unclear how much and what type of freedom the person that is being persuaded needs to have.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of the present thesis, the general definition of persuasion is deemed sufficient. What follows is a discussion of foundational theoretical perspectives on persuasive communication and their implications for the present thesis.

2.2 FOUNDATIONAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

Persuasive communication is a well-established field of research that has produced numerous theories. As a result, identifying one theoretical perspective that would be universally applicable to all persuasive contexts and suit all persuasive objectives is virtually impossible. Although persuasion cannot be entirely explained by one theoretical perspective, different theoretical perspectives can still help to explain different aspects of persuasion. Belief-based theories are concerned with how pre-existing beliefs affect attitude change (e.g., Summative Model of Attitude [Fishbein, 1967]) and behaviour change (e.g., Theory of Reasoned Action [Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975], Theory of Planned Behaviour [Ajzen, 1985]). Functional theories of attitude consider the functions served by a recipient's attitudes (e.g., Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, and White, 1956). Discrepancy theories of belief change focus on the proximity of a message's argument to the recipient's beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Cognitive Dissonance Theory [Festinger, 1957] and Social Judgment Theory [Sherif *et al.*, 1965]). Dual-process models explain different cognitive routes to persuasion (e.g., Elaboration Likelihood Model [Petty and Cacioppo, 1986] and Heuristic-Systematic Model [Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly, 1989]). Finally, there are theories which are concerned with resistance to persuasion (e.g., Inoculation Theory [McGuire, 1964] and Persuasion Knowledge Model [Friestad and

Wright, 1994)). A brief summary of key foundational perspectives on persuasive communication can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Foundational perspectives on persuasive communication

Theoretical perspective		Summary
Belief-Based Models	Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985)	TRA suggests that a recipient's intention to perform or not to perform a particular behaviour is a function of <i>behavioural beliefs</i> that influence the person's attitude towards performing the behaviour, and <i>normative beliefs</i> , that influence the person's subjective norms about performing the behaviour (Madden, Ellen and Ajzen, 1992). TPB extends TRA by adding beliefs about the ease of performing the behaviour (i.e., <i>perceived behavioural control</i>). According to TRA and TPB, effective persuasive messages should address the belief(s) that is(are) most strongly related to the recipient's intention (O'Keefe, 2016).
	Summative Model of Attitude (Fishbein, 1967)	The model suggests that an individual's attitude toward an object is a function of the individual's beliefs about the object. As a result, one of the ways to persuade a person is to present arguments that change their beliefs (O'Keefe, 2016).
Functional Approaches to Attitude (Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, and White, 1956)		Attitudes serve different functions (e.g., ego-defensive, utilitarian, value-expressive, knowledge, and social-adjustive). Persuasive appeals are more effective when they target the function that is served by an attitude of the recipient (Carpenter, Boster and Andrews, 2012).
Discrepancy Models of Belief Change	Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957)	People seek to maintain the internal psychological consistency of their attitudes, beliefs, and other cognitions (O'Keefe, 2016). The theory suggests that opinion change is a function of a complex interaction between the discrepancy of a message's argument from the recipient's initial attitude and the communicator's credibility (Aronson, Turner and Carlsmith, 1963).
	Social Judgment Theory (Sherif <i>et al.</i> , 1965)	The theory suggests that a recipient's pre-existing attitudes and beliefs influence how a position in a message is perceived. Specifically, if the message's position is close to the recipient's pre-existing position (i.e., located within the recipient's latitude of acceptance), the message's position appears to be closer than it is, and the message is perceived to be not very discrepant (i.e., it is assimilated) (Fink and Cai, 2012). In contrast, if the message's position is far from the recipient's pre-existing position (i.e., located within the recipient's latitude of rejection), the message's position appears to be further than it is, and the message is perceived to be very discrepant (i.e., it is contrasted). According to SJT, the less discrepant the message seems, the more belief or attitude change it produces. However, the relationship between discrepancy and attitude change is not linear but curvilinear. That is, '[a] message that is as discrepant as possible but still within the individual's latitude of acceptance should be most persuasive' (Fink and Cai, 2012: 90).
Dual-process	Elaboration Likelihood Model	The model suggests that under different motivational and involvement conditions, recipients will be more or less likely to elaborate on the

Theories	(Petty and Cacioppo, 1986)	information presented in a persuasive message. While persuasion can occur in high and low elaboration conditions, the nature of the persuasion processes involved will differ. When elaboration is high, the central route (i.e., purposeful thinking) is involved. When elaboration is low, the peripheral route (i.e., some heuristic principle) is involved.
	Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly, 1989)	Similar to the ELM model, the HSM provides a theoretical framework for understanding persuasion processes by suggesting two routes to persuasion: the systematic ('central' route) and the heuristic ('peripheral' route). However, one of the key differences of the HSM from the ELM is that unlike the ELM, which assumes that the central and peripheral routes are mutually exclusive, the HSM suggests that they can co-occur and even interact (Chaiken and Ledgerwood, 2011).
Resistance to persuasion	Inoculation Theory (McGuire, 1964).	The theory advocates that by exposing recipients to messages containing a weakened argument against their attitude, it is possible to "inoculate" them against resistance to similar persuasive messages in the future.
	Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994)	The model explains how consumers develop persuasion knowledge and use it to cope with persuasion attempts.

While there is a broad range of theoretical perspectives on persuasion in existing literature, this section focuses on two foundational perspectives that are deemed to be most relevant in the context of the present thesis, namely Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Festinger, 1957) and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). These two theoretical perspectives on persuasion were chosen over others because they have the capacity to provide a theoretical basis for the argument that crisis affects reactions to persuasive communication and inform the conceptual model of the thesis. Specifically, CDT sheds light on how the internal psychological inconsistency of career crisis sufferers can affect their processing of career support persuasive messages. ELM, in turn, explains how the personal importance of career support persuasive messages for career crisis sufferers can indirectly affect the persuasiveness of the messages through the type of persuasion process involved and the type of thoughts elicited by the message.

2.2.1 Cognitive dissonance theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Festinger, 1957) holds that individuals are motivated to maintain the internal psychological consistency of their cognitions (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, and values). Cognitive dissonance is, in essence, the experience of inconsistent cognitions. According to the original definition of cognitive dissonance, ‘two elements are in a dissonant relation if, considering these two alone, the obverse of one element would follow from the other’. (Festinger, 1957: 13). Since a ‘crisis is provoked when a person faces an obstacle to important life goals’ (Caplan, 1961: 18), it is plausible to suggest that career crisis is likely to involve a certain degree of self-incongruity or cognitive dissonance, where an individual experiences internal psychological inconsistency.

There are several areas in which career crisis and cognitive dissonance overlap. For example, career crisis could be produced by a career status/role change. In the same vein, according to Festinger (1957: 271), dissonance can be produced by a sudden change in a person’s way of life (e.g., changes in a status or role). Career crisis could also be caused by a failure to meet one’s own self-standards (e.g., failing to secure a job after graduation). The later revisions of CDT suggest that dissonance can be produced when an individual’s behaviour is inconsistent with their valued self-standard and does not reflect what they want to be or should be (Stone and Cooper, 2001). Moreover, cognitive dissonance can vary in its magnitude depending on the importance of the inconsistent cognitions (Festinger, 1957). As discussed in Section 1.6, career plays an important role in people’s lives; therefore, any career-related inconsistent cognitions are likely to be of a great magnitude. Thus, existing literature not only provides a link between a crisis and cognitive dissonance but also suggests

that due to the personal importance of crisis-related inconsistent cognitions, people in crisis are likely to experience the cognitive dissonance of a large magnitude.

While CDT is not a systematic theory of persuasion (O’Keefe, 2016), it has been demonstrated to have implications for the processes that play an important role in it (Aronson, Turner and Carlsmith, 1963; Bochner and Insko, 1966; Whittaker, 1964). Aronson, Turner and Carlsmith (1963) proposed that one of the causes of dissonance can be exposure to a message, which communicates ideas that are discrepant from the initial opinion of the recipient. In this case, the recipient is motivated to reduce dissonance either by changing their opinion (i.e., being persuaded) or by disparaging the communicator. The likelihood of opinion change is argued to be ‘a function of a specific complex interaction between the credibility of the communicator and the discrepancy of the communication from the initial attitude of the recipient’ (Aronson, Turner and Carlsmith, 1963: 31). Specifically, it was found that, when a communicator is highly credible, there is a linear relationship between opinion change and discrepancy, where opinion change increases with the degree of discrepancy. However, if a communicator is mildly credible, they not only will be less likely to induce opinion change, but the relationship between opinion change and discrepancy will be curvilinear, with the greatest opinion change occurring at a moderate level of discrepancy.

Another important implication of CDT for persuasive communication is related to perception. Specifically, exposure to dissonance-inducing messages can affect perceptual processes and result in: (i) selective information exposure (i.e., avoiding information that is inconsistent with one’s beliefs or behaviours), (ii) selective information attention (i.e., paying attention to the information that reaffirms one’s beliefs or behaviours), (iii) interpretation (i.e., interpreting ambiguous information in the way that is consistent with one’s beliefs or

behaviours), and (iv) selective information retention (i.e., retaining information that is consistent with one's beliefs or behaviours while forgetting information that induces cognitive dissonance) (Dainton and Zelly, 2005). Thus, dissonant messages can have important implications for the exposure, attention, interpretation, and retention of persuasive messages. However, while people generally prefer information that is consistent with their beliefs and behaviours, marketers widely utilise the cognitive dissonance principle by designing messages that induce dissonance while also offering a solution that helps to minimise the dissonance (e.g., highlighting the importance of physical exercise and then offering a gym membership) (Dainton and Zelly, 2005). Similarly, a message promoting career support can potentially induce cognitive dissonance in a career crisis sufferer, but if it simultaneously offers a solution that helps to minimise the dissonance, then the negative implication of cognitive dissonance for message perception could be offset.

Thus, based on the above review, a suggestion can be made that career crisis sufferers, when presented with persuasive messages featuring career support, may respond differently to those messages depending on: (i) whether those messages are dissonant or consonant with their career-related beliefs and behaviours, (ii) the magnitude of the discrepancy between the message's argument and the career crisis sufferers' career-related cognitions, (iii) the credibility of the communicator (Aronson, Turner and Carlsmith, 1963), and (iv) whether a solution for how to reduce the cognitive dissonance is provided in the message. The key problem then is the prediction of the determinants (i) and (ii). While CDT (Festinger, 1957) provides a theoretical basis for the argument that career crisis can affect the persuasiveness of career support persuasive messages, it does not answer the question of what sort of cognitions are likely to be held by people in a career crisis, which, in turn, makes it difficult to assess the magnitude of the discrepancy between the message's argument and the career crisis sufferers'

career-related cognitions. As a result, the current thesis presents an alternative theoretical approach in Chapter 3, which addresses these questions and is also consistent with CDT.

2.2.2 Elaboration likelihood model

Another theoretical perspective on persuasive communication, which is relevant in the context of the present thesis, is represented by the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The model suggests that depending on their information processing ability and motivation, recipients will be more or less likely to engage in elaborative thinking about the information presented in a persuasive message. While persuasion can take place at both the high and low ends of the elaboration continuum, the nature of the persuasion processes involved will be different. When elaboration is high, the central route (i.e., purposeful thinking) is involved. When elaboration is low, the peripheral route (i.e., some heuristic principle) is involved. According to the model, high issue involvement leads to more elaborative message processing (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Issue involvement is ‘the extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance’ (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979: 1915). Career-related persuasive communication has high relevance for career crisis sufferers and, therefore, can be expected to result in high issue involvement and elaborative message processing. When elaboration is high, the effectiveness of a persuasive message will depend on whether the message elicits mainly positive or negative thoughts (O’Keefe, 2016). The valence of the elicited thoughts, in turn, is contingent on the direction of the message’s advocacy (pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal) and the strength of the message’s argument. Pro-attitudinal messages tend to elicit positive thoughts, whereas counter-attitudinal messages tend to elicit negative thoughts. As for the argument’s

strength, due to high elaboration, recipients tend to pay more attention to the quality of the message's arguments. Consequently, strong arguments (e.g., those that involve sound reasoning and good evidence) elicit positive thoughts, whereas weak arguments (e.g., those that involve dubious reasoning and poor evidence) elicit negative thoughts.

While ELM identifies the factors determining the valence of induced thoughts, there are still questions that require scholarly attention. For example, it is unclear under what conditions career support persuasive messages will be perceived by career crisis sufferers as pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal. It is also likely that not only the type of thoughts induced by a message but also the type of feelings evoked affects the persuasive outcome. Because career support messages offer a potential solution for a career crisis, career crisis sufferers can find such messages encouraging and motivating, which is likely to lead to positive thoughts, emotions, and attitudes. Conversely, those messages can also remind crisis sufferers about their career failures or fears and therefore be perceived as depressing and anxiety-inducing, and lead to negative thoughts, emotions, and attitudes. However, when an anxiety- or fear-inducing persuasive message is moderately strong and contains psychological reinforcement in the form of a proposed solution (e.g., career support services that can help to resolve a career crisis), it may result in the reduction of emotional tension and conformity to the recommended course of action (Wheatley and Oshikawa, 1970).

In summary, ELM implies that, due to the personal importance of career support persuasive messages, career crisis sufferers are likely to process those messages through the central route and engage in elaborative message processing. As a result, the persuasive outcome will depend on the type of thoughts elicited by the message. However, the mechanism that would explain when career support messages result in positive versus negative thoughts in career crisis sufferers needs further development. This is a research gap

that the present thesis will address. To conclude this section, although CDT and ELM provide a theoretical basis for the argument that crisis can influence the effectiveness of persuasive communication, both theories cannot be directly applied to the design of career support persuasive messages. Specifically, CDT cannot be applied to message design without knowing what sort of cognitions are likely to be held by people in a career crisis. ELM, on the other hand, cannot be successfully applied to message design without knowing what sort of messages are pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal for people in a career crisis. To design a conceptual model that would address the shortcomings of CDT and ELM, it is necessary to identify the key factors that determine the effectiveness of persuasive messages.

2.3 FACTORS AFFECTING MESSAGE PERSUASIVENESS

How consumers react to persuasive messages has been of great interest to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Persuasive messages play an important role in promoting products, services, political parties, behaviours (e.g., healthy, ethical, or sustainable behaviours) and attitudes (e.g., attitudes towards mental health issues). It is possible to identify three primary forms of mass media persuasion: pro-social advertising, political advertising, and commercial advertising of products and services (O’Keefe, 2019). Although each of these forms of persuasion has its own characteristics, there are common factors that seem to determine the effectiveness of all mass media persuasion. Among such factors are: source characteristics (Chaiken, 1980; Wilson and Sherrell, 1993; Tormala and Petty, 2004; Brinol and Petty, 2009; Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010), the medium of communication (i.e., the type of media used to communicate the ad) (Bezjian-Avery, Calder and Iacobucci, 1998; Dijkstra, Buijtel and van Raaij, 2005; Dahlén and Edenius, 2007; Germelmann *et al.*, 2016),

the nature of the advertised product (Kamins and Gupta, 1994; Liebermann and Flint-Goor, 1996; Choi, Paek and Whitehill King, 2012; Klein and Melnyk, 2016), and the characteristics of the spokesperson (Smith and Shaffer, 1991; Priester and Petty, 2003; Lalwani, Lwin and Li, 2005; Weisbuch and Mackie, 2009; Tukachinsky, 2020). However, the most central factors are the characteristics of the message and the characteristics of the recipient (Mann *et al.*, 2004; Updegraff and Rothman, 2013). Message characteristics are a central factor because they are relatively easy and inexpensive to manipulate. Thus, they give more control over the persuasion process compared with other factors determining persuasive communication's effectiveness. The characteristics of the recipient, in turn, are important because they can enhance or neutralise the effect of message characteristics. Thus, it is crucial not only to know what type of advertising appeals should be communicated but also to whom they should be communicated.

2.4 MESSAGE CHARACTERISTICS

Research on the role of message characteristics in persuasion is not scarce. Among the message characteristics that have been studied up to date are familiarity (Cacioppo and Petty, 1989; Claypool *et al.*, 2004; Jung, Rhee and Kim, 2012), argument strength (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979; Aaker and Lee, 2001), presentation order (Buda, 2003), wording (e.g., abstract vs. concrete) (Semin *et al.*, 2005), physical proximity (Jia *et al.*, 2017), and colour (Wang *et al.*, 2020). However, another widely researched message characteristic is message framing. 'Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communication text, in such way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, a moral evaluation

and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman, 1993: 55). The term *framing effect* refers to the observation that individuals ‘often respond differently to different descriptions of the same problem’ (Frisch, 1993: 399).

The framing effect has been a topic of numerous marketing and consumer research studies. Some of those studies have found that message framing affects buying behaviour (Ganzach and Karsahi, 1995), consumer purchase intention (Levin and Gaeth, 1988), brand choice (Shiv *et al.*, 1997), the choice between delayed and immediate consumption (Loewenstein, 1988), willingness to buy private brands (Gamliel and Herstein, 2007), number of clicks and purchases online (Matz *et al.*, 2017), product recommendation click-throughs (Gai and Klesse, 2019), goal-level setting (Tuk, Prokopec and Van den Bergh, 2021), and travel destination selection process (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). The framing effect has also been researched extensively in relation to ad and message persuasiveness studies (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken, 1994; Smith and Petty, 1996; Chang, 2007; Chang, Zhang and Xie, 2015; Segev, Fernandes and Wang, 2015; Lee, Liu and Cheng, 2018; Foti *et al.*, 2020; Wang, Fu and Wu, 2020). Cesario, Corker and Jelinek (2013: 238) state that ‘[c]onsistent with the theoretical and practical importance of this topic, research on message framing has been a fixture of the persuasion literature for over three decades’.

Despite the considerable scholarly attention that message framing has received, it is still unclear how exactly it operates. Messages framed in different ways have been found to have different persuasive effects (Mann *et al.*, 2004). Messages can be framed positively or negatively. Positive or negative messages, in turn, can be framed, for example, in terms of loss vs. gain (Shiv *et al.*, 1997; Shiv *et al.*, 2004; Rothman *et al.*, 2006), maximal vs. minimal claims (Jain *et al.*, 2006), and comparative valence (e.g., Jain, 1993; Jain and Posavac, 2004;

Chang and Chou, 2008). However, it is unclear which type of framing (positive or negative) and under what conditions is more persuasive. Existing studies provide mixed results on this issue (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Cesario, Corker and Jelinek, 2013). For example, the ‘loss and gain’ frames are often mentioned in the context of prospect theory, which suggests that ‘losses loom larger than gains’ (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981: 456). This implies that negatively framed persuasive messages (i.e., those that emphasise potential losses) are likely to be more effective than positive messages (i.e., those that emphasise potential gains). Indeed, in their study on the promotion of credit cards, Ganzach and Karsahi (1995) found that the persuasive messages that frame the benefits of credit cards in terms of losses are more persuasive than those that are framed in terms of gains, thereby confirming the ‘losses loom larger than gains’ principle. On the other hand, there are studies that have found that positive messages are more persuasive than negative messages. In particular, Levin and Gaeth (1988) found that consumers preferred meat labelled ‘75% lean’ rather than ‘25% fat’. These competing results may be due to consumers’ level of issue involvement (i.e., the extent to which an issue is important to the person processing the message, which then affects the depth of information processing) may account for the mixed results in framing studies (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990). For example, several studies have found that negative framing is more effective only when the recipient’s level of elaboration is *high* (e.g., Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Rothman *et al.*, 1993; Block and Keller, 1995). Other studies, on the contrary, have shown that negative framing is more effective than positive framing when the level of elaboration is *low* (Shiv *et al.*, 1997). Shiv, Edell Britton, and Payne (2004) suggest that the reverse results are caused by the difference in the way elaboration was manipulated in these studies.

Moreover, the operational definition (and hence the underlying processes) of framing itself is different in different studies (Levin *et al.*, 1998). According to Levin *et al.* (1998), frames can differ in terms of (i) what they frame, (ii) what they affect, and (iii) how their effect is measured. Based on these differences, Levin *et al.* (1998) developed a typology of framing that distinguishes: 1) risky choice framing, 2) attribute framing, and 3) goal framing (Table 4). *Risky choice framing* offers a set of options that involve different risk levels (e.g., gain and losses in Tversky and Kahneman's [1981] study) and affects risk preference. *Attribute framing* frames some characteristics of an object or event (e.g., '75% lean' vs. '25% fat' meat options in Levin and Gaeth's [1988] study) and affects the object's or event's evaluation. Finally, *goal framing* frames the goal of an action or behaviour (e.g., 'eat breakfast and be successful' vs. 'if you don't eat breakfast, you might fail' in Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken's [1994] study) and affects the persuasiveness of a communication. Depending on the type of framing, different studies use different manipulations. For example, in attribute framing studies, the same act can be presented as a 'good' thing to do (positive frame) or as a 'bad' thing to do (negative frame) (Levin *et al.*, 1998). In contrast, in goal framing studies, the same act is portrayed as a 'good' thing to do in both positive and negative frames. However, goal frames focus attention on either the promoted issue's potential to provide a gain (positive frame) or its potential to prevent a loss (negative frame), thereby influencing the recipient's implicit goals (also known as 'goal framing effect') (Levin *et al.*, 1998). Gain-framed messages are normally associated with approach goals, whereas loss-framed messages are associated with avoidance goals (Lee and Aaker, 2004).

Table 4. Summary of methodological differences in risky choice, attribute, and goal framing (retrieved from Levin et al. [1998: 151])

Frame type	What is framed	What is affected	How effect is measured
Risky choice	Set of options with different risk levels	Risk preference	Comparison of choices for risky options
Attribute	Object/event attributes or Characteristics	Item evaluation	Comparison of attractiveness ratings for the single item
Goal	Consequence or implied goal of a behaviour	Impact of persuasion	Comparison of the rate of adoption of the behaviour

To conclude, one of the most important message characteristics for persuasion is message framing. The effect of message framing has been argued to be moderated by issue involvement (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990; Rothman *et al.*, 1993; Block and Keller, 1995; Shiv *et al.*, 1997; Shiv, Edell Britton and Payne, 2004), which is consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) discussed in Section 2.2.2. Since career-related persuasive communication has high relevance for career crisis sufferers, it can be expected to result in high issue involvement. Therefore, career crisis is likely to indirectly affect the reaction to message framing. There are several types of message framing (risky choice, attribute, and goal framing) that can be used in diverse communication settings. However, since a ‘crisis is provoked when a person faces an obstacle to important life goals’ (Caplan, 1961: 18), goal framing is deemed most appropriate for the purpose of the present thesis, which seeks to improve the promotion of career support for people experiencing a career crisis. Although goal framing has gained considerable attention in persuasive communication studies, the question that remains is which type of goal (approach or avoidance) is the more powerful enhancer of career support persuasive messages and under

what conditions. In order to address this question, it is necessary to review the recipient's characteristics that can affect the effectiveness of message framing.

2.5 RECIPIENT'S CHARACTERISTICS

While the framing effect is an important factor determining the effectiveness of persuasive communication, it can be enhanced or neutralised by the recipient's characteristics (Kuhberger, 1998; Covey, 2014). Studies on message framing have demonstrated that persuasive messages are more (less) effective when they are (not) tailored to the recipient's psychological characteristics (Matz *et al.*, 2017). Such characteristics include self-efficacy (Van't Riet *et al.*, 2008), construal level (White, Macdonnell and Dahl, 2011), ideal and ought selves (Pham and Avnet, 2004), motivational orientation (approach vs. avoidance) (e.g., Mann *et al.*, 2004; Sherman *et al.*, 2006), coping strategies (Han *et al.*, 2016), mood (Bless *et al.*, 1990; Chang, 2007b), independent vs. interdependent self-view (Kareklas, Carlson and Muehling, 2012), emotions (Agrawal and Duhachek, 2010; Duhachek *et al.*, 2012), level of extraversion and openness to experience (Matz *et al.*, 2017), and need for cognition (Zhang and Buda, 1999). However, among the most widely researched recipient characteristics that moderate the message framing effect is regulatory focus (Yi and Baumgartner, 2009; Updegraff and Rothman, 2013; Covey, 2014). Despite the considerable scholarly attention that regulatory focus has received in the persuasive literature, especially in goal framing studies (e.g., Lee and Aaker, 2004; Keller, 2006; Kim, 2006; Zhang *et al.*, 2018), there are still areas that demand additional research, which is discussed next.

2.5.1 Regulatory focus

‘Consumers are goal-oriented beings’ (Higgins, Nakkawita and Cornwell, 2020: 76). To gain a better understanding of consumer behaviour, it is important to recognise the motivational systems that regulate both the choice and the pursuit of consumer goals (Higgins, Nakkawita and Cornwell, 2020). One prominent framework that provides an account of such systems is regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997). The theory suggests that people have two different self-regulatory foci: *promotion focus* – associated with hopes and aspirations, and *prevention focus* – associated with duties and obligations. The promotion focus involves sensitivity to the presence or absence of positive outcomes and motivates people to *approach* matches to their desired end-states by means of eagerness-oriented strategies. The prevention focus, in turn, involves sensitivity to the presence or absence of negative outcomes and motivates people to *avoid* mismatches to their desired end-states by means of vigilance-oriented strategies. The promotion and prevention foci are rooted in different needs (Higgins, Nakkawita and Cornwell, 2020). While the promotion focus is related to growth and nurturance needs, the prevention focus is related to security and safety needs. Both foci are independent. People can have a stronger predominant focus, but it is also possible for both foci to be strong or weak. In addition, regulatory focus can be chronic (i.e., a stable trait that is a consequence of historical or recurring situations) as well as situational (i.e., a temporary state evoked by a stimulus).

It must be noted that Higgins' (1997) promotion and prevention systems are different from Carver and Scheier's (1998) discrepancy-enlarging and discrepancy-reducing feedback systems that are based on the idea of two reference points – desired end-states, which people are motivated to approach, and undesired end-states, which people are motivated to avoid (Higgins, 1997). Carver and Scheier (1998) do not differentiate between different ways of

approaching desired end-states (Higgins, 1997). In contrast, self-regulatory theory (Higgins, 1997) proposes different strategic means people can use to approach their desired self-states. Specifically, they can use promotion-oriented strategies to approach matches to their desired self-states, or they can use prevention-oriented strategies to avoid mismatches to their desired self-states.

Higgins' (1997) promotion and prevention systems are also different from the behavioural activation system (BAS) and behavioural inhibition system (BIS), which are governed by two separate neural systems (Gray, 1987, 1990; Fowles, 1988). *BAS* is defined as a physiological self-regulatory system that controls appetitive (approach) motivation and approach behaviour (Carver and White, 1994). Conversely, *BIS* is a physiological self-regulatory system that controls aversive (avoidance) motivation and avoidance behaviour (Carver and White, 1994). While BIS and BAS systems represent general sensitivity to reward and punishment, the prevention and promotion foci reflect different types of desired end states, that is, aspirations for the promotion focus vs. responsibilities for the prevention focus (Mann, Sherman and Updegraff, 2004).

While regulatory focus theory has its origin in psychology, it is of significance to both consumer research and message framing literature (Pham and Higgins 2005; Werth and Foerster, 2007; Yi and Baumgartner, 2009; Pham and Chang, 2010; Cesario, Corker and Jelinek, 2013; Motyka *et al.*, 2014; Haws, Dholakia and Bearden, 2010; Higgins, Nakkawita and Cornwell, 2020). Often, in combination with the regulatory fit principle (Higgins, 2000), this theory has been used to enhance the effectiveness of persuasive messages among consumers (Higgins, 2012). Regulatory fit theory, which derives from regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 2012), postulates that a regulatory fit occurs when people use goal pursuit means

(eagerness-oriented vs. vigilance-oriented) that fit their regulatory orientation (promotion vs. prevention respectively) (Higgins, 2000).

In applying the regulatory fit principle to message framing studies, researchers have found that individuals with a strong promotion focus tend to be more responsive to promotion-oriented or gain-oriented persuasive messages, and individuals with a strong prevention focus tend to be more responsive to prevention-oriented or loss-oriented persuasive messages (Lee and Aaker, 2004; Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004, Study 1; Zhao and Pechmann, 2007; Latimer *et al.*, 2008). There are three mechanisms that have been argued to account for the effect of regulatory fit on persuasion: 1) the experience of ‘feeling right’, 2) enhanced processing fluency, and 3) elaboration likelihood (Cesario, Higgins and Scholer, 2008).

The first mechanism suggests that regulatory fit makes the recipient ‘feel right’ about their experience during message processing, and that feeling serves as information for various message evaluations, including message persuasiveness perceptions (Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004). The second mechanism suggests that regulatory fit results in enhanced message processing fluency (i.e., the ease of message processing), which, in turn, contributes to the ‘feeling right’ and leads to more favourable evaluations compared with the non-fit condition (Lee and Aaker, 2004). However, it must be noted that some researchers argue that challenges are motivating (Higgins and Scholer, 2009), and metacognitive difficulty is desirable in the context of goal pursuit (Labroo and Kim, 2009). For example, Labroo and Kim (2009) have found that, for people pursuing a goal, the difficulty of processing an advertisement can result in more favourable evaluations of the promoted object, providing that the object is instrumental in achieving the goal. The third mechanism suggests that when regulatory fit occurs, people pay more attention to and elaborate more on message information (Aaker and Lee, 2001). In this case, message characteristics such as argument

strength can moderate the relationship between elaboration and persuasion. Aaker and Lee (2001) found that, in the regulatory fit condition, when the message's argument is strong, it leads to more favourable persuasion effects. Conversely, when the argument is weak, it results in less favourable persuasion effects.

Thus, a considerable body of literature suggests that messages congruent with the recipient's regulatory focus are more persuasive than incongruent messages. There is also significant research on the various mechanisms that account for that effect. However, other studies have found that, in certain circumstances, congruent messages can have the opposite effect (Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken, 1994). The mechanism that explains those findings is based on self-discrepancy theory which is the focus of the next section.

2.5.2 Self-discrepancy

While regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2000) is a 'child' of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) is a 'parent' of the latter (Higgins, 2012). According to Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory (SDT), people have three self-states: actual, ideal, and ought. These self-states exist on two standpoints: one's own standpoint and significant others' standpoints. The *actual self* is essentially a person's self-concept, which represents attributes that they possess according to their own belief or a significant other's belief. The ideal and ought selves are self-guides or self-directive standards. The *ideal self* represents attributes that the individual or the individual's significant others would like the individual, ideally, to possess (i.e., someone's aspirations, hopes, and wishes for the individual). The *ought-self* represents attributes that the individual or the individual's

significant others believe the individual ought to possess (i.e., obligations, duties, and responsibilities of the person).

As stated above, the concept of self-discrepancy is closely related to the concept of regulatory focus. Due to the fundamental needs that underlie the promotion and prevention systems (i.e., growth and nurturance vs. security and safety, respectively), people with a predominant promotion or prevention focus set goals that vary in regard to the types of end states that are desired (Higgins, 1997). Promotion goals usually reflect desired end states related to a person's ideal self, whereas prevention goals reflect desired end states related to a person's ought self. Moreover, Higgins (1987) argues that people are motivated to create matches to their personally relevant self-guides because failing to do so results in negative affective reactions. Specifically, a discrepancy between the actual and ideal self-states induces dejection-related emotions (e.g., disappointment, dissatisfaction, and sadness). A discrepancy between the actual and ought self-states induces agitation-related emotions (e.g., fear, restlessness, threat, shame, and guilt).

Conceptually, self-discrepancy (SD) is closely related to positively and negatively framed messages in persuasive communication (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009). The role of self-discrepancy in the effectiveness of message framing has been a topic of several studies (Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken, 1994; Brendl, Higgins and Lemm, 1995, Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009). Those studies have shed new light on the relationship between regulatory fit and message persuasiveness. As discussed in Section 2.5.1, there is a considerable body of literature that suggests that regulatory fit (i.e., matching message frames to the regulatory focus of the recipient) increases message persuasiveness. In line with the regulatory fit principle, Dijkstra *et al.* (2009) have found that a match between a person's SD (actual:ideal vs. actual:ought) and framing

(positive vs. negative) leads to enhanced persuasion. However, this effect *only occurs under a condition of high involvement*. Specifically, when involvement is high, people with an actual:ideal SD are more persuaded by positively framed messages, and people with an actual:ought SD are more persuaded by negatively framed messages. Based on the findings of Dijkstra *et al.*'s (2009) study, it could be expected that people in career crises would be more persuaded by career support messages consistent with their SD type.

However, other researchers have demonstrated that, in certain instances, people are more persuaded by messages that are incongruent with their regulatory focus. Specifically, Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken (1994) found that negatively-framed messages had a greater persuasive effect than positively-framed ones for people with actual:ideal SDs (i.e., promotion-oriented). The opposite effect was observed for people with actual:ought SDs (i.e., prevention-oriented). They were more persuaded by positively framed messages. Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken (1994) suggest that, while a message that matches the recipient's sensitivity is likely to receive more attention, which can enhance the recall of that information, this kind of information is also more likely to activate a relevant self-discrepancy which can result in emotional discomfort. As a result, the recipient may reject the message to eliminate the source of the discomfort. However, this idea seems to apply only if the goal promoted by the message is not established yet in an ideal or ought self-guide. If the goal already exists in a self-guide (e.g., promoting a healthy lifestyle among gym members), then the recipient will be unable to reject the goal. In this case, the emotional discomfort caused by self-discrepancy will likely motivate the individual to accept the message and follow its recommendations. The findings of Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken's (1994) study, thus, imply that since career crisis sufferers are likely to have a career-related goal in their self-guide, they will be persuaded by career support persuasive messages that are congruent with

their SDs. However, Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken's (1994) findings are based on a single study and, therefore, call for additional empirical work, which this thesis addresses.

Overall, the main takeaway of the abovementioned SD studies is that the principle of regulatory fit may work only for people who are highly involved in a message's issue and have a pre-established goal related to that issue (e.g., career crisis sufferers who are exposed to a career support persuasive message). However, more empirical research is needed to confirm these effects. Therefore, further research on how high involvement and pre-established goals affect message the recipient's reaction to regulatory fit is warranted.

2.6 SUMMARY

The present chapter starts with the definition of persuasion, which is formulated as follows: 'a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom' (O'Keefe, 2016: 4). The review of foundational theoretical perspectives on persuasive communication demonstrated that while there is a great variety of theoretical perspectives, Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Festinger, 1957) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) are the most relevant persuasive communication theories in the context of the present thesis. These theories help to explain how a career crisis can influence the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages and lay the foundation for a conceptual model of the thesis. Specifically, CDT sheds light on how the internal psychological inconsistency of career crisis sufferers can affect their processing of career support persuasive messages. The ELM, in turn, explains how the personal importance of career support persuasive messages for career crisis sufferers can indirectly affect the

persuasiveness of the messages through the type of persuasion process involved and the type of thoughts elicited by the messages.

However, while CDT and the ELM show a link between a career crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages, they lack specificity around what type of career support messages and under what conditions will result in increased or decreased persuasion in career crisis sufferers. CDT does not answer the question of what sort of cognitions people will likely hold in a career crisis, making it difficult to assess the magnitude of the discrepancy between the message's argument and the career crisis sufferers' career-related cognitions. The ELM suggests that, in the condition of high involvement, the persuasion effect depends on the valence of thoughts produced by the message, which is partially determined by whether the message is pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal. Yet, the model does not explain when and why crisis sufferers will perceive career support persuasive messages as pro- or counter-attitudinal. Therefore, it is challenging to apply this model to the design of career support messages.

To address these issues, a literature review was conducted to identify the key factors that determine the effectiveness of persuasive messages in general. As a result, message characteristics (message framing) and recipient characteristics (regulatory focus and self-discrepancy) were found to be the central factors which affect persuasion. The literature review has identified three theories, which can help to develop the conceptual model that would address the shortcomings of ELM and CDT. The theories in question are message framing theory (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981), regulatory fit theory (RFT) (Higgins, 2000), and self-discrepancy theory (SDT) (Higgins, 1987). RFT and SDT are compatible with ELM and CDT, respectively. The link between RFT and ELM is that one of the ways in which

regulatory fit can affect persuasion is by influencing elaboration likelihood (Cesario, Higgins and Scholer, 2008; Koenig *et al.*, 2009). Koenig *et al.* (2009) found that incidental regulatory fit results in low elaboration message processing, whereas incidental regulatory non-fit results in high elaboration message processing. However, not only is fit argued to influence elaboration likelihood, but some researchers also suggest that the effectiveness of regulatory fit can be affected by the type of message processing involved. In their meta-analytic review, Motyka *et al.* (2014) found preliminary support for the suggestion that the effect of regulatory fit is stronger when the message's information is more peripheral and does not require high elaboration message processing. Therefore, there seems to be a cyclical relationship between regulatory fit and message processing.

As for CDT, the later revisions of the theory suggest that dissonance can be produced when an individual's behaviour is inconsistent with their valued self-standard and does not reflect what they want to be or should be (Stone and Cooper, 2001). Similarly, SDT suggests that self-discrepancy occurs when there is an incongruity between the actual self and self-guides (i.e., ideal self and ought self). Stone and Cooper (2001) also propose that the emotional experience of dissonance can be similar to the emotional experience of self-discrepancies. That is, dissonance produced by a violation of ought- or ideal-normative standards may be experienced as agitation- or dejection-related emotions, respectively. RFT and SDT are not only consistent with ELM and CDT but can also help to overcome the latter's shortcomings, which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Additionally, the literature review of self-discrepancy studies revealed that regulatory fit does not always have a favourable effect on persuasion. It is possible that the principle of regulatory fit may work only for people who are highly involved with an issue (Dijkstra *et al.*,

2009) and have a preestablished goal related to that issue (Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken, 1994). However, more empirical research is needed to determine these effects. As a result, one of the objectives of the present thesis is to provide further empirical evidence to build on Dijkstra *et al.*'s (2009) and Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken's (1994) works. The next chapter explains in more detail how the theoretical gaps that have been identified in the literature review are addressed in this thesis.

3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The objective of the present chapter is to develop research hypotheses and design the corresponding conceptual model of the current thesis. Section 3.1 of this chapter explains the expected relationship between message framing and message effectiveness. Section 3.2 hypothesizes the relationships between crisis severity, self-discrepancy, and regulatory focus. Section 3.3 builds upon the hypotheses from Section 3.2 and explains how the regulatory focus of crisis sufferers and the severity of their crisis can act as moderators for the relationship between message framing and message effectiveness. Finally, Section 3.4 provides a chapter summary and introduces the conceptual model of this thesis.

3.1 MESSAGE FRAMING AND PERSUASION

Message framing has been researched extensively in the context of persuasive communication (see Levin, Schneider and Gaeth, 1998; Sarial-Abi and Ulqinaku, 2020). Considerable attention in advertising research has been dedicated to valence framing (Zhang and Buda, 1999; Tsai, 2007; Putrevu, 2010; Kulkarni and Yuan, 2015; Pounders, Lee and

Mackert, 2015; Wyllie, Baxter and Kulczynski, 2015; Yoon and La Ferle, 2018), whereby the same facts are presented in either positive or negative terms (Levin, Schneider and Gaeth, 1998; Putrevu, 2010). Valence framing encompasses: risky-choice framing – options framed in terms of their riskiness; attribute framing – framed using characteristics of an object or event; and goal-framing – frames the goal of an action or behaviour (Levin, Schneider and Gaeth, 1998). It is the latter, goal framing, that forms the central framing focus of the present research, as a “crisis is provoked when a person faces an obstacle to important life goals” (Caplan, 1961: 18).

Goal framing is different from other types of valence framing in that both positive and negative goal frames are designed to promote the same positive end result (e.g., being employed). In goal framing, the positive frame highlights the positive consequences of performing a specific behaviour (Levin, Schneider and Gaeth, 1998). In contrast, the negative frame emphasises the negative consequences of not performing the behaviour (Levin, Schneider and Gaeth, 1998). This type of framing is widely used in advertising messages (Chandy *et al.*, 2001). Often, advertisers use goal framing to emphasise the potential of their products or services to help consumers obtain certain benefits or avoid losses (e.g., advertising the teeth whitening or cavities prevention properties of toothpaste). Although existing research provides mixed results regarding which goal frame (positive or negative) is more effective, it is generally agreed that message framing can influence persuasive messages' effectiveness (Smith and Petty, 1996). Previous research operationalised advertisement effectiveness as advertisement attitude, brand attitude, and purchase intention (Simpson, Brown and Widing, 1998; Drossos *et al.*, 2007; Tsai, 2007; Sohn and Youn, 2013; Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020). Akin to this operationalisation, message effectiveness in the present thesis is operationalised as message attitude (i.e., attitude toward a career support

persuasive message), initiative attitude (i.e., attitude toward a career support initiative), and service use intention (i.e., the intention to use the career support service promoted in the message). Ad attitude has been argued to mediate the effect of advertising on brand attitude and purchase intention (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986).

Thus, message framing affects advertising effectiveness (ad attitude, brand attitude and purchase intention), and ad attitude mediates the effect of advertising on brand attitude and purchase intention. In the present research, the corresponding proposition would be as follows: message framing affects message effectiveness (message attitude, initiative attitude and service use intention), and message attitude mediates the effect of message framing on initiative attitude and service use intention. Therefore:

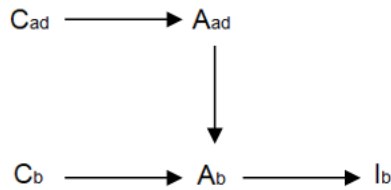
H1: Message framing will have a significant relationship with message attitude.

While the various models of the mediating role of ad attitude exist, among the widely discussed are the four models identified by MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986) – the affect transfer hypothesis (Mitchell and Olson, 1981; Shimp, 1981), the reciprocal mediation hypothesis (Heider, 1946), the dual mediation hypothesis (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989) and the independent influence hypothesis (Howard, 1977). *The affect transfer hypothesis* suggests a direct effect of ad attitude on brand attitude and an indirect effect on purchase intention through brand attitude. *The dual mediation hypothesis* extends the affect transfer hypothesis by adding an indirect effect of ad attitude on brand attitude through brand cognitions. *The reciprocal mediation hypothesis* mirrors the affect transfer hypothesis but also suggests a reciprocal relationship between ad attitude and brand attitude. Finally, *the independent influence hypothesis* suggests that both ad attitude and brand

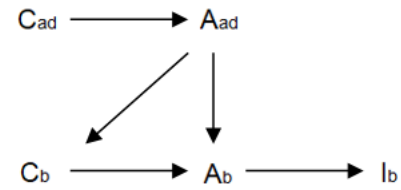
attitude affect purchase intention, but they do that independently. The visual representations of all four models can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Ad attitude models (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986).

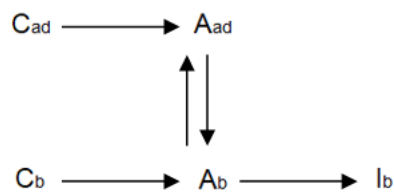
Affect Transfer Hypothesis



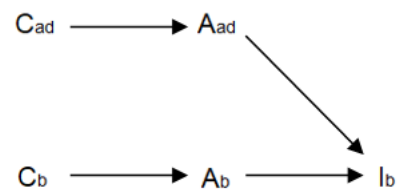
Dual Mediation Hypothesis



Reciprocal Mediation Hypothesis



Independent Influences Hypothesis



Cad - ad cognitions
 Cb - brand cognitions
 Aab - attitude toward the ad
 Ab - attitude toward the brand
 Ib - intention to purchase the brand

Compared to the other three models, the dual mediation model has been found to be superior (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986; Brown and Stayman, 1992). Its robustness has been repeatedly confirmed by different studies (Miniard, Bhatla and Randall, 1990; Yoon *et al.*, 1995; Moore and Lutz, 2000). However, as discussed above, advertising effectiveness is usually operationalised as ad attitude, brand attitude, and purchase intention. Therefore, attitude cognition and brand cognition are of limited interest and utility in the present

research. Moreover, some scholars have found that, while ad attitude has a significant relationship with both brand attitude and brand cognition, the latter two constructs are independent of each other (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989); and some scholars found that the relationship between brand cognition and brand attitude is the weakest in the model (Brown and Stayman, 1992). As a result, it has been decided to exclude cognition constructs (ad attitude and brand attitude) from the conceptual model of the thesis and focus on ad attitude, brand attitude, and purchase intention paths.

Despite their differences, the dual mediation, affect transfer, and reciprocal mediation models suggest that ad attitude directly affects brand attitude and indirectly affects purchase intention through brand attitude. The only model, which does not support this logic, is the independent influence hypothesis. However, in their meta-analysis study assessing the four models, Brown and Stayman (1992) found that the independent influence model had the worst fit to the aggregated data from existing studies, which brings the model's robustness into question. Thus, based on the above examination of the ad attitude models, it is plausible to expect that ad attitude has a direct effect on brand attitude and an indirect effect on purchase intention through brand attitude. In a similar vein, the present research proposes that message attitude affects initiative attitude directly and service use intention indirectly through initiative attitude. The corresponding hypotheses are as follows:

H2: Message attitude will have a significant relationship with initiative attitude.

H3: Initiative attitude will mediate the relationship between message attitude and service use intention.

The value of these hypotheses is not in their novelty but rather in the application of a universal theory to a specific phenomenon (i.e., career crisis), which makes the theory more

aligned with the issue that practitioners encounter in practice (Laczniak, 2015). It has been argued that “such [contextualised] theories have the best chance of influencing practice” (Laczniak, 2015: 432). What follows is the explanation of mechanisms through which a psychological crisis is expected to influence the relationship between message framing and the effectiveness of persuasive messages.

3.2 CRISIS, SELF-DISCREPANCY, AND REGULATORY FOCUS

The present thesis proposes that psychological crisis severity can impact the effectiveness of message framing through self-discrepancy and regulatory focus. Self-discrepancy is likely to be an integral part of a crisis state. According to Forer (1963: 278), crisis often involves ‘emergency self-revision’ and ‘the pressure of external events to reality-testing in an area in which it had been deficient, generally in self-perception’. Robinson, Demetre and Litman (2017: 426) state that ‘[d]uring periods of developmental crisis, individuals experience uncomfortable internal incongruence’. Crisis literature also suggests that the initial stage of crisis starts with the perception of threat to important life goals and needs, and to *the person’s sense of integrity* (Rapoport, 1962; Miller and Iscoe, 1963; Geissler, 1984). In addition, some types of crises (e.g., developmental and transitional crises) are associated with biologically or socially determined life transitions, which can be considered liminal periods. Existing literature suggests that during liminal periods consumers are more likely to have a higher self-concept discrepancy and may be less psychologically healthy than people in non-liminal states (Noble and Walker, 1997). Therefore, it is logical to propose that crisis involves a certain degree of self-incongruity or self-discrepancy in the crisis domain.

Moreover, a crisis occurs when an individual encounters an obstacle to an important life goal, which habitual coping mechanisms cannot overcome. This is likely to be perceived by the individual as a failure to match their actual state to desired self-states in an important life domain, which activates self-discrepancy. The longer the individual fails to overcome the crisis-inducing problem, the greater the distance between actual and desired self-states (self-discrepancy magnitude) will become. In other words, crisis progression can be seen as an important element against which crisis sufferers judge the current status of their self. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H4: People in the late stage of a crisis will experience a greater magnitude of crisis-related self-discrepancy than people in the early stage of a crisis.

Previous research found that different types of self-discrepancy (SD) (actual:ideal vs. actual:ought) are associated with different regulatory foci (i.e., promotion vs. prevention) (Higgins *et al.*, 1994; Higgins, 1997). People with a predominant actual:ideal SD have sensitivity to the presence or absence of positive outcomes and be motivated to approach/promote matches to their ideal self-guides (i.e., they are promotion-oriented), whereas people with a predominant actual:ought SD have sensitivity to presence or absence of negative outcomes and are motivated to avoid/prevent mismatches to their ought self-guides (i.e., they are prevention-oriented). However, it is possible that the magnitude of self-discrepancy, as opposed to the type of self-discrepancy, can also determine regulatory focus. According to Carver and Scheier's (1981) self-regulation theory, motivation to reduce self-discrepancy depends on a favourable (or unfavourable) outcome expectancy. If the evaluation of a situation suggests a favourable outcome expectancy, then the individual will continue trying to match their self to standard. If the evaluation suggests an unfavourable outcome expectancy, then the individual will attempt to withdraw from the situation. It is likely that

people with greater self-discrepancy magnitude assess the likelihood of a favourable outcome of their self-discrepancy-reducing efforts more negatively compared to people with lesser self-discrepancy magnitude. This is in line with objective self-awareness theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972). Objective self-awareness theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972) suggests that motivation to match self to standard (i.e., self-guide) or to withdraw from the situation depends on the magnitude of self-discrepancy.

Thus, it is expected that the magnitude of self-discrepancy will determine regulatory focus, i.e., crisis sufferers' motivation to match self to standard (i.e., self-guide) or to withdraw from the situation will depend on the magnitude of self-discrepancy in the crisis domain. Crisis sufferers with greater self-discrepancy magnitude are likely to assess the likelihood of a favourable outcome of their self-discrepancy-reducing efforts more negatively compared to crisis sufferers with lesser self-discrepancy magnitude. Therefore, it is hypothesised that the greater the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the prevention orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.

H5a: *The greater the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the prevention orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.*

In contrast, crisis sufferers with lesser self-discrepancy magnitude are likely to assess the likelihood of a favourable outcome of their self-discrepancy-reducing efforts more positively compared to crisis sufferers with greater self-discrepancy magnitude. Therefore, it is hypothesised that the lesser the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the promotion orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.

H5b: *The lesser the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the promotion orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.*

Further, since people in the late stage of a crisis are hypothesised to experience a greater magnitude of crisis-related self-discrepancy than people in the early stage of a crisis (H4), and crisis sufferers with a greater magnitude of self-discrepancy are expected to be more prevention-oriented in the crisis domain than those with the lesser magnitude of self-discrepancy (H5a), it follows that people in the late stage of a crisis will be more prevention-oriented than people in the early stage of a crisis. Therefore:

H6a: *People in the late stage of a crisis will be more prevention-oriented than people in the early stage of a crisis.*

Relatedly, since people in the early stage of a crisis are hypothesised to experience a lesser magnitude of crisis-related self-discrepancy than people in the late stage of a crisis (H4), and crisis sufferers with the lesser magnitude of self-discrepancy are expected to be more promotion-oriented in the crisis domain than those with the greater magnitude of self-discrepancy (H5b), it follows that people in the early stage of a crisis will be more promotion-oriented than people in the late stage of a crisis.

H6b: *People in the early stage of a crisis will be more promotion-oriented than people in the late stage of a crisis.*

Finally, since crisis severity is hypothesised to affect self-discrepancy magnitude in the crisis domain (H4), and self-discrepancy magnitude, in turn, is expected to affect regulatory focus (H5a and H5b), it is logical to conclude that self-discrepancy will mediate the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus:

H7: *Self-discrepancy magnitude will have a mediating effect on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus.*

3.3 REGULATORY FOCUS, CRISIS SEVERITY, AND PERSUASION

Previous message framing studies found that regulatory focus moderates the relationship between message framing and the effectiveness of persuasive messages (Lee and Aaker, 2004; Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004; Kim, 2006; Zhao and Pechmann, 2007; Latimer *et al.*, 2008). Specifically, individuals with a strong promotion focus were to be more responsive to promotion-oriented or gain-oriented persuasive messages, and individuals with a strong prevention focus were found to be more responsive to prevention-oriented or loss-oriented persuasive messages. However, it is largely unknown whether the principle of regulatory fit (i.e., matching the message's motivational focus to the recipient's regulatory focus) holds when the recipient is in a crisis. Some scholars suggested that the principle of regulatory fit may work *only* for people who are highly involved with an issue (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009) and have a preestablished goal related to that issue (Tykocinski, Higgins and Chaiken, 1994). If these suggestions are correct, then the principle of regulatory fit should work particularly well with crisis sufferers who are exposed to persuasive messages related to the domain of their crisis because, in this case, they will be highly involved with the issue and have a preestablished goal related to that issue. Thus, in accordance with the regulatory fit principle, it is expected that regulatory focus of crisis sufferers will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude, when the message is related to the domain of the crisis.

H8: *Regulatory focus of crisis sufferers will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.*

Specifically, prevention-oriented career crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-framed career support persuasive messages than promotion-oriented messages.

H8a: *Prevention-oriented crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-framed support persuasive messages than promotion-oriented messages.*

Relatedly, promotion-oriented career crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-framed career support persuasive messages than prevention-oriented messages.

H8b: *Promotion-oriented crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-framed support persuasive messages than prevention-oriented messages.*

Testing hypotheses H8, H8a, and H8b will help to establish whether the principle of regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000) – i.e., matching the message's motivational focus to the recipient's regulatory focus – holds when the recipient is in a crisis state. However, it is also equally, if not more, important to establish whether crisis severity can act as a moderator for the relationship between message framing and message attitude. This is important to establish as it would help advertising practitioners to move away from generic crisis support promotion messages and provide a starting point for effective crisis support message customisation based on the severity of crisis. Since it has been hypothesised that the different stages of crisis are associated with different regulatory foci (H6a, H6b) and different regulatory foci make people more sensitive to different message frames (H8a, H8b), it is plausible to propose that crisis severity will also moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.

H9: *Crisis severity will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.*

Specifically, since people in the late stage of a crisis are likely to be prevention-oriented (H6a) and prevention-oriented crisis sufferers are hypothesised to be sensitive to prevention-oriented messages (H8a), it can be proposed that people in the late stage of a career crisis will be more persuaded by prevention-oriented career support messages than promotion-oriented career support messages. For example, people with a late-stage career crisis can be expected to be persuaded by a persuasive message: ‘We are here to help you avoid being trapped in an unsatisfying job’. Therefore:

H9a: *When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient’s crisis, recipients in the late stage of a crisis will be more responsive to prevention-oriented messages than promotion-oriented messages.*

Relatedly, since people in the early stage of a crisis are likely to be promotion-oriented (H6b) and promotion-oriented crisis sufferers are hypothesised to be sensitive to promotion-oriented messages (H8a), it can be proposed that people in the early stage of a career crisis will be more persuaded by promotion-oriented career support messages than prevention-oriented career support messages. For example, people with an early-stage career crisis can be expected to be persuaded by a persuasive message: ‘We are here to help you get a satisfying job!’. Thus:

H9b: *When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient’s crisis, recipients in the early stage of a crisis will be more responsive to promotion-oriented messages than prevention-oriented messages.*

To summarise, the present research investigates how a psychological crisis influences the effectiveness of persuasive messages related to the domain of the crisis and the mechanisms behind this influence.

3.4 SUMMARY

In summary, the present thesis suggests that message framing will influence the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages (operationalised as message attitude, initiative attitude, and service use intention). Moreover, it is expected that message attitude will affect initiative attitude directly and service use intention indirectly through initiative attitude. The thesis also proposes the mechanisms through which a psychological crisis is expected to influence the relationship between message framing and the effectiveness of persuasive messages related to the crisis domain (e.g., career for career crisis sufferers).

It is hypothesised that people in a crisis will have a discrepancy between their actual and desired (ideal and/or ought) self-states in the crisis domain. The experience of a crisis is likely to be perceived by the individual as a failure to match their actual state to desired self-states in an important life domain, which would activate self-discrepancy. The longer the individual fails to overcome the crisis-inducing problem, the greater the distance between actual and desired self-states will be. In other words, crisis progression can be seen as an important element against which crisis sufferers judge the current status of their self. Thus, it is hypothesised that people in the early stage of a crisis will have a lesser magnitude of self-discrepancy in the crisis domain than people in the late stage of a crisis.

The magnitude of self-discrepancy, in turn, is hypothesised to determine regulatory focus in that crisis sufferers' motivation to match self to standard (i.e., self-guide) or to withdraw

from the situation will depend on the magnitude of self-discrepancy. It is likely that people with greater self-discrepancy assess the likelihood of a favourable outcome of their self-discrepancy-reducing efforts more negatively compared to people with lesser self-discrepancy. Therefore, it is hypothesised that the greater the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the prevention orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain. In contrast, the lesser the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the promotion orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain. Also, since crisis severity affects self-discrepancy magnitude, and self-discrepancy magnitude affects regulatory focus, it is hypothesised that self-discrepancy will mediate the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus.

In accordance with the regulatory fit principle, it is expected that regulatory focus of crisis sufferers will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude, when the message is related to the domain of the crisis. Specifically, promotion-oriented crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-framed crisis-related messages than prevention-framed crisis-related messages. Prevention-oriented crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-framed crisis-related messages than promotion-framed crisis-related messages. In addition, since it has been hypothesised that the different stages of crisis are associated with different regulatory foci, and different regulatory foci make people more sensitive to different message frames, it is proposed that crisis severity will also moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude. Specifically, since people in the early stage of a career crisis are expected to be more promotion-oriented, they are more likely to have a favourable attitude to promotion-framed career support messages than prevention-framed career support messages. Relatedly, since people in a late stage of a career crisis are expected to be more

prevention-oriented, they are more likely to have a favourable attitude to prevention-framed career support messages than promotion-framed career support messages. The summary of all hypotheses can be found below:

H1: Message framing will have a significant positive relationship with message attitude.

H2: Message attitude will have a significant positive relationship with initiative attitude.

H3: Initiative attitude will mediate the relationship between message attitude and service use intention.

H4: People in the late stage of a crisis will experience a greater magnitude of crisis-related self-discrepancy than people in the early stage of a crisis.

H5a: The greater the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the prevention orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.

H5b: The lesser the magnitude of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the greater the promotion orientation of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.

H6a: People in the late stage of a crisis will be more prevention-oriented than people in the early stage of a crisis.

H6b: People in the early stage of a crisis will be more promotion-oriented than people in the late stage of a crisis.

H7: Self-discrepancy magnitude will have a mediating effect on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus.

H8: Regulatory focus of crisis sufferers will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.

H8a: Prevention-oriented crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-framed support persuasive messages than promotion-oriented messages.

H8b: Promotion-oriented crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-framed support persuasive messages than prevention-oriented messages.

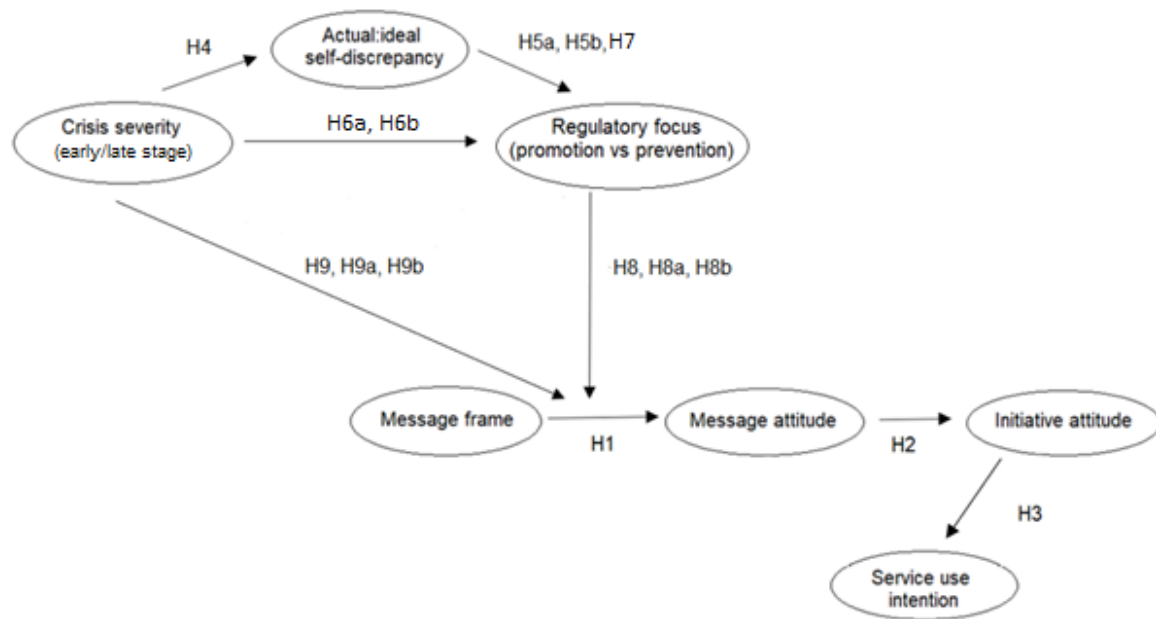
H9: Crisis severity will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.

H9a: When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient's crisis, recipients in the late stage of a crisis will have a more favourable message attitude to prevention-oriented messages than promotion-oriented messages.

H9b: When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient's crisis, recipients in the early stage of a crisis will have a more favourable message attitude to promotion-oriented messages than prevention-oriented messages.

For a visual representation of the conceptual model, see Figure 2.

Figure 2. Conceptual model



4. CHAPTER SUMMARY

The literature review highlights diverse theoretical perspectives on crisis and persuasion. Existing theoretical perspectives on crisis (homeostatic, cognitive, dialectic and psychoanalytic) are often portrayed as potentially incommensurate. However, in the current thesis, these perspectives are seen as complementary rather than competing. As a result, the present thesis introduces an integrative perspective on crisis by suggesting that people are motivated to maintain emotional balance, and that a crisis represents a state of disequilibrium of that emotional balance (homeostatic perspective); to be in a crisis, a person has to perceive an encountered problem as threatening to their important goals (cognitive perspective); crises can be prerequisites for individual development (dialectic perspective); previously unresolved psychological conflicts can exacerbate subsequent crises, and current crises can help attain a better resolution of previously unresolved crises (psychoanalytic perspective). Although there is variation in terms of how crisis scholars define crisis, they would generally agree that a

crisis, in a broad sense, is *a psychological state that is provoked by a situation that is perceived as threatening to important life goals of the individual and that, for the time being, cannot be resolved by customary problem-solving methods* (Caplan, 1961; Rapoport, 1962; Bloom, 1963; Halpern, 1973; Lukton, 1974; Flannery and Everly, 2000; Brown and Rainer, 2006). This is the definition of crisis adopted in the present thesis.

The review of crisis studies in the consumer research literature has demonstrated that this is indeed an important topic of enquiry for consumer researchers that warrants further attention. The discussion on career-related crisis in early adulthood has revealed that, despite its prevalence and importance, such crisis has received limited attention from scholars in the consumer research field. This is especially the case in relation to how young adults experiencing a career-related crisis might relate to persuasive marketing communications for interventions seeking to help this group of people. Therefore, this constitutes one of the theoretical gaps that the present thesis addresses.

The chapter on persuasive communication has introduced the definition of persuasion, which is adopted in this thesis: ‘a successful intentional effort at influencing another’s mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom’ (O’Keefe, 2016: 4). Furthermore, the review of the persuasive communication literature demonstrated that there is a broad range of theoretical perspectives on persuasive communication, each is useful in explaining the different aspect of persuasion. Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) (Festinger, 1957) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) have been identified as the most relevant theoretical perspectives on persuasion for the current thesis. These theories help to explain how a career crisis can influence the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages and lay the foundation for a conceptual model of this thesis. Specifically, CDT explains how the internal psychological

inconsistency of career crisis sufferers can affect their processing of career support persuasive messages. The ELM, in turn, explains how the personal importance of career support for people in a career crisis can impact the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages through the type of persuasion route involved and the valence of thoughts elicited by the advertisement. However, while CDT and the ELM show a link between a career crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages, the type of career support message and the conditions that will result in increased or decreased persuasion among career crisis sufferers remain unclear.

CDT does not explain the type of cognitions likely to be held by career crisis sufferers, making it difficult to assess the magnitude of the discrepancy between the message's argument and the crisis sufferers' career-related cognitions. The ELM, on the other hand, suggests that, in the condition of high involvement, the persuasion effect depends on the valence of thoughts produced by the message. The valence of the thoughts, in turn, is partially determined by whether the message is pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal. However, the model does not help to fully understand when and why crisis sufferers will perceive a career support advertisement as pro- or counter-attitudinal. To address these issues, the literature review also sought to identify the key factors that determine the effectiveness of persuasive messages in general. As a result, message characteristics (message framing) and recipient characteristics (regulatory focus and self-discrepancy) were found to be the central factors which affect persuasion. The literature review has identified three theories, which are not only compatible with ELM and CDT but also help to address their shortcomings. These theories are message framing theory (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981), regulatory fit theory (RFT) (Higgins, 2000), and self-discrepancy theory (SDT) (Higgins, 1987).

Based on these theories, the conceptual model of the present thesis was developed. The model proposes that the severity of a career crisis determines the magnitude of self-discrepancy and regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention). This addresses the shortcoming of CDT in that it explains what sort of cognitions are likely to be held by career crisis sufferers, which, in turn, makes it possible to assess the magnitude of the discrepancy between the message's argument and the career crisis sufferers' career-related cognitions. In addition, the model hypothesises that, depending on the severity of their career crisis, recipients are more likely to be persuaded by either promotion- or prevention-oriented career support persuasive messages. This addresses the shortcoming of the ELM in that it explains when career-support persuasive messages can be expected to be perceived as pro- or counter-attitudinal by career crisis sufferers.

Having reviewed the literature and developed the research hypotheses, the chapters that follow move on to consider the methodological aspects of the current thesis, such as research philosophy, approach to theory development, research design, and method justification.

PART II: METHODOLOGY

5. RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

This chapter provides an overview of the philosophical underpinnings of the present thesis. Section 5.1 introduces the research philosophy guiding the project – critical realism. Section 5.2 focuses on the ontological assumptions associated with critical realism. Section 5.3 explains the epistemological assumptions of critical realism. Section 5.4 discusses the axiological assumptions of the chosen research philosophy. Finally, Section 5.5 provides a chapter summary.

5.1 CRITICAL REALISM

The present thesis is guided by critical realism (CR) research philosophy. There are many streams of realist philosophy, but, in essence, they are characterised by an integration of a *realist ontology* (i.e., there is a single objective reality, and its existence is independent of our perceptions) with a *constructivist epistemology* (i.e., knowledge of reality is a ‘construction from our own perspectives and standpoint’) (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010: 146). This perspective is consistent with my view of reality and knowledge. CR, in particular, originated in the late 20th century in the work of Bhaskar (1978, 1989) (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010; Saunders *et al.*, 2016) and is considered the most widely accepted version of realism in the social sciences (Easton, 2002; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). CR is often seen as a middle way between interpretivism and positivism (Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013). In contrast to positivism with its belief in a single, apprehensible reality, and interpretivism with its idea of multiple,

socially constructed realities, CR holds that there can be multiple perceptions of a single observer-independent reality (Easton, 2002; Bisman, 2010).

CR has been argued by several scholars to be one of the most appropriate philosophical bases for marketing and consumer research (e.g., Hunt, 1990; Perry *et al.*, 1999; Easton, 2002). I concur with these scholars. While interpretivists aim to understand consumer behaviour and positivists aim to predict consumer behaviour (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988), critical realists – due to their methodological pluralism – can do both. Thus, the methodological flexibility of CR allows for more complete accounts of consumer behaviour, which is inherently very complex. I believe that consumer behaviour can be predicted to a certain extent through statistical tests and experiments. However, I also acknowledge that people's behaviours are very complex and influenced by a great variety of factors, which means they cannot be predicted in their entirety. Nevertheless, the fact that consumer behaviour cannot always be accurately predicted does not mean that critical realists should abandon statistical tests and experiments; it simply means that results should be interpreted critically through the lenses of CR.

CR not only reflects my worldview but is also consistent with the research goals of this thesis. The main goals of the present research are: 1) to explore the relationship between career crisis and the effectiveness of career-support persuasive messages; 2) to test the proposed relationship; and, most importantly, 3) to uncover a possible causal mechanism behind the relationship. The latter, in particular, fits well with critical realists' focus on explaining what people see and experience in terms of underlying mechanisms and structures (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). In the sections that follow, CR ontology, epistemology, axiology, and their implications for the present thesis are discussed.

5.2 CRITICAL REALIST ONTOLOGY

The choice of CR as a philosophical perspective for this thesis is driven by my view of reality. I believe there is a single objective reality, but it is very complex and constantly changing, with multiple mechanisms that interact at different levels. This corresponds well with CR's stratified and structured ontology. Critical realists identify three ontological domains: the empirical, the actual and the real (Bhaskar, 1978, 1989). *The real* is a realm of causal mechanisms and structures that produce events (Dean *et al.*, 2006; Sayer, 2000). These causal mechanisms are not always in action. Their activation may depend on historical and/or social contexts. *The actual* consists of the events generated by the activated causal mechanisms of the real. People may or may not observe these events. These events exist independently of people's experiences. For example, inflation (*the real*) affects spending power (*the actual*) whether we observe it or not. *The empirical domain* is essentially 'the domain of experience' which consists of those events that people experience, observe, and sense directly or indirectly (Sayer, 2000: 12). For example, the decreased spending power means that people can buy fewer things with a unit of currency, which is something they are likely to notice, i.e., observe. Thus, the empirical is a subset of the actual, and the actual is a subset of the real. The latter (the deep dimension with generative mechanisms) distinguishes the CR tradition from other forms of realism (Danermark *et al.*, 2001).

According to critical realists, positivists reduce the abovementioned three domains to a single empirical domain, which results in the conflation between the subject and object of analysis. In other words, positivists reduce what is to what is known about it (Danermark *et al.*, 2001), and hence commit 'the epistemic fallacy' (Bhaskar, 1978: 36). In contrast, critical realists argue that the existence of something does not depend on its observability (Sayer,

2000; Danermark *et al.*, 2001). While we may be able to observe some events, structures and processes, there are still some events, structures and processes that may be unobservable to us.

To sum up, CR's stratified ontology suggests that '[e]vents may or may not be regularly recurring and they may or may not be experienced by us' (Dean *et al.*, 2006: 9). This view of reality inherently shapes critical realists' view on how knowledge about reality can be obtained. The latter is reviewed in the next section.

5.3 CRITICAL REALIST EPISTEMOLOGY

5.3.1 *Fallibilism*

Critical realism is *critical* in the sense that it is 'critical of the social practices it studies as well as of other theories' (Sayer, 2000: 18). Indeed, one of the epistemological implications of CR's stratified ontology is the belief that our understanding of reality is never complete (Reed, 2005). This is particularly true of social reality. A great number of observable and unobservable factors influence people's behaviour, and taking all of them into account would be virtually impossible. As a result, existing theories can always be disproved by new theories (Danermark *et al.*, 2001). However, although all theories are fallible, not all theories are *equally* fallible. Theories should be contested, and those theories that have greater explanatory power should be seen as the best knowledge about reality that is available for the moment.

Similarly to many other forms of realism, CR holds that objective reality exists independently of our knowledge of it (Danermark *et al.*, 2001; Fleetwood, 2005). However, unlike other forms of realism (e.g., empirical or naïve realism), CR asserts that our knowledge of reality is conceptually mediated (Fleetwood, 2005; Bergene, 2007). That is, facts (i.e.,

empirical data) are rarely completely neutral (Danermark *et al.*, 2001). For facts to be understandable, they should comprise existing lay and/or scientific conceptualisations. Facts do not ‘speak for themselves’. People have to use language, which is socially constructed, to give them meaning. It is people who make facts meaningful, and different people may assign different meanings to things. Thus, knowledge is essentially ‘socially determined conceptual constructions/ (Danermark *et al.*, 2001: 17). Hence, it is futile to search for the objective truth (Maxwell and Lincoln, 1990). CR epistemology assumes that the theories we produce in social sciences are always fallible and revisable and never exhaustive (Reed, 2005).

5.3.2 Methodological pluralism

An important methodological implication of CR’s epistemology is that it allows for a highly flexible approach to research methods (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014). Critical realism is ‘ontologically bold but epistemologically cautious’ (Lawson, 1999: 5). There are no characteristically CR methods of research (Porpora, 2015). CR is compatible with both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). Due to its methodological flexibility, similar to pragmatism, CR has been advocated as a productive stance for mixed-method research (Lipscomb, 2008; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). However, unlike pragmatists, who tend to neglect meta-theoretical considerations, critical realists explicitly acknowledge the existence of logical and conceptual links between the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that shape their research (Lipscomb, 2008). Critical realists hold that pragmatists underestimate the fundamental importance of philosophical assumptions (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). These assumptions are not simply constraints on methods. They are also lenses through which researchers view

the world; hence, they inevitably affect researchers' goals and even actions to a certain degree. They are often implicit and not easily changed or abandoned.

Philosophical assumptions are particularly important for mixed methods research (MMR) (Lipscomb, 2008; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). Lipscomb (2008) states that researchers who employ mixed methods are more likely to face greater challenges in maintaining logical coherence in their studies than those who rely on a single quantitative or qualitative methodology. Indeed, one of the most topical issues in MMR is the issue of 'commensurability', i.e. the question of whether different methods with different ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and methodologies can be mixed (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). Bergman (2011: 100-101) argues that '*[a] superficial recourse to pragmatism does not hide the fact that the two so-called paradigms as presented in the mixed methods literature remain incompatible: If the qualitative part of a mixed methods research design is steeped in constructivism, while the quantitative part is steeped in (post-)positivism, then, under most circumstances, the two components cannot be logically combined within one single, coherent, and consistent research design*'. While the issue of commensurability remains the Achilles' heel of pragmatism, critical realism, with its developed ontological base, can effectively address it.

In summary, taking a CR stance in the present thesis has several practical benefits. Specifically, CR allows for greater methodological flexibility, which means the research questions can be addressed in the most exhaustive way. In addition, CR's developed ontological base allows for improved argumentative coherence, even in mixed-method research. However, it must be noted that, despite the claimed methodological flexibility, it appears to be rare for critical realists to use quantitative or experimental methods as the main methods in their research. The reason for that is further discussed below.

5.3.3 Critical realism and empirical methods

Critical realists are essentially pragmatic methodological pluralists in that they hold that different research methods are suitable for different research situations (Bergene, 2007). However, critical realists appear to disapprove of experimental and quantitative research, especially in the social sciences (e.g., Sayer, 1992; Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Bashkar, 1998; Danermark *et al.*, 2001).

From a CR perspective, correlations between variables can neither uncover causal mechanisms behind events nor can they predict the occurrence of such events (Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, some critical realists are sceptical about using statistical analysis in social science research (Pratschke, 2003) or use it merely for descriptive purposes (Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013). However, it is necessary to point out that not all critical realists find unease with statistical analysis. For example, Pratschke (2003) has demonstrated that statistical analysis, especially causal modelling, is, in principle, consistent with CR. According to Pratschke (2003), the scepticism of critical realists toward statistical analysis is driven not by the fact that CR is incompatible with this form of analysis but simply by the methodological preferences of prominent critical realists such as Bashkar (1998) and Lawson (1997, 2001). Indeed, the founder of CR, Bashkar (1998: 226), states that ‘meanings cannot be measured, only understood. Hypotheses about them must be expressed in language, and confirmed in dialogue’. In response, Pratschke (2003) argues that theories that involve unobservable abstract concepts and complex causal mechanisms can be presented by a set of structural equations. The fact that certain assumptions need to be applied does not invalidate the model but merely suggests that the results are contingent on the sensitivity and plausibility of the assumptions. In a similar vein, Porpora (1998) points out that the difference between

positivism and CR is not that positivists run regressions and critical realists do not, but it is the way critical realists run regressions and the significance they attach to them.

As for experiments, critical realists tend to disapprove of the use of this method in the social sciences because, in experiments, causal mechanisms are studied in a closed system, and this sort of system rarely exists in the social world (Danermark *et al.*, 2001). It is challenging to find a social situation outside a laboratory where one can ensure that certain mechanisms are isolated and no other mechanisms are involved. Furthermore, unlike objects in the natural sciences, people are conscious, reflective, intentional, and self-changing. They subconsciously or consciously alter their behaviour as a reaction to the experimental setting. As a result, some critical realists suggest that when researchers want to gain knowledge about causal mechanisms behind social situations, they should isolate ‘certain aspects in thought – abstraction – rather than isolating them by manipulating events’ (Danermark *et al.*, 2001: 43).

I agree with Danermark *et al.* (2001) that social life is complex, and this complexity cannot be explained in its entirety by simple mathematical models. However, the fact that, for example, consumer behaviour is complex does not mean that the principles dictating this behaviour must always be complex (Doreian, 1985). Even though the world is an open system, there are still regularities that underpin people’s behaviour and manifest themselves in stable patterns of events (Downward, 2002). In my opinion, these so-called ‘demi-regularities’ (Lawson, 1997) cannot predict human behaviour in its entirety, but predicting something to an extent is still better than not predicting it at all. We cannot observe all causal mechanisms that are in place, but we still can try to investigate some of them based on their observable effects by means of statistical analysis and experiments. It is also worth mentioning that one of the major figures in the development of experimental methods in

social research, Donald Campbell, was a critical realist (Campbell, 1988; Maxwell and Lincoln, 1990; Maxwell and Mittapali, 2010).

In summary, it can be said that several prominent critical realists have explicitly or implicitly opposed the use of statistical analysis and experiments, especially in the social sciences. They see quantitative methods as positivists' tools that reinforce the epistemic fallacy, reducing what is to what we know about it. In other words, these critical realists hold that statistical analysis and experiments focus on empirical events (the domain of empirical) and largely neglect the generative mechanisms that produce those events (the domain of real). Nevertheless, as evident from the above discussion, critical realists can and do use analytical statistics and experiments. However, it must be noted that they do it with a different understanding of causality and causal explanation, compared with positivists (Porpora, 2015).

5.3.4 Causality

Positivists and critical realists have different views of causality. Specifically, positivists adopt the covering law (or regularity) perspective of causality (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010; Porpora, 2015). In their causal explanations, they focus on a systematic relationship between empirical events (i.e., cause and effect), and the actual process of causality remains largely unobservable (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). Positivists see human behaviour as the result of some cause that precedes the behaviour. Critical realists, in contrast, argue that causality cannot be equated with a relationship between different events; 'it cannot be reduced to the statistical generalisations of empirically observed invariance of constant conjunctions of events that characterise quantitative research methods' (Reed, 2005: 1630). Instead of studying empirical events and focusing on identifying causal linkages between them, critical

realists aim to discover (often through abstraction) the underlying mechanisms and structures that create those empirical events in the first place (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Reed, 2005; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010).

Additionally, CR holds that the potential generative causal mechanisms depend on a range of structural factors that interact in a complex and dynamic way. Hence, the relationship between these mechanisms and the effects they produce is not fixed; it is contingent (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Critical realists place significant emphasis on the role of context in causal explanation (Bergene, 2007; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). Unlike positivists, they acknowledge that the context in which the causal mechanism operates is, to a certain extent, inherently involved in that mechanism (Sayer, 2000; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). This means that the context often cannot be ‘controlled for’ or reduced to a set of ‘extraneous’ variables without misrepresenting the causal process. Therefore, to understand the operation of causal mechanisms in the social sciences, it is critical to take into account the social and cultural contexts of the phenomenon under consideration (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010).

While I agree that the context of a social phenomenon plays an important role in understanding causal processes, I disagree that statistical analysis and experiments misrepresent this process. Although experiments do not tell us much about the process through which and the circumstances under which causal relationships hold (i.e., causal explanation), they are still a valuable tool for identifying those causal relationships (i.e., causal description) (Shadish *et al.*, 2002). Similarly, statistical causal models (e.g., structural equation modelling and mediated moderation models) can provide valuable information about causal mechanisms by identifying causal relationships through correlations between variables. Critical realists tend to criticise statistical models for their dependence on observable variables. However, although latent variables are not directly observable, they can still be

identified through their observed effects (Pratschke, 2003). Thus, it is not that statistical models and experiments misrepresent causal processes, but rather they do not tell the whole story. This does not mean that statistical models and experiments should not be used for establishing causal mechanisms. It simply means that the limitations of these methods must be acknowledged, and results should be interpreted with caution. That is, statistical results should be treated ‘as a form of evidence for an explanation rather than as an explanation itself’ (Porpora, 2015: 63).

It is also necessary to point out that those critical realists, who believe that quantitative methods should not be utilised to uncover causal mechanisms in the social world, put themselves in a problematic epistemological situation. To justify their claim that there are causal mechanisms that generate events, realists need to demonstrate that the causal mechanisms they propose *actually* exist, and that these mechanisms are responsible for the surface manifestations they are claimed to produce (Harre, 1961). However, what significantly complicates the task is that, by definition, there can be no direct or observable evidence of the existence of such mechanisms. According to Halfpenny (1987: 35), this problem is ‘the epistemological stumbling block for realism, just as the problem of causation is of positivism and the problem of interpretation is of interpretivism’.

I believe that an actionable way forward is to see statistical results as the empirical manifestations of proposed underlying causal mechanisms. Furthermore, I hold that both variance- and process-based approaches are helpful in investigating causality. I see these approaches as complementary and by no means mutually exclusive. When combined, they can produce more robust causal claims. According to Bisman (2010: 10), CR research ‘may be initially qualitative and inductive, enabling issues, propositions and models to be developed, approach clarified and modified, then followed by the hypothetico-deductive (most

commonly used in quantitative research), to unearth knowledge concerning broader mechanisms and tendencies'. This is the design that I have decided to adopt in the present thesis based on my philosophical views and the nature of research problems. It is more extensively explained and justified in the Research Design chapter.

5.4 CRITICAL REALIST AXIOLOGY

Critical realists hold that social structures shape the activities of agents (see Reed, 2005). Archer (1998: 201) explicates this idea by raising and answering the question of activity-dependence: '[U]pon whose activities particular distribution, positions, roles and institutions themselves depend?'. The answer that she provides to this question is as follows:

'[s]ince (...) the structuring of all the above arose from the past activities of agents (possibly now dead), then the emergence of such properties and powers cannot be attributed to practices of current agents, who can maintain and transform the above, rather than creating them, but whose strategic actions are conditioned by their inherited structural and cultural context in so doing. Moreover, qua agents they are shaped and reshaped in their sequential attempts to remould the structures they confront but did not create' (Archer, 1998: 201, emphasis added).

Critical realists treat structure and agency as separate entities of social reality without denying that social structures are dependent upon the activities of human agents (see Archer, 1998; Reed, 2005). Thus, structure and agency are not simply two distinct entities that exist separately, but they have 'temporal relations of priority and posteriority towards one another' (Archer, 1998: 202).

Archer (1998) explains social structuring over time as the interaction between agency and structure. Archer (1998: 202) suggests that there is a morphogenetic cycle of 'Structural Conditioning – Social Interaction – Structural Elaboration' where structure always predates the agents' actions which transform it, and structural elaboration, in turn, always post-date those actions. This view of the structure/agency problem allows critical realists to identify structural factors that function as constraints upon people's freedoms and to develop strategic uses of peoples' freedoms for social transformation. As a result, critical realists' axiological assumptions stem from acknowledging that one's knowledge of reality is a product of social conditioning and cannot be separated from the social actors involved (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, critical realists try to be aware of how their own sociocultural backgrounds and experiences might affect their research. They aim to minimise their biases and be as objective as possible. They do this by reflecting consciously on their impact on the respondents and research environment (Proctor, 1998).

Considering the above, it is necessary to acknowledge that I have a personal experience of a career crisis, the phenomenon under investigation. While personal experience with a researched phenomenon, if unaccounted for, has the potential to bias the researcher and lead to confirmatory bias, it can also be advantageous for the researcher. Personal experience can sensitise the researcher to the aspects of a phenomenon, which are deemed unimportant by other researchers lacking such experience (Unger, Draper and Pendergrass, 1986). My firsthand experience of a career crisis led me to think of how self-discrepancy can be an integral part of a psychological crisis, and how crisis intensity may interact with message framing. Thus, while my past career crisis experience most certainly affected my interpretations of my literature review and hypotheses, in my view, its effect was largely inspiring rather than limiting. In addition, my personal experience impacted how I interacted

with my research participants and the type of questions I asked. There were times when I drew on my experience during interviews to encourage participants to share their opinions on sensitive topics. My experience with the phenomenon helped me stay highly empathetic toward my research participants and aided the process of building rapport with them.

It is important to admit that, as an agent, I am being shaped by the structure I have been living in. That is, my experience of a career crisis as a university-educated middle-class person is likely to be different from the career crisis experience of a working-class person with no higher educational degree. However, the structure also, to a great extent, defined the type of research participants I had access to (i.e., other university-educated middle-class young adults). Thus, since my research participants and I shared similar educational and economic privileges, my lack of insight into a career crisis from the perspective of other socio-economic classes was not a considerable disadvantage.

5.5 SUMMARY

In conclusion, the present thesis is guided by critical realist ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Being a critical realist, I believe that, while a single objective reality exists, it may not always be observable; and, when it is observable, there may be multiple perceptions of that reality. Consequentially, this belief shapes my view on what constitutes valid knowledge and how knowledge about reality can be obtained. Specifically, knowledge is never exhaustive and always fallible. It is socially constructed, and therefore there is no 'objective truth'. Theories should be questioned, tested, and contested (Danermark *et al.*, 2001). Subsequently, those theories that have greater explanatory power should be seen as the best knowledge about reality that is available at the moment.

As for approaches to obtaining knowledge, it must be pointed out that while qualitative and quantitative research approaches are both compatible with CR, several prominent critical realists have opposed the use of statistical analysis and experiments, especially in the social sciences. They criticise quantitative methods for reinforcing the epistemic fallacy, that is reducing what is to what we know about it. However, as evident from the above discussion, critical realists do use statistical techniques and experiments, but they do so with a different understanding of causality and causal explanation compared with positivists (Porpora, 2015). Instead of studying empirical events and focusing on identifying causal linkages between events, critical realists aim to discover the underlying mechanisms and structures that create those empirical events in the first place (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Reed, 2005; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). Overall, as a critical realist, I see statistical results as the empirical manifestations of proposed underlying causal mechanisms and hold that both variance- and process-based approaches are useful for investigating causality. I see these approaches as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Finally, CR axiology suggests that while structure and agency are separate entities, they are in a cyclical relationship where structure precedes agents' actions which in turn shape the structure. Therefore, a researcher's knowledge is a product of social conditioning. As a result, critical realists try to reflect on the effect their own socio-cultural backgrounds and experiences might have on their research. Hence, I have reflected on the impact that my past experience of a career crisis and my socio-economic background may have on the research. While potential challenges of having personal experience of the researched phenomenon have been identified (e.g., confirmatory bias), overall, my shared experience with research participants has been deemed beneficial for the present research. Specifically, my firsthand experience of a career crisis inspired me to develop original research hypotheses, helped me

stay highly empathetic toward my research participants, and aided the process of building rapport with them.

Having discussed the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions of my research, it is now necessary to turn to the approach to theory development that has been adapted in the present thesis.

6. APPROACH TO THEORY DEVELOPMENT

6.1 RETRODUCTION

The present thesis adopts the retroductive approach to theory development. Overall, there are two modes of inference that are commonly associated with CR – retroduction and abduction (Scambler, 2001). Abduction and retroduction are often used as synonyms (Chiasson, 2005; Mirza *et al.*, 2014). Both abduction and retroduction are cyclical in their nature (Proctor, 1998), and involve moving back and forth between data and theory, combining inductive and deductive reasoning (Sæther, 1998; Suddaby, 2006). However, the difference is that abduction is concerned with analysing and explaining data that fall outside an initial premise or theoretical frame through reconceptualisation, whereas retroduction is focused on reconstructing the conditions (causal mechanisms) that made something possible (Danermark *et al.*, 2001; Meyer and Lunnay, 2013). Although both abduction and retroduction are argued to be used by CR, it is retroduction that is typically seen as a distinctly CR mode of inference (Reed, 2005; McEvoy and Richards, 2006; Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013).

One of the main goals of the present thesis is to identify reasons as to why career sufferers may be more sensitive to positively or negatively framed career support persuasive messages.

The retroduction research strategy appears to be the most suitable and productive in this instance. Retroduction is a mode of inference in which a possible explanation is inferred by reasoning backwards from the phenomenon under investigation and asking ‘What made this possible?’ (Reed, 2005; Bergene, 2007; Blaikie, 2010; Price, 2016). In other words, retroduction is the process of mental analysis that takes place sometime after the experience, when we work ‘backwards from our experiences to the underlying reality that might have caused them’ (Saunders *et al.*, 2016: 139). This, in turn, justifies ‘a causal-explanatory methodology’, the goal of which is to explain consumer behaviour instead of merely predicting, deconstructing or describing it (Reed, 2005: 1631). Retroduction aims at identifying the underlying causal mechanisms or structures that generate regularities under certain conditions (Reed, 2005). This is done through the process of development of hypothetical models, their testing and evaluation.

Unlike induction and deduction, retroduction is not the move from particular to general or from general to particular, but from concrete to abstract (Bergene, 2007). Thus, retroduction allows researchers to move beyond the level of reality at which a specific phenomenon occurs (Lawson, 2003), thereby developing ‘an explanation that embraces ontological depth’ (Downward and Mearman, 2006: 88). Furthermore, compared with deduction and induction, retroduction is more flexible when it comes to methods of data collection (Proctor, 1998). It allows researchers to use different and complementary methods when they are searching for answers to their research questions. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined to discover causal mechanisms that produce certain events (Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013).

6.2 SUMMARY

In summary, the retroductive approach to theory development in the present thesis is consistent with the ontological and epistemological assumptions stated earlier (Sections 5.2 and 5.3), as well as the research goals. It embraces ontological depth and is also appropriate for the investigation of causal mechanisms behind the relationship between career crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages. Retroductive approach allows for both variance-based and process-based explanations of causal relationships, which enables the CR logic of the thesis. Retroduction supports the development of hypothetical models, their testing and evaluation, which is the aim of the thesis. Finally, retroduction is compatible with the mixed methods research design that is adopted in the thesis. The latter will be discussed in the following pages.

7. RESEARCH DESIGN

7.1 MIXED METHODS RESEARCH DESIGN JUSTIFICATION

This thesis adopts a mixed methods research design. Mixed method research (MMR) can be defined as ‘the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration’ (Johnson *et al.*, 2007: 123). In the past decades, MMR has become increasingly common (Bryman, 2006; Cohen *et al.*, 2017). Although MMR is implicitly encouraged in the marketing discipline (Woodruff, 2003), mixed methods marketing studies are still rare (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Davis *et al.*, 2011). The

lack of mixed methods studies in marketing may be due to the historical favouring of quantitative research in the marketing field (Hunt, 1994; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Davis *et al.*, 2011), obstacles in publishing mixed methods studies (e.g., difficulties in the review process, journal page constraints that make it difficult to report the results of MMR) (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Davis *et al.*, 2011; Harrison and Reilly, 2011), the resources required for conducting MMR (e.g., time, money, and expertise) (Davis *et al.*, 2011; Harrison and Reilly, 2011), or the lack of exemplary MMR that would serve as templates (see Bryman, 2006). Despite the historical dominance of quantitative studies in marketing journals, marketing scholars increasingly argue that it is necessary to move away from reliance on a single paradigm (Deshpande, 1983; Hunt, 1994), and that more mixed methods studies should be conducted to move the discipline forward (Davis *et al.*, 2011). This is the call the present thesis aims to address.

The decision to employ a mixed methods research design (MMRD) in the current project stems from my philosophical stance (i.e., critical realism) and the nature of the research goals. As discussed in the previous chapter, CR ontology holds that reality is stratified and complex. CR epistemology, in turn, suggests that, although there are ‘demi-regularities’ (Lawson, 1997) and patterns in the social world, the causal mechanisms behind them are rarely directly observable and depend on contextual factors. MMRD aligns well with CR ontology and epistemology in that it ‘answers complex research questions more meaningfully, combining particularity with generality, “patterned regularity” with “contextual complexity”, insider and outsider perspectives (emic and etic research), focusing on the whole and its constituent parts, and the causes of effects’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2017: 33).

As for the research goals, they are: (1) to explore the relationship between career crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages, (2) to test that relationship, and (3) to

examine the process that may underly the relationship. Since experimentation allows one to deliberately manipulate the environment to establish the effect of one variable on another (Field and Hole, 2003), experiment appears to be the most suitable method for achieving the second (and to some extent the third) research goal. However, since no reliable scales or measurement instruments have been found for the phenomenon under investigation (career-related crisis), a qualitative stage is needed to develop a quantitative instrument. In addition, as discussed in the Research Philosophy chapter, although the unique strength of experiments is in providing causal descriptions (i.e., identifying causal relationships), experiments do less well at providing causal explanations (i.e., explaining mechanisms behind those causal relationships). Therefore, in the current thesis, to discover a mechanism behind the relationship between career-related crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages, a hypothetical model is developed and subsequently tested by causal modelling, which helps to achieve the third research goal.

Overall, in this thesis, the qualitative stage allows: 1) to develop a crisis assessment instrument (i.e., vignettes) and experimental stimuli that are to be used in the subsequent quantitative studies; 2) to refine research hypotheses; 3) to obtain qualitative insight into the problem under investigation and add context for quantitative findings; and 4) to improve the internal validity of the research. Therefore, adding qualitative data enhances the subsequent quantitative design, which means that the qualitative stage is not merely supplementary to the quantitative one, but complementary as well. The quantitative phase, on the other hand, plays a major role in meeting the research goals and allows for more robust conclusions. The specifics of the adopted MMRD are discussed in the following sections.

7.2 DESIGN DESCRIPTION

The thesis employs an embedded mixed methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011) consisting of one qualitative study (19 semi-structured interviews) and two quantitative studies (online surveys combined with experiments). Each of these studies is further discussed later in separate sections. Embedded designs are mixed methods designs that employ either concurrent or sequential data collection with an unequal priority for each strand, and where data from one of the strands plays a supporting role (Harrison and Reilly, 2011). In the present thesis, the temporal relationship between the qualitative and quantitative strands is sequential. That is, the strands are implemented in two distinct phases, with the collection and analysis of the qualitative data preceding the collection and analysis of the quantitative data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). The qualitative data is embedded within the larger quantitative design to enhance it (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). More specifically, the qualitative phase is used in a secondary role to initiate the preliminary exploration of the phenomenon under investigation before the experiments and to develop experimental stimuli and crisis assessment tools (i.e., vignettes). The quantitative phase, on the other hand, is given a higher priority since it is more suitable for addressing the project's goals and questions, allowing for more robust conclusions.

Thus, the qualitative and quantitative strands are mixed at the level of design, and there is a direct interaction between the two strands (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). In other words, the qualitative strand informs the design of the quantitative strand. The results from the qualitative and quantitative studies are presented separately. Finally, the research is empirical with the data coming from primary sources.

7.3 CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING MIXED METHODS RESEARCH

Despite its numerous benefits, mixed methods research (MMR) is not without criticism and challenges. Mixed methods research design (MMRD) has several practical challenges when it comes to research implementation. First, MMRD requires more time and research skills from a researcher. Since, in this thesis, qualitative and quantitative stages have different weights, it was deemed realistic to complete this MMR within the time frame of a PhD project. It was acknowledged that the researcher would need to be familiar with both qualitative and quantitative data collection and data analysis techniques. In the past, the researcher had an opportunity to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with people who experienced a life crisis, and hence she was generally acquainted with data collection, data analysis and transcription techniques required for the qualitative phase of the present research. However, it has to be said that the researcher's quantitative data analysis skills needed further development. To address this problem, the researcher undertook specialist training in experimental design and advanced statistical analysis techniques.

There is also the challenge of data integration. Harrison and Reilly (2011:20) state that '[a] study that includes both data types without integration is merely a collection of methods'. For a strong mixed methods study, the decision of how to coherently integrate the data needs to be addressed (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Integrating different data formats from different methods associated with different world views can be challenging, and careful thought should be given to what is to be done if different methods produce conflicting results. According to Freshwater (2007: 140), '[t]here is little recognition of the impossibility of deciding between two or more competing interpretations; MMR does bring different perspectives to bear, but does it allow for competing interpretations to coexist, and therein undecidability?'. While the challenge of competing interpretations is acknowledged, it also must be noted that the critical

realist philosophy that guided the present thesis allowed for competing interpretations. That is, critical realist philosophy suggests that reality is complex and that multiple interpretations of a single observer-independent reality can (co-)exist (Easton, 2002; Bisman, 2010). Moreover, since the qualitative stand was mainly used to refine the hypotheses and to develop the quantitative instrument, it was not expected that the results from the qualitative strand would conflict with the results from the quantitative strand.

Another issue associated with MMR is the potentially poor rigour of one of the strands, specifically the qualitative one. It is very often that, in mixed methods marketing studies, the methods used to collect the qualitative data and interpret its meaning are barely mentioned, and manuscripts get published primarily based on the rigour of the quantitative strand (Woodruff, 2003). To address this problem in the present research, careful consideration was paid to the rigour of both strands. Although the qualitative strand has a lower priority than the quantitative strand, it was ensured that it meets the established quality requirement for qualitative research – such as trustworthiness and credibility (Mertens, 2011) – to the greatest possible extent.

7.4 SUMMARY

To conclude the discussion of the research design, the present thesis employs a sequential, embedded mixed methods research design (MMRD) consisting of a qualitative strand (19 semi-structured interviews) and a quantitative strand (two online surveys combined with experiments). The decision to employ an MMRD in the present project stems from my philosophical position as a critical realist that embraces the stratified (multi-layered) ontology and epistemological flexibility. The design choice is also supported by the nature of the

research goals, i.e., to explore, test, and explain a causal relationship between career crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages. The qualitative and quantitative strands are mixed at the level of design with a direct interaction between them. The qualitative strand is used to inform the quantitative design by developing a crisis assessment tool and experimental stimuli, and to refine the research hypotheses. It also provides context for the quantitative results and improves the internal validity of the research. A higher priority is given to the quantitative stand because it plays a major role in meeting the research goals and allows for more robust conclusions.

As discussed, MMRD's challenges include the time-consuming nature of the design, the breadth of research skills required, the difficulty of data integration, and the risk of poor rigour in one of the strands. In the present research, all these challenges are acknowledged and addressed. What follows is a more detailed account of the research strategies employed, and their strengths and weaknesses.

8. METHODS JUSTIFICATION

8.1 INTERVIEWS

8.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

As discussed above, the goal of the qualitative phase is to develop a crisis assessment tool (i.e., vignettes) and experimental stimuli that can be used in the subsequent quantitative studies. According to Harrison and Reilly (2011: 22), it is not uncommon for quantitative studies to use qualitative methods for scale construction, pre-tests and manipulation checks because 'simply asking research subjects their opinions is more diagnostic to researchers than

running multiple tests'. As per Section 1.4, no reliable scale for career-related crises has been found. Therefore, this study adopts crisis vignettes akin to the vignette used by Robinson and Wright (2013) in their study on crisis episodes in early adulthood and midlife. The vignettes in the present thesis are initially informed by the literature review, Robinson and Wright's (2013) vignettes, and the researcher's personal experience, and subsequently, they are amended in accordance with interviewees' experience. Vignettes can be a helpful tool to identify whether someone is or has been in crisis as well as to assess crisis severity. The reason for this approach is the scarcity of studies on career-related crises that could be used for the development of vignettes. To gather feedback on the crisis vignettes from crisis sufferers, interviews were the best method of inquiry as they enable detailed insights and feedback from participants. Focus groups have not been chosen as a research method here, because participants may be reluctant to talk about their crisis experience within a group of strangers.

The quantitative phase also requires positively and negatively framed advertisements as experimental stimuli. According to Belk (2017: 36), 'we are still nowhere near being able to clearly demonstrate just how advertising affects our consumption, especially at the level of the individual ad and the individual consumer'. The author argues that qualitative research could be of great help in understanding how consumers interpret and respond to advertisements. For example, depth interviews can assist in revealing how consumers 'read' ads, what ads mean to them, and how these meanings may affect their responses (Belk, 2017). Focus groups could also be helpful in understanding consumers' interpretations of ads because they may resemble naturally occurring social discussions. However, focus groups can be subject to problems such as moderator bias, individual people dominating discussions, and groupthink. As a result, when it comes to qualitative research on advertising, academic

journals seem to favour one-on-one depth interviews (Belk, 2017). Therefore, in this thesis, interviews are also used to ensure that the persuasive message stimuli designed by the researcher are interpreted in the way the researcher intended.

Thus, interviews are used to design crisis vignettes and develop positively and negatively framed career support persuasive messages. It has been decided that semi-structured interviews are the most suitable for the study purposes. Semi-structured interviews have been chosen over other types of interviews (i.e., structured and unstructured) because there are *specific* questions that need to be explored in *sufficient depth* in this thesis. Although it is also appropriate to use structured interviews to develop a scale or experimental treatment (Arsel, 2017), these types of interviews would not be the most suitable for the present research. Due to the lack of studies on career-related crisis, it is important to be open to the possibility of reviewing or refining the hypotheses. Structured interviews are typically used to confirm hypothesised propositions (Arsel, 2017), and this deductive approach to qualitative inquiry does not allow for the discovery of unobserved patterns or facts. This hypothetico-deductive nature of structured interviews also does not feel consistent with the critical realist stance I take. Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, are not feasible given the time constraints of a PhD thesis. Nor are they necessary here.

8.1.2 Zoom as a research medium

Due to the lockdown caused by COVID-19 in the country where the research was taking place (i.e., the UK), all interviews were conducted on Zoom videoconferencing platform. Zoom was chosen as a research tool because recent research has shown that researchers and research participants tend to rate it above similar videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Skype)

(Archibald *et al.*, 2019). It is considered to have a user-friendly interface, and its audio-video quality is at least as good as on other similar platforms. Most importantly, Zoom allows to securely record sessions without the use of third-party software (Archibald *et al.*, 2019) – a feature that is currently unavailable on other videoconferencing platforms and that is important for research projects. Another notable (although not unique) advantage of Zoom is its screen and file-sharing options that facilitate greater engagement. These are essential options for the present study because the study involves showing vignettes and persuasive messages to research participants.

Overall, synchronous online interviewing is commonly considered the next best (or even equally viable) option to face-to-face interviews (e.g., Hanna, 2012; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Lo Iacono *et al.*, 2016; Weller, 2017; Archibald *et al.*, 2019). It is cost-effective due to reduced travel expenses for the researcher and participants, it allows the researcher to easily reach participants in different geographical locations (Lo Iacono *et al.*, 2016; Weller, 2017), and is less disruptive in terms of rescheduling (Seitz, 2016). Most importantly, online interviewing allows the researcher and participants to stay in the location of their homes, which is crucial given the pandemic in the country of the research. Furthermore, when participants are at home while being interviewed, they are likely to be less worried about time and hence talk more (Lo Iacono *et al.*, 2016).

Unlike telephone or email interviews, synchronous online interviews also provide an opportunity to communicate with research participants in real time and see non-verbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions, which, in turn, allows to have more lively conversations with participants and helps to build rapport (Hanna, 2012; Archibald *et al.*, 2019). However, it is necessary to point out that, although it is possible to observe facial expressions and gestures in synchronous online interviews, these observations are only partial

and limited by the reach of the web camera (Seitz, 2016; Weller, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative to pay attention to the tone of voice and facial expressions of participants (Seitz, 2016). On the other hand, the intimate focus of web cameras on headshots may detract ‘attention from any diversions in either the participant or researcher’s locale enabling the (re)forging and/or strengthening of the connection’ (Weller, 2017: 617). In other words, videoconferencing makes people focus on each other’s faces which may create a more intimate feeling during the communication.

It must be acknowledged that online interviewing has the potential to lay projects open to self-selection bias, i.e., only people who are confident about their technological skills and have access to the Internet will volunteer to participate (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013). However, 93.6% of the UK population has access to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2020). In case of a slow internet connection, the participants of the present study would be offered to switch off their cameras and proceed in the ‘audio only’ mode. Moreover, since the study was focused on young adults, it was expected that most people in the target population not only had access to a stable internet connection but were also experienced users of videoconferencing platforms.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that participants could still experience individual technical difficulties (e.g., outdated hardware, software incompatibility, poor web camera/microphone functionality, or low device battery). Although it was virtually impossible to predict and avoid all potential technical problems, several measures were taken by the researcher and participants to minimise the possibility of disruptions during the interviews. Specifically, the researcher tested Zoom with her supervisors during one of the monthly supervisory meetings to familiarise herself with the software interface and to make sure that her Internet connection and web camera were adequate for online interviews. The supervisory meeting was chosen for

this purpose because its average length (~ 40-60 mins) is comparable with the expected length of the interviews (~ 60 mins). Also, it provided an opportunity to ask more experienced researchers on the features of the software. In advance of the interviews, participants were also asked to ensure they had a stable internet connection, a fully charged computer or smartphone, a functional web camera, and a quiet space where they would not be disturbed during the interview.

Another potentially challenging aspect of online interviewing is rapport building. Previous research has suggested that building rapport in synchronous online interviews may be more challenging compared with face-to-face interviews (Seitz, 2016). Rapport building has been argued to be even more challenging for online interviews on sensitive or personal topics due to the loss of intimacy and personal connection. Physical distance and lack of eye contact (i.e., looking at the person's eyes on the screen does not create the impression of being looked in the eyes for the recipient) can create an emotional barrier (Seitz, 2016; Weller, 2017). Furthermore, technical glitches in the middle of someone's personal story may result in an abrupt feeling. Also, participants may be reluctant to answer sensitive or personal questions due to suspicions related to the video element of videoconferencing (Seitz, 2016). However, it has been argued that interviewing through videoconferencing platforms can facilitate rapport building by decreasing the 'pressure of presence' and increasing the sense of ease with the mode and setting (Weller, 2017). Participants tend to see online interviewing as less formal and anxiety-inducing than face-to-face interviewing. They are likely to feel more relaxed because they are 'in their own space separate from the researcher' (Weller, 2017: 618). Seitz (2016) suggests that online interviewing might be especially beneficial for introverted or shy participants. Introverts are likely to feel more comfortable discussing personal topics in front of a screen than in person. Finally, participants may feel more at ease because research props

(e.g., the recording equipment and interview schedule) are not visible to them (Seitz, 2016). Considering the above, it can be said that rapport building in synchronous online interviewing is a complex issue. Online interviewing has its challenges as well as opportunities for rapport, and arguably, it is the researcher's interviewing skills that play a definitive role in this matter.

8.2 EXPERIMENTS

8.2.1 *Online experiments*

The quantitative phase consists of two sequential quantitative studies. The first study is used to pre-test the main survey and aids in making several methodological decisions. The second study aims to test the conceptual model of the present thesis. Both quantitative studies involve self-report online surveys with an experimental component. Since the quantitative stage aims to test hypotheses and infer causal relationships between research variables, online surveys incorporating experiments are deemed most appropriate for this stage. Online experiments allow to investigate cause-and-effect relationships by manipulating causal or independent variables in a controlled fashion (Malhotra *et al.*, 2012).

Before discussing the advantages of online experiments over lab experiments, it needs to be pointed out that experiments, in general, are a popular research method among advertising researchers (Chang, 2017). Firstly, advertising research has been closely affiliated with and influenced by research in the media effect and consumer psychology fields. Historically, both of those research fields have tended to favour experiments for their power to identify the causal effects of exposure to different stimuli, including persuasive messages. Secondly, experimental designs help demonstrate the causal effects of *different* messages and appeals, which have valuable implications for advertising practitioners. Specifically, the results can help make decisions about what types of messages to employ or which appeals to use.

Turning now to online experiments, i.e., experiments that use ‘the Internet to administer stimuli, collect data, and recruit participants’ (Bryant *et al.*, 2004: 109), they were preferred to lab experiments for several reasons. First and foremost, the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence meeting participants face-to-face was problematic for safety reasons. Putting aside the exceptional circumstances in which the research was conducted, online experiments generally have many advantages over lab experiments. Online experiments offer cost savings of person-hours, lab space, equipment, and administration (Reips, 2000). It is also easier to persuade people to participate in online experiments than to come to a laboratory. Additionally, online experiments provide access to hard-to-reach participants all over the world, and hence allow for increased sample size and statistical power (Bryant *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, increased heterogeneity of participants and variability of times and settings increase external validity (Bryant *et al.*, 2004). Another advantage of online experiments is that they are normally completed in a ‘natural’ (i.e., non-laboratory) setting which can increase external and construct validity (Bryant *et al.*, 2004; Hooley *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, in online experiments, participants in one condition (e.g., control group) are unlikely to learn information that is intended for participants in another condition (e.g., treatment group), and hence the control and treatment groups of participants are unlikely to imitate each other (Bryant *et al.*, 2004). This increases internal validity, i.e., it helps to ensure that the change in a result is due to the treatment (Shadish *et al.*, 2002). Interactive controls (e.g., ‘branch’, ‘skip logic’, ‘timer’, and ‘randomiser’ options) are another significant advantage of online experiments over lab experiments. Interactive controls help to increase the uniformity of the procedure and improve internal validity (Birnbbaum, 2000; Bryant *et al.*, 2004). Compared with lab experiments, online experiments also have reduced experimenter influences (e.g., decreased evaluation apprehension and experimenter demand effects), which

increases construct validity (Bryant *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, it is logical to suggest that participants of online experiments are likely to have less inclination to impression management, compared with participants of lab experiments. Finally, online experiments also prevent respondents from submitting invalid responses and normally generate data that can be immediately downloaded into data analysis software, which increases the statistical conclusion validity of research.

Although online experiments have some considerable advantages over lab experiments, it is necessary to acknowledge that the former have their shortcomings. First, compared with lab experiments, online experiments typically have higher drop-out rates (Bryant *et al.*, 2004). Drop-out rates, however, can be reduced by presenting information about a monetary reward at the beginning of the online experiment (Frick *et al.*, 2001; O'Neil *et al.*, 2003). Drop-out rates also can be reduced by using online panels (as was done in the present thesis) where all participants expect to be paid for their work and hence are financially motivated to complete their tasks. Second, the heterogeneity of experimental settings may increase random error, which, in turn, poses a threat to statistical conclusions (Bryant *et al.*, 2004). However, the added 'noise' created by having participants in different settings can be compensated for by the larger sample sizes that are normally achievable with Internet delivery (McGraw *et al.*, 2000). Third, online experiments give researchers less control over the experimental environment and how participants engage with the experiment (Hooley *et al.*, 2012). Because of the reduced or absent interaction of the experimenter with participants, experiment instructions may be misunderstood (Reips, 2002). This problem can be reduced by piloting the materials and collecting participant feedback, which was done in the current thesis. Fourth, participants tend to pay less attention in online experiments compared with lab experiments, but this again can be compensated by a large sample size (Rand, 2012). Fifth, internal validity

in online experiments can be undermined by multiple submissions from the same person (Bryant *et al.*, 2004). However, software that is used today to design and conduct online experiments normally has various settings that help prevent multiple submissions (e.g., the ‘Prevent Ballot Box Stuffing’ option on Qualtrics). Sixth, online experiments are susceptible to self-selection bias, which may pose a threat to external validity (Reips, 2000). This is acknowledged as a limitation of the present research.

To sum up, online experiments are believed to be most appropriate for the purposes of the present study. Online experiments, as any other research method, have certain disadvantages. Nevertheless, previous research has shown that online data is reliable, reasonably representative, valid, efficient, and cost-effective (Meyerson and Tryon, 2003; Buhrmester *et al.*, 2011; Suri and Watts, 2011; Rand, 2012). In direct replication studies, online experiments where participants were recruited through MTurk were found to be as valid – both externally and internally – as lab and field experiments (Paolacci, 2010; Horton *et al.*, 2011). In the present thesis, experiments were designed and conducted on Qualtrics online survey platform. This platform was chosen because it has all the necessary functionality for online experiments specified by Hooley *et al.* (2012): it is *adaptable* (offers enough flexibility and control over the experiment), *visible* (allows the researcher to see what is going on in the experiment), *enclosable* (provides control over access to the experiment), *recordable* (records experimental results), and *analysable* (produces data in a format that can be easily analysed by the researcher) (Hooley *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, choosing this platform is a pragmatic decision for at least two reasons. Firstly, the researcher is familiar with the platform’s interface and functions, hence using Qualtrics saves time on training. Secondly, the researcher’s university provides free access to this platform, which reduces data collection costs.

8.2.2 Between-subjects experiments

Experimental studies in this thesis employ a between-subjects design. Between-subjects design uses ‘separate groups of participants for each of the different conditions in the experiment’, which means each participant is tested one time only (Field and Hole, 2003: 70). Between-subjects designs decrease chances of practice and fatigue effects (Field and Hole, 2003). Unlike within-subjects designs, between-subjects designs also help to prevent possible carryover effects from one condition to another. Moreover, between-subjects designs reduce the risk that participants will figure out the goal of the study, which is one of the weaknesses associated with within-subjects designs (Geuens and De Pelsmacker, 2017). Additionally, between-subjects designs allow for more flexibility in terms of data analysis techniques. That is, while there is one general linear model for repeated designs, there are several versions for independent designs as well as greater opportunities in other models (e.g., regression).

Despite their advantages, between-subjects designs are not without disadvantages. One of the main disadvantages of between-subjects designs is that they are less sensitive to experimental manipulations and require more participants, compared with within-subjects designs (Field and Hole, 2003). Sometimes groups can have systematic differences on variables that are not manipulated experimentally, which makes it difficult to understand whether differences between the groups’ results are due to the uncontrolled systematically varying factors, the experimental manipulation, or both. It could be possible to decrease the chance of uncontrolled systematic differences by allocating participants to the conditions randomly (Field and Hole, 2003), which has been done in the present thesis. However, it is necessary to point out that the present study employs a quasi-experimental design, and therefore it lacks random assignment of participants to some of the conditions. Specifically, it is impossible to assign participants randomly to the mild and severe crisis conditions. It would

be challenging to manipulate crisis severity for both ethical and practical reasons. That is one of the limitations of the experimental studies in this project.

8.3 SUMMARY

In summary, the qualitative stand of the present thesis involves 19 online semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom videoconferencing platform. The quantitative stand is comprised of two online between-subjects experiments designed and conducted on Qualtrics online survey platform. The strength and weaknesses of the chosen research methods were discussed. Based on this discussion, it was concluded that the chosen methods are most optimal for the purpose of this project.

9. CHAPTER SUMMARY

To conclude this chapter, the present project is guided by critical realism (CR) research philosophy which is considered the most widely accepted version of realism in the social sciences (Easton, 2002; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010), one of the most appropriate philosophical bases for marketing and consumer research (e.g., Hunt, 1990; Perry *et al.*, 1999; Easton, 2002), and a middle way between interpretivism and positivism (Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013). CR reflects the researcher's worldview and is also consistent with the research goal of this thesis to uncover a possible causal mechanism behind the relationship between career crisis and career support message effectiveness.

CR's stratified ontology holds that there is a single objective reality, but it is very complex and constantly changing, with multiple mechanisms that interact with each other at different

levels. As a result, knowledge is never exhaustive and always fallible. Moreover, it is socially constructed and, therefore, there is no 'objective truth'. In terms of research methods, qualitative and quantitative research approaches are both compatible with CR. However, some prominent critical realists have opposed the use of statistical analysis and experiments, especially in the social sciences, for they reduce what is to what we know about it. Nevertheless, in Sections 5.3.3 and 5.3.4, it was demonstrated that critical realists do use statistical techniques and experiments, but they do so with a different understanding of causality and causal explanation compared with positivists (Porpora, 2015). Further, CR axiology suggests that while structure and agency are separate entities, they are in a cyclical relationship where structure precedes agents' actions which in turn shape the structure. This means that a researcher's knowledge is a product of social conditioning. Therefore, critical realists try to reflect on the effect their own sociocultural backgrounds and experiences might have on their research, which has been done by the researcher in the present thesis.

The present thesis employs the retroductive approach to theory development, i.e., an approach that is focused on reconstructing the conditions (causal mechanisms) that made something possible (Danermark *et al.*, 2001; Meyer and Lunnay, 2013). Retroduction embraces CR's ontological depth and is also appropriate for the investigation of causal mechanisms behind the relationship between career crisis and the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages. Thus, the retroductive approach to theory development is consistent with CR's ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as the research goals. Also, retroduction is compatible with the sequential, embedded mixed methods research design that is adopted in the thesis.

The current thesis consists of a qualitative strand and a quantitative strand, which are mixed at the level of design with a direct interaction between them. The qualitative strand is

comprised of 19 online semi-structured interviews and is used to inform the quantitative design by developing a crisis assessment tool and experimental stimuli, and to refine the research hypotheses. The quantitative strand consists of two online surveys combined with experiments. A higher priority is given to the quantitative stand because it plays a major role in meeting the research goals and allows for more robust conclusions.

PART III: STUDY 1

10.1 OBJECTIVES

Study 1 has two objectives. The first is to design three crisis vignettes that will be subsequently used in quantitative studies. One crisis vignette will provide the general description of a career crisis and help to assess whether research participants are currently in a career crisis. The two additional vignettes will provide the descriptions of the different stages of a career crisis (early vs. late), which will subsequently help to assess the severity of experiment participants' career crises. The second objective is to develop positively and negatively framed career support persuasive messages, which will be used as experimental stimuli in the subsequent quantitative studies.

10.2 SAMPLING

10.2.1 TARGET POPULATION

The target population of the qualitative study in this thesis was university-educated UK residents aged 20-39 years who were in a career-related crisis at the time of the study or had experienced a career-related crisis in the past. University-educated people have been chosen because of the availability of such participants to the researcher, and because they were likely to be familiar with the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., career crisis). Due to the dramatic expansion of higher education in the UK over the recent decades, a considerable number of people are overeducated (Sloane, Battu and Seaman, 1999; Dolton and Vignoles, 2000; Chevalier, 2003). According to a recent report by the Office for the National Statistics

(2021), 42.5 % of recent UK graduates work in non-graduate roles, which is likely to contribute to the difficulty of finding a satisfying job. Indeed, not being able to employ one's skills effectively at work was found to increase the likelihood of wanting to quit the job (CIPD, 2018). Moreover, it is plausible to suggest that the increasing number of university graduates makes the graduate job market more competitive, which, in turn, adds to the career-related stress and anxiety of young adults with university degrees. In addition, since employers increasingly filter applications by qualification level (CIPD, 2018), university-educated adults are more likely to have a greater number of career options to choose from, compared with people without a higher educational degree. This abundance of choices can contribute to confusion, stress, and anxiety about one's career direction – the so-called 'paradox of choice' (Schwartz, 2004).

The 20-39 age group, in particular, has been chosen because the phenomenon under investigation was a career-related crisis in early adulthood (for the justification of the chosen life stage, see Section 1.6). Although there are no strict age boundaries denoting early adulthood, developmental psychologists tend to define early adulthood as the age range of 20 to 39 (e.g., Golembiewski, 1978; Robinson *et al.*, 2017). It is acknowledged that people outside the identified age group can experience a career crisis. However, depending on their age, individuals may have different work experiences, perceived occupational security, level of income, financial obligations, coping processes and strategies, cognitive ability, and goal orientation in terms of gain versus loss (Folkman *et al.*, 1987; Ebner, Freund and Baltes, 2006; Trouillet *et al.*, 2011; Pavlova and Silbereisen, 2012; Hertel *et al.*, 2015; Strittmatter, Sunde and Zegners, 2020). Therefore, people in different life stages and age groups are likely to perceive, process, and cope with their career crisis in a different manner, which in turn could affect how they respond to career-related materials in the present research. Thus, due to

a large number of potentially confounding variables, conducting career crisis research across different age groups and life stages would be challenging and pose a risk of overgeneralised explanations. Moreover, investigating career crises across different age groups and developmental stages would increase the costs of the study and make it unfeasible. In addition, such a heterogenous sample might also lessen the likelihood of finding meaningful common themes during analysis (Robinson, 2014).

10.2.2 SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

To recruit research participants, convenience sampling was employed. Students and alumni from the researcher's university were recruited through the university portal, career services, and alumni relations team. It should be noted that convenience sampling is often considered the most common sampling technique – and the least desirable (Patton, 1990). For example, Marshall (1996: 523) describes it as ‘the least rigorous technique, involving the selection of the most accessible subjects’. Suri (2011: 72) states that researchers ‘must resort to convenience sampling as the last option’. Nevertheless, the fact that the sampling technique is the least costly in terms of effort, time, and money does not make it the least suitable for all studies. The decision regarding the suitability of a sampling strategy for a study should be made based on the target population and research questions.

Since convenience samples are relatively homogenous in terms of education, age, and life experiences (Sears, 1986; Cassese *et al.*, 2013), they are not suitable for studies with broad target populations (Robinson, 2014). Any (analytical) generalisations derived from such samples would be unwarranted in this case. However, in the present study, the target population (i.e., university-educated UK residents aged 20-39) was demographically narrow

and geographically local. Therefore, any analytical generalisations would be restricted to the local level, and hence more justifiable. Moreover, the aim of the study was to develop and test the crisis vignettes for the subsequent quantitative studies rather than make generalisations. Another reason to employ convenience sampling was that it would allow to reach the groups of people in which the concentration of individuals from the target population was high. Therefore, the sample derived through this sampling technique would be representative of the target population.

Participants were compensated with £10 Waterstones (bookshop) vouchers. £10 is the minimum value of a book voucher available at Waterstones. This compensation is just above the UK minimum hourly wage for people over 25 – £8.72 (GOV.UK, 2021). To lower the risk of undue inducement and biased enrollment in recruitment announcements, it was advertised that the voucher value was £7. Thus, participants expected to get a £7 Waterstones voucher and did not know that they would get a £10 voucher until the end of the interview.

10.2.3 SAMPLE AND SAMPLE SIZE

Some authors argue that an optimal sample size for thematic analysis (i.e., the type of analysis used in the present study) can be calculated a priori (e.g., Fugard and Potts, 2015), yet others argue that determining qualitative sample size a priori is inherently problematic because sample in qualitative research is typically emergent and adaptive (Byrne, 2015; Hammersley, 2015; Braun and Clarke, 2016; Sim *et al.*, 2018). While calculating a sample size a priori can be difficult, to plan the resources for the study, a provisional decision on the sample size had to be made (Robinson, 2014; Sim *et al.*, 2018). At the initial design stage, Robinson (2014) suggests using an approximate sample size range, instead of a fixed sample

size. As a result, it was decided that the approximate sample size range in the qualitative study of this thesis would be 10-20 interviews. The rationale for this range was that less than ten interviews were unlikely to allow for elicitation of common themes, whereas conducting and analysing more than 20 interviews could be challenging considering the scope, available funding and timeframe of the project. Furthermore, a bigger sample size would increase ‘the risk of failing to do justice to the complexity and nuance contained within the data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2016: 742).

The final sample consisted of 19 university-educated UK residents (30% males, 70% females; approximate age range 20-32). The demographics of the sample can be found in Table 5. This sample size was determined by the researcher’s subjective perception of theoretical saturation, which appears to be a prevailing criterion for sample size in exploratory qualitative research (Mason, 2010; Trotter, 2012). The key limitation of this approach is the fact that operationally defining saturation is challenging. Being based on the researcher’s subjective evaluation of saturation, the sample size may still not be optimal. Therefore, any conclusions derived from the analysis should and will be treated with caution.

Table 5. The demographics of the qualitative sample

No.	Gender	Age	Nationality	Education	Employment
1	Male	26	British	Part-time undergraduate student	Quantity Surveyor
2	Female	31	Bangladeshi	PhD Student	Unemployed
3	Female	26	British	Postgraduate taught (completed)	Head of sales and marketing for a franchise company
4	Male	25	British	Undergraduate (completed)	University fundraiser at a university alumni office
5	Male	32	Indian	PhD Student	Unemployed
6	Female	29	British	Undergraduate (completed)	HR Administrator at an accountancy firm
7	Female	25	British	Undergraduate (completed)	Placements and Employability Officer at a university
8	Male	27	Cypriot	Postgraduate (completed)	A marketing executive for a skincare company
9	Female	21	British	Undergraduate (completed)	Unemployed. Recent Graduate
10	Male	Early 20's	Saudi/Pakistani	Undergraduate student	Unemployed
11	Female	23	British	Undergraduate student	Graduate job as an engineer
12	Male	20	British	Undergraduate student	Unemployed
13	Female	22	American	Postgraduate student	Unemployed
14	Female	25	Turkish	Postgraduate (completed)	Research Assistantship at a university
15	Female	Early 20's	British	Undergraduate student	Unemployed
16	Female	21	British	Undergraduate student	Unemployed
17	Female	25	British	Undergraduate (completed)	Primary school teacher
18	Female	24	British	Undergraduate (completed)	Assistant student recruitment officer at a university
19	Female	31	Vietnamese	PhD (completed)	Associate Lecturer

10.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The project received ethical approval from the university's ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. Ethical considerations have been taken into account at all stages of the research process to avoid any potential harms that might be inflicted upon the interviewees or the interviewer. These ethical considerations include informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the interviewer's potential impact on the interviewees and vice versa (Sanjari *et al.*, 2014).

Prior to the interview, the information sheet (Appendix A) and the interview consent form (Appendix B) were emailed to the study participants. The participants were given enough time to read the documents thoroughly and understand the purpose of the interview and what it would involve. The information sheet explicitly stated what sort of potential risks the interview might pose for people with mental health issues. It is acknowledged that people experiencing a career crisis are likely to experience temporary vulnerability. Nevertheless, since no evidence was found to suggest that a career crisis impaired mental capacity, the research participants were deemed capable of assessing the potential risks the interviews might pose for their mental health. Moreover, the informed consent form informed the study's participants about their right to stop and leave the interview at any point without giving a reason. Right before the interview, participants were asked to sign and return the information sheet and interview consent form to the researcher via email. In addition, before each interview, the researcher reminded the interviewees of: (i) the purpose of the interview and what it would involve; (ii) their rights (e.g., the right to withdraw from the study anytime they want), and (iii) how data would be used and protected.

In the process of the interview, the researcher constantly monitored the interviewees' emotional states and reactions to interview questions. None of the questions seemed to make interviewees feel uncomfortable. However, if that had happened, the researcher would have changed the topic or moved to the next question. None of the participants felt unwell during the interview. If that had happened, the interview would have been terminated immediately, and the participant would have been referred by the researcher towards the University's counselling system (for a member of staff or a student) or a volunteer counsellor at Carrs Lane Counselling Centre for further support. Carrs Lane is a counselling service funded by donations that typically operates for a nominal fee. Additionally, the interview consent form and participant information sheet also included details of the abovementioned services as well as other helpful resources that participants could consider in case if they experienced any mental health problems after the interview.

It is also necessary to point out that, since the crisis under investigation was related to one's career rather than more sensitive problems (e.g., divorce, bereavement), participants seemed comfortable talking about it. Furthermore, considering the overload of mental health support services in the UK and difficulties with obtaining counselling sessions, participants were likely to use the interview as a chance to share their problems with someone and feel better after the interview rather than worse. Participants seemed to find their interviews helpful and cathartic, which is consistent with existing literature on the experiences of research participants in studies with a sensitive focus (Griffin *et al.*, 2003; Decker *et al.*, 2011; Alexander *et al.*, 2018). The study's participants reported that they benefited through an opportunity to reflect and learn something about themselves, feeling that they were helping others, and realising that there were many other people who were going through similar experiences.

The potential impact of the interviews on the researcher has been thought about fully at the study design stage. Due to the previous experience of interviewing people in crisis, the researcher was fully aware of the potential challenges she could face during her interviews (e.g., interviewees getting emotional and hearing about upsetting or distressing experiences in an interviewee's life) and how those challenges could affect her emotional and physical well-being. Therefore, her decision to conduct interviews was informed and weighted. Her well-being was not harmed by the interviews.

10.4 DATA COLLECTION

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. To avoid equipment failure during an interview – one of the common pitfalls in qualitative data collection (Easton, McComish and Greenberg, 2000) – all equipment was checked before interviews. Participants were allowed to choose any interview date and time that suited them. On average, the interviews were one hour long. The interview schedule consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions. To facilitate more informative questions, a higher priority was given to open-ended questions. A small number of pilot interviews (~ 2 interviews) were conducted with people from the researcher's network to make sure that research participants would not experience any difficulty with understanding interview questions, and that they would interpret the questions in the way that was originally intended by the researcher. Each interview started with warm-up questions ('ice-breakers'), and then the interviewer proceeded to demographic questions. After that, the main questions were asked.

In the main part of the interview, first, interviewees were asked to describe their career crisis. Then, they were presented with a general crisis vignette, which had been adopted from

Robinson's (2015) study on the quarter-life crisis and slightly modified in accordance with the focus of the present research. The vignette provided a description of a career crisis and had the following content:

“A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more difficult, stressful than normal, during which you struggle to cope. A crisis is also an important turning point in your life due to challenging changes that occur during it. Crisis episodes typically last for a year or two but may be shorter or longer. Some people in their 20s or 30s may experience a crisis related to their careers. This crisis can manifest itself through a feeling of being confused about one's career direction, or struggles to obtain a desired job, or feeling trapped in an unsatisfying job”.

Interviewees were asked to provide their feedback on the accuracy of the vignette. Then, participants were asked to reflect on how their career crisis had been developing. They were asked to try to identify distinct stages of their crisis. Next, participants were presented with the vignettes of the early and late stages of a crisis and asked to provide their feedback on the accuracy of the vignettes.

The early-stage crisis vignette was as follows:

“When you were studying at university, you expected that shortly after graduation (in 2-3 months) you would find a full-time job that would be satisfying and personally meaningful. This job would not only pay well, but also allow you to reach your full potential and make a difference. However, in reality, none of those expectations were fulfilled. It has been 4 months since your graduation, and you are still struggling to find a job that would make you happy and generally feel confused about your career direction. All your job applications have been unsuccessful so far, and you find yourself getting more and more anxious about your future. Meanwhile, all your friends seem to have great jobs that they are passionate about, and this makes you feel like you are falling behind”.

The late-stage crisis vignette was as follows:

“When you were studying at university, you expected that shortly after graduation (in 2-3 months) you would find a full-time job that would be satisfying and personally meaningful. This job would not only pay well, but also allow you to reach your full potential and make a difference. However, in reality, none of those expectations were fulfilled. It has been 12 months since your graduation, and you are still struggling to find a job that would make you happy and feel very confused about your career direction. Meanwhile, all your friends seem to have great jobs they are passionate about, and this fuels your feeling of inadequacy. You suffer from depression and panic attacks. You feel helpless”.

After being shown the vignettes, participants were shown promotion- and prevention-oriented messages related to their crisis theme (i.e., career). Similar to existing framing studies (Aaker and Lee, 2001; Louro, Pieters and Zeelenberg, 2005), promotion and prevention foci in the messages were manipulated by using language emphasising one or the other. Specifically, the messages emphasised either promotion (e.g., getting a dream job) or prevention (e.g., being unemployed or trapped in a hated job) benefits of using the promoted service (Figures 3 and 4, respectively). Participants were asked to choose the message that they liked more and that was more likely to motivate them to use the service that was promoted in the message. Then, they were asked to identify differences between those messages (manipulation check) and explain their message choice. Where necessary, probing and prompting were done. Closer to the end of the interview, the researcher asked neutral questions to avoid leaving participants in ‘a state of personal disquiet’ (Arksey and Knight, 1999: 98). At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they wished to add anything to what they had already said. After that, they were thanked and debriefed.

Figure 3. The promotion-oriented ad (Study 1: Interviews)



STILL LOOKING FOR A JOB THAT DOES NOT FEEL LIKE WORK?
WANT YOUR JOB TO BE PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL AND EXCITING?
WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU FIND YOUR DREAM JOB!

MDJ IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.MDJ.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Figure 4. The prevention-oriented ad (Study 1: Interviews)



CONFUSED ABOUT YOUR CAREER DIRECTION?
FEELING TRAPPED IN A DULL JOB? FACING UNEMPLOYMENT?
WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU SAY GOODBYE TO THESE PROBLEMS!

MDJ IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.MDJ.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

10.5 TRANSCRIPTION

All interviews were audio- and video-recorded using Zoom's 'recording' option. To transcribe the interviews, a standardised syntax for encoding (adopted from Poland [1995]) was used (APPENDIX C). To avoid transcription errors, the researcher was the interviewer and the transcriber in the project (Easton, McComish and Greenberg, 2000). This helped to ensure the adequate quality of transcription, given that the researcher had first-hand knowledge from her involvement in the interview process, the advantage of taking part in both verbal and nonverbal exchanges with the interviewees, and expertise in the interview subject (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006).

During the interviews, the interviewer allowed participants to say anything that they deemed relevant and tried not to interrupt them to avoid losing any valuable data that could emerge from the reflections of the interviewees. However, in the process of the transcription, the researcher was reflexive and thought of what depth and scope of transcription would be practical with respect to the way in which the data would be analysed and used. It was anticipated that the data would be analysed by means of thematic analysis (template analysis), hence the primary goal of the transcription was to 'present the data in codifiable units of meaning' rather than 'to capture the narrative qualities and voice of the participant' (Bird, 2005: 245). According to Halcomb and Davidson (2006: 40), '[t]he use of analysis techniques such as thematic or content analysis seeks to identify common ideas from the data and, therefore, does not necessarily require verbatim transcripts'.

As a result, the transcription was selective (i.e., irrelevant parts were not transcribed), and some highly detailed notations (e.g., rising or falling tone) were sometimes omitted. The researcher was also selective about the interjections she noted. According to MacLean *et al.*

(2004), a detailed account of interjections can detract attention from the interviewees' words and make them sound less articulate than they actually were. Therefore, only those interjections that, in the researcher's opinion, could contribute to a better understanding of the interviewees' state, mood, and feelings were noted. Nevertheless, the researcher still tried to capture as much detail as possible (e.g., body language, pauses, false starts, and emphasis on specific words) and strike a balance between accuracy and efficiency.

10.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Template analysis was used to analyse the data. 'Template analysis is a style of thematic analysis that balances a relatively high degree of structure in the process of analysing textual data with the flexibility to adapt it to the needs of a particular study' (King, 2012: 426). The central idea of this analysis is the development of a coding template based on a subset of the data, which is subsequently applied to more data, revised, and refined. Template analysis is relatively flexible with regard to the format and style of the template that is designed. In contrast to some other forms of thematic analysis, template analysis does not suggest a fixed number of coding levels. It also does not require a clear distinction between descriptive and interpretive themes, nor a specific position for each type of theme in the coding hierarchy. Moreover, unlike more generic forms of thematic analysis (e.g., Braun and Clarke 2006) where theme definitions are produced at the late stage of the analysis, template analysis allows to develop theme definitions at the initial template stage (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). Since the present study has certain a priori interests (i.e., themes), it is preferable to use the type of analysis that allows having pre-defined themes. In addition, template analysis is compatible with the kind of realist qualitative research that is focused on discovering the underlying

causal mechanisms of events and strives for researcher objectivity as well as seeks to demonstrate coding reliability (King, 2012). Thus, this type of analysis is consistent with the critical realist epistemology adopted in the present thesis.

Before carrying out template analysis, four tentative, theoretically informed, a priori themes were identified (Table 6). This approach is common for template analysis conducted from a critical realist stance (King and Brooks, 2007).

Table 6. A priori themes in the template analysis

A priori theme	Description
The causes of a career crisis	Commentaries on the major theme of a crisis (e.g., unsatisfying job, unemployment, and confusion about a career direction)
The effect of a crisis	Psychological, physiological, and behavioural effects of crisis. The evaluation of the accuracy of the crisis vignettes.
The development of a crisis	Crisis stages, development over time, intensity. The evaluation of the accuracy of crisis stage vignettes.
Career support advertisements	Commentaries on the ads

Next, following the process suggested by Brooks *et al.* (2015), template analysis was carried out as follows:

1. Becoming familiar with the data to be analysed. Reading through a subset of transcripts.
2. Conducting initial coding of the data, utilising a priori themes.
3. Organising emerging themes into clusters and hierarchical relationships.
4. Designing an initial coding template.
5. Applying the initial template to more data, revising, and refining as necessary.
6. Finalising the template and applying it to the complete data set.

The data was coded by means of NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software. The final template can be found in Table 7.

What follows is the analysis of the template themes in terms of their implications for the quantitative design, as the core goals of this study were to inform the development of the vignettes and ads for the purposes of the subsequent quantitative studies.

Table 7. Final template analysis structure

1. CAUSES OF CRISIS

- 1.1 Feeling trapped in an unsatisfying job
- 1.2 Being unable to obtain a desired job
- 1.3 Being uncertain about a career direction

2. THE EFFECT OF A CAREER CRISIS

(The numbers in parentheses represent the number of participants that mentioned the effect)

2.1 Psychological domain

- 2.1.1 Anxiety (11)
- 2.1.2 Depression (8)
- 2.1.3 Diminished self-esteem (6)
- 2.1.4 Feeling lost (9)
- 2.1.5 Stress (13)
- 2.1.5 Helplessness (5)

2.2 Behavioural domain

- 2.2.1 Voluntary reduction in social interaction (7)
- 2.2.2 Reduced physical activity (5)
- 2.2.3 Maladaptive coping behaviours (2)

2.3 Physiological domain

- 2.3.1 Sleep problems (5)
- 2.3.2 IBS (2)

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CAREER CRISIS

- 3.1 Linear development vs. cyclical development
- 3.2 Multiple career crisis

4. CAREER SUPPORT PERSUASIVE MESSAGES (STIMULI DEVELOPMENT)

- 4.1 Feelings evoked by the messages
- 4.2 The description of a desired job
- 4.3 The description of an undesired job

10.6.1 CAUSES OF CRISIS

The general crisis vignette described a career crisis as follows: ‘This crisis can manifest itself through a feeling of being confused about one’s career direction, or struggles to obtain a desired job, or feeling trapped in an unsatisfying job’. Interview findings demonstrate that a career crisis is indeed often triggered by one of the described situations. Some interviewees suggested that the cause of their crisis was being stuck in an unrewarding, meaningless, dull, and stressful job. For example, Participant 1, who is a 26-year-old quantity surveyor in a construction consultancy firm, described his feelings as follows:

‘I can deal with discomfort, but there's a level of comfort that I want to reach. And I simply can't reach it in this job, where... You know, it's (a?) persistent... err ...worry about things all the time, about your performance in it. ///// It's just a real deep desire just not to do it, essentially. Just to not... Just to not be in the room half the time... Just to be... Just to be thinking “I'm wasting my time”. I just feel like I'm just wasting a lot of time when I'm there. Erm... You know... Yeah, and I don't like wasting my time. Life is pretty short. I've already wasted a lot of my time doing this job, so...’ (Participant 1).

Dissatisfaction with one’s job was not only caused by the nature of the job itself but also by the working environment. An unsatisfying job was commonly described as a job where one felt unappreciated and exploited. For example, Participant 8, a 27-year-old digital marketing executive in a growing skincare company, explained:

‘I see that the crisis comes when I am stressed. When I feel unappreciated or feel that I do tasks that are beyond my scope ///// You're just a machine. They just want you to be a machine. ///// So, you know, I just get the feeling that I can never fulfil their needs. Because they always want something more’ (Participant 8).

Participant 6 (a 29-year-old HR administrator at an accountancy firm), who used to be a tutor at a secondary school, also experienced a career crisis because she felt unappreciated at her workplace. She spent a considerable amount of time and money to complete various

qualifications required to get the type of teaching job in which she was interested. However, whenever the position she wanted became vacant, her candidacy was rejected despite her having all the necessary qualifications. She tried changing the school. In a new school, she felt that she was not heard whenever she tried to share her ideas or suggestions on how to improve teaching or pastoral care practices. Eventually, the feeling of being unappreciated, as well as a substantial decline in mental health, made her leave the education sector:

‘And they said “No”. I said “Okay. Well, I feel very undervalued”. And xxxx, the business manager said: “You don't understand the meaning of the word ‘undervalued’”///// And, so I thought “I'm gonna get out of education”. And that, to me, was a big blow, a BIG career crisis, because this is what I'd spent five-six years really working towards. X paid for my courses, doing evening classes, reading around, you know, giving it my own time both in work and outside work. So, it was a really, really big blow. Really big blow. Because I thought “What can I do now? I've spent all these months and years building this, building my portfolio of resources, and it's useless. What's the point?”’. (Participant 6).

While some interviewees were stuck in an unsatisfying job, others struggled to get a job or internship, which negatively affected their self-esteem and well-being:

‘And I applied for like seven firms, and I got rejected from all. So, that sent me in a very deep- in a very, very dark place’ (Participant 10, a law student in his early 20s).

Another common cause of crisis is experiencing uncertainty about one's career direction. While in education, young people have specific milestones they need to achieve. There is a structure to their life, which is shaped by assignment deadlines, years of study, and eventually graduation. Life after university, however, does not have that structure. Faced with an abundance of career options and the absence of a clear path to follow, people in the early stages of their careers tend to feel lost and stressed about their career direction. This problem seems to be particularly common among students and recent graduates, especially those who

complete degrees that are not directed at a particular occupation. For example, Participant 12, a 20-year-old History student at the end of her second year, stated:

'So, it's kind of a little bit stressful, a little bit concerning, 'cause I know that decisions have to be made soon, and how competitive it is to sort of get a job after university, as well. ///// I've not got that direction, which kind of worries me a little bit. I would like to have a bit of direction' (Participant 12).

Similarly, Participant 9, a recent philosophy graduate, explained:

'We do different degrees. I mean, he (boyfriend) does physics. And I did philosophy, so it is very different. There's a very specific scientific career that he wants to go down. Whereas my degree is a bit more ambiguous. So, I feel like that sort of adds to the confusion when you graduate' (Participant 9).

Finally, it is also possible for people to experience different types of career crises consecutively or even simultaneously. For example, a person can be stuck in an unsatisfying job and at the same time be uncertain about a career direction, which was the case for Participant 7, a 25-year-old former recruitment consultant in a recruitment agency:

'Yeah. I think there's like two parts to it. I was quite stressed, I'd say definitely. Because I didn't know what I wanted to do. ///// And I'd say like mental health-wise, looking at myself now, I didn't realise it at the time, but I was just so low. Going to work every day doing something I didn't want, finishing up being exhausted at the weekends and then going back. It was just [the?] time of being incredibly demotivated. ///// [There was?] a sense of unhappiness, where I was sort of like "Right, is it me? Do I need just to be more positive?". It was that kind of stage of just realising that I ACTUALLY didn't want to be there. Erm, then I'd say it was definitely a period of like stress and just "Okay, I don't want to be here, but what on earth am I going to do? I've got to pay rent. I want to do this. How's it gonna work?"' (Participant 7).

Thus, the interview findings suggest that the description of career crisis themes in the general crisis vignette, which is designed to assess whether a person is in a career crisis or not, is accurate.

10.6.2 THE EFFECT OF A CAREER CRISIS

According to the interview findings, a career crisis can affect the psychological, physiological, and behavioural domains of a person's life. Moreover, these effects were found to differ depending on the intensity of a crisis. This will subsequently be reflected in the vignettes that are designed to establish the severity of participants' crises.

10.6.2.1 *The psychological domain*

Among the common psychological consequences of a career crisis are anxiety and depression, which is consistent with the crisis literature (Rapoport, 1962; Miller and Iscoe, 1963; Halpern, 1973; Myer and Conte, 2006). In this study, the code 'anxiety' covered anxiety and worry. The code 'depression' covered depression (as a diagnosis or a general feeling), sadness, feeling demotivated, feeling low, and lack of energy. The exact words that were chosen by interviewees typically depended on the severity of their crisis. Those who experienced a severe crisis were slightly more inclined to use words such as depression and anxiety:

'And it made me really, really upset and really, really anxious' (Participant 6, a 29-year-old former form tutor at a secondary school).

'I remember feeling quite depressed and quite anxious' (Participant 16, a 21-year-old student in Education and History).

Those who experience a milder crisis were more inclined to use words such as sad and worried:

'-and suddenly you're feeling all sad' (Participant 3, a 26-year-old head of sales and marketing for a franchise company).

'I guess, I was quite worried for a bit, because I thought "Well, I can't quit my job, because I haven't got anything else to go into" and all of this' (Participant 4).

A feeling of being lost or confused and self-esteem issues were other common psychological consequences of a career crisis. Feeling lost or confused is especially characteristic of students, recent graduates and generally people who are at the beginning of their careers. These feelings can stem from the abundance of career options, the phenomenon also known as the 'paradox of choice' (Schwartz, 2004).

'But it was definitely like confusion, and like "Everyone knows what they want to do, why don't I know what I want to do?" etc.' (Participant 7).

The feeling of being lost can also be caused by not knowing what is causing the crisis. Some interviewees reported that it had taken them some time to understand the source of their unhappiness.

'I'm just always kind of happy, and I've taken things in my stride. And then suddenly, I was just feeling... Like... Like this feeling of being lost. I didn't quite know what it was. I just wasn't happy. And I was, like, getting tearful sometimes. I just didn't really know what it was' (Participant 3).

Self-esteem issues involved diminished self-esteem, insecurity, a feeling of inadequacy, questioning one's own abilities, and feeling ashamed. These issues were predominantly reported by people who were or had been in a crisis due to having difficulty obtaining a desired job. It is plausible to suppose that people who fail to obtain a desired job are more likely to doubt their abilities, skills, and job competence.

'I did struggle to find a job. It was very hard and very difficult. I went to interviews. They weren't going so great. It just (knocks?) your confidence down and the self-esteem' (Participant 17, 25-year-old primary school teacher).

In addition, previous research suggests that unemployed people tend to have a higher level of negative social comparison compared with employed people, which in turn affects self-esteem (Sheeran, Abrams and Orbell, 1995). This was in line with interviewees' statements:

'Regarding anxiety specifically focused on my career, a little bit I'd say around January time, when people were starting to say "Oh, I've got this grad job lined up!", "Oh, I've applied for this grad programme!", and I'm thinking "Oh my God, I've just started to get my dis in line". ///// It was when people were turning up to seminars like "Oh, I've got my interview for my grad job next week!", and it was like "Ooh, I'm not that organized. I have nothing xx. That's a bit worrying". That's when I started to be a bit more like "Okay, that's something that we need to really think about". And that's when I started emailing the careers team at uni and being like "Please help me!" (smiling)' (Participant 15).

Moreover, in the case of young adults, the issue of negative social comparison during a career crisis is likely to be substantially aggravated by social media use. Previous research demonstrated a relationship between social media use and negative social comparison (Feinstein *et al.*, 2013; de Vries and Kühne, 2015; Liu, He and Li, 2019). People aged 18-25 (Gen Z) and 26-39 (Millennials) in 2022 are the most active social media users who spend an average of 2 hours 41 minutes and 2 hours 22 minutes per day on social media, respectively (Global Web Index, 2020). Thus, the target population of this thesis (people aged 20-39) consists of active users of social media platforms that have been argued to contribute to negative social comparison, which in turn is likely to diminish the users' self-esteem during a career crisis:

'I feel like social media isn't that great for my mental health. Because a lot of the times when I'm scrolling through, I'm seeing other people's successes, and it makes me jealous that they're being successful, and I haven't reached that stage, yet. Especially on Facebook. Just probably the main social media platform I use. And around springtime, when everyone else is graduating, and they're all saying that they've got this degree, and they've got this job, and they've done this and done that' (Participant 13).

Career crisis sufferers can also feel inadequate because they are failing their own and/or other people's expectations for themselves. For example, Participant 13 stated:

'I would say the two biggest expectations that are causing me stress are my own and society's' (Participant 13).

Similarly, Participant 15 said:

'I feel like I do have quite high expectations for myself. It's something I've been told in the past that I need to work on (smiling). ///// But I do think there's a little bit of societal expectation that like when you've finished uni, you should be working. Because, especially from older generations, they're like "Well, why did you go to uni then if you haven't been able to get a job?". And (it's?) like "Because it's hard. The job market's tough". But, yeah, mostly personal expectations, I think' (Participant 15).

In addition to failing other people's expectations, inadequacy may also be linked to the financial costs of pursuing something that does not materialise. For example, Participant 9 explained the roots of her feeling of inadequacy as follows:

'I think, sometimes I feel a little bit inadequate, xx. Like some people might just say "Oh, look, you've paid all that money for your degree, and now you still haven't got a job, which is the same position you were in before you did your degree. Yet, you spent so much money on it". And I sort of feel like... Erm, yeah, that feeling of inadequacy is really not pleasant' (Participant 9).

One of the participants, who studies at one of the leading research universities in the UK, pointed out that high expectations can be partially caused by the prestige of the university one studies at. It is possible that the more prestigious university that an individual studies at, the bigger the perceived sense of failure if a desired career outcome is not achieved.

'Well, I think just because of the fact that it's a good university, it's a top hundred institution in the world, that you expect much more to get out of it, than- compared to a university that's not that (highly ranked?), right? And, once this expectation is there, then you think that other people are expecting it from you, as well. It's like you're expecting that maybe

your friends back home or your extended family is expecting you to land at some big place, go to some big place, just because you're studying at this place' (Participant 10).

Interview findings also suggest that crisis almost always involves a certain amount of stress, which is consistent with what has been discussed in the literature review (Section 1.3). Stress can be a response to a crisis (e.g., being stressed about one's career direction or not being able to secure a desired job). For those whose crisis is about getting a job or finding a career direction, stress is often caused by the fear of failure and negative social comparison:

'I felt stressed out. I felt under pressure. Especially when I had friends as well, and because we were in the same x, we were applying for jobs. Some of them got the jobs. And it was quite nice, and I was quite- I was happy for them. But then, at the same time, I would think about myself "Oh, my God, why haven't I got a job yet?"' (Participant 17, a 25-year-old primary school teacher).

Stress also can be one of the triggers of a crisis (e.g., working in a stressful environment). For those people whose crisis is about being trapped in an unsatisfying job, stress is commonly created by their working environment. For example, Participant 4, a 25-year-old fundraiser at a university alumni office who had worked in telephone sales, described his past job as follows:

'(There were?) very heavy targets, which I don't necessarily mind. But it was like if you weren't getting the sales and all of that, you would be, yeah, in kind of trouble. So, yeah, I always managed to make sure that I... Because they kind of measured how long you were on the phone for in a day. So, I always made sure that I was always on the phone. So, I was quite good at hitting those targets (smiling). But (it was kind of?) stressful environment, because you thought... You know, you've constantly got to be on your game in order to kind of do well' (Participant 4).

Similarly, Participant 2, a 31-year-old former bank employee, stated:

'And you would meet, like, different kinds of people every single day. And, you know, after that, you just... It kind of wears you out, you know. Like, people shouting at you to get the work done, or... You know, it was... It was really stressful' (Participant 2).

Overall, interviewees agreed with the vignette's description of a crisis as 'a period in adult life that is noticeably more difficult, stressful than normal':

'But yeah, it's definitely more stressful than usual' (Participant 16, a 21-year-old student in education and history).

'I think that's quite a good description. It covers a lot in (that?). Yeah, I think, definitely the "more stressful than normal" bit' (Participant 15, a history student in their early 20s).

Another common psychological consequence of a career crisis is a feeling of helplessness. Interviewees, especially those who experienced a moderate-severe career crisis, reported feeling helpless, hopeless, and out of control during their crisis. This learned helplessness (Peterson *et al.*, 1993) shows that after being exposed to a stressful career situation repeatedly, people come to believe that it is beyond their control to change their career situation, so eventually they stop trying to address their career problems and start acting, thinking, and feeling helpless:

'And then, like it does- I think the longer the period, yes, it makes you more hopeless. I mean, I was on the verge of getting completely hopeless with my degree. And like, I don't know, if my depression had lasted a little bit longer, what I would have done. But definitely something much worse. Something very irrational' (Participant 10).

It is not uncommon for a career crisis to aggravate to the point where crisis sufferers struggle to cope, however not many people seem to seek professional help for their mental health in such a situation:

'And once I went back home to [HOME COUNTRY], it was quite hard to cope then. And that's when I made the decision to actually see a psychiatrist. And I said: "You know, I need to get out of this position. I cannot stay in this". And then, when it was completely

unbearable, I said: “You know, I just go, and I just sit with this person and talk to him”. And then, yeah, he prescribed me with a prescription. It's called Prozac. It really helped me’ (Participant 10).

The reason why people who struggle to cope with crises may be reluctant to seek professional help could be a psychological barrier related to a fear of talking to strangers about personal issues:

‘I don't know. It's just not my kind of thing. Like I'd rather talk to someone who I really know, well, than to a complete stranger’ (Participant 10).

Those who finally decide to seek professional help may be discouraged from proceeding with the plan by their family members, especially those who belong to an older generation and may not be familiar with the idea of a career crisis or mental health issues in general. Participant 10 continues:

‘And, once I went back [home], I somehow convinced my parents that “I need to see a psychiatrist”, even though they were insisting that “You don't”. Like there this expectation with the thing that, you know, your children are- Like if they're walking, if they're talking, (then?) they're doing perfectly fine’ (Participant 10).

Thus, career crises can affect people's psychological well-being in a variety of ways. The symptoms can range from relatively mild to severe. As any other psychological crisis, a career crisis has the potential to result in severe and long-lasting mental health problems. However, mental health problems are not the only negative consequences of a career crisis. Among other negative effects of a career crisis are risks for physical well-being, which will be discussed in the following section.

10.6.2.2 The physiological domain

Among the most reported problems of a physiological nature were sleep problems. These problems can be the result of work stress or stress from unemployment:

'I was coming home very, very upset. I was not sleeping' (Participant 6),

'I could not sleep properly. I used to be always stressed' (Participant 5),

anxiety about one's career future

'Just like two o'clock in the morning, lying in bed, and I'm just sort of... My mind is sort of racing, thinking about everything, like my whole situation. Like I said, I'm to make choices between lots of different possible outcomes' (Participant 9),

or poor sleep routine due to depression

'My sleeping pattern was completely messed up' (Participant 10).

In addition, a couple of interviewees reported experiencing irritable bowel syndrome due to their career-related stress, which is consistent with previous research that suggests that stress can contribute to the development of irritable bowel syndrome (Mayer *et al.*, 2001; Qin *et al.*, 2014):

'And I suffered with IBS, as well. So, of course, I was getting a lot of stomach pains' (Participant 6).

Overall, the physiological effects of a career crisis were reported less frequently than the psychological ones. Nevertheless, the reported negative consequences of a crisis for sleep and the digestive system can have a substantial impact on the quality of life, mental well-being, and physical well-being of an individual.

10.6.2.2 The behavioural domain

Apart from the psychological and physiological effects, a career crisis can also have behavioural implications. The interview findings suggest that a common behavioural change that usually accompanies a severe crisis is the voluntary reduction of social interaction. Interviewees offered several explanations for this crisis reaction. Participant 7 reported not wanting to see her friends during a crisis because most of them were her colleagues, and conversations with them mainly revolved around the job she found unsatisfying.

‘But I’d say, overall, it was just that general sense of not wanting to hang out with people. And same with at work. So, a lot of my friends were colleagues as well, because we started the grad scheme together, etc. And I just stopped wanting to see them. Even though I absolutely loved them to pieces. And, luckily, I’ve got those relationships now. But they became like... [It became?] about work, and I just didn’t want to be associated with that, at the end of the day (smiling)’ (Participant 7).

Another explanation for the voluntary reduction of social interaction during a crisis was shame.

‘At that time, I didn’t want to connect with my university friends, with my college friends. I isolated myself from my social circle. And most of the time, I used to spend my evenings alone, because I didn’t want to interact with anyone. ///// So, maybe, at that time, I was thinking that I was not doing something good, great in my life, and I was kind of ashamed. “I don’t want to meet these people because everyone is successful in their life, xxx”’ (Participant 5)

and perceived shortcoming

‘And that person: “I’ve just come back from...” – wherever they’ve been that sounded really nice. And I was... Not ashamed, but I just didn’t want to open up about my time because I thought “That’s not exciting”, you know. And they also had that more money because they’d got different jobs. And they were going to all these places while I was like “Well, I can’t afford that. I can’t afford these certain holidays and things that people (are?) going on”.

And because my wage wasn't that much. And because I wasn't staying in the job, I wasn't going through the banding. So yeah, it definitely changed my social life” (Participant 6).

Often crisis sufferers also struggle to obtain the required emotional support and feel isolated because they do not know how to communicate their problems or because they believe that they will not be understood:

‘I've got people I can speak to, but when... When you're like that, and you're typically not like that... When you're typically happy, and suddenly you're feeling all sad, you don't really know even how to describe it or how to confide in people’ (Participant 3).

Cultural background is also likely to play a role in whether a person is likely to seek emotional support from the close ones, as Participant 10 explains:

‘Like I really wanted to talk to someone about this stuff, but it's like, you know, you don't really have someone to talk to you about this stuff, so... ///// Like I couldn't talk to my parents about this. I think there's a stigma in Asian cultures, as well. You know, like “This nothing. xx You just get on [go] with life”. So, I just didn't talk to anyone about it. And not being able to talk to anyone about it, it's like, you know, the emotions build up’ (Participant 10).

Among other behavioural changes reported by interviewees was decreased physical activity caused by lack of energy and motivation. However, it has to be acknowledged that career crisis sufferers’ lack of energy is more likely to be caused by depression and/or work burnout rather than by a crisis per se.

‘It just sort of... yeah, made me feel like... I just didn't really want to use my time very wisely, and I was sort of, basically, just staying in pyjamas for a lot of the day. Not being very active, not exercising. Watching a lot of Netflix and things like that. And just because... Sort of as a bit of escapism, I think’ (Participant 9).

‘I didn't have any drive to get out of bed’ (Participant 5).

In addition to the decrease in physical activity, participants who experienced a severe crisis also reported engaging in maladaptive coping behaviours such as unhealthy eating and substance abuse:

'I was just eating unhealthily. I went back home (home country). I saw a psychiatrist, and I gained significant weight, as well ///// Like I was lying down in bed for hours on end, just eating takeaways, which was not healthy at all' (Participant 10).

'And I used to take a huge amount, a big amount of alcohol at that time, as well. Because I was unable to sleep, so most of the time, at night, I used to take xx alcohol' (Participant 5).

Thus, it is evident from the above interview quotes that a career crisis has the potential to lead to behaviours that can be harmful to both physical and mental well-being.

To summarise, a career crisis poses a serious risk to the mental, physical, and social functioning of individuals. Therefore, it is important to develop and effectively promote support for career crisis sufferers, which is addressed in the present thesis. Moreover, the interview findings suggest that, depending on the stage or severity of a crisis, participants' reactions to a crisis can differ. Specifically, people experiencing a mild crisis tend to report worry, concern, sadness, and confusion. They are also relatively more optimistic about their chances of resolving their crisis. People experiencing a severe crisis tend to report a significant impact of a career crisis on their psychological, physical, and social functioning. Compared with mild crisis sufferers, severe crisis sufferers more often say that a career crisis made them feel inadequate, isolated, stressed, anxious, and depressed to such an extent that they struggled to cope. Severe crisis sufferers also feel more hopeless and pessimistic about their chances to resolve their crisis. These findings were subsequently used to update the early and late-stage crisis vignettes. The next section discusses that in more detail.

10.6.3 THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CAREER CRISIS

10.6.3.1 Linear development versus cyclical development

Most (if not all) crisis researchers appear to agree that crisis typically consists of several stages. Rapoport (1962) broadly describes crisis stages as ‘a beginning, middle and end’. Tyhurst (1957) suggests ‘the period of impact, period of recoil and the posttraumatic period’ (cited in Rapoport, 1962), and Caplan (1964) isolates four main characteristics phases of a crisis. Phase 1: the initial increase in tension after the impact of the stimulus initiates habitual problem-solving mechanisms. Phase 2: failure to deal with the challenge via habitual problem-solving strategies increase the tension and leads to upset and the sense of ineffectiveness. Phase 3: the individual mobilises their internal and external resources to resolve the problem. During this stage, the individual may resolve the problem by using new coping methods or defining the problem in a new way. Phase 4: if the problem has not been resolved in the previous phase, the tension builds up and/or reaches a breaking point. Major disorganisation with drastic results then follows.

Thus, much of the crisis literature suggests that a crisis develops in stages. Therefore, it was expected that a career crisis would develop gradually in stages (from the early to the late stage of a crisis). As a result, the early- and late-stage crisis vignettes were designed anticipating that interviewees would be able to tell at which stage of crisis they were, or at which stage their crisis had been resolved in the past. However, data analysis has revealed a more complex picture. Some of the interviewees seemed to struggle to describe the development of their crisis in terms of chronological, linear stages. Instead, they described crisis development in terms of crisis intensity that was going up and down cyclically:

'So, yeah, now I've got the foresight that it was a bit of a career crisis throughout. It's just how I labelled it or identified it. /// I'd say the intensity of the crisis would have hit certain points throughout. /// Sometimes, I was absolutely fine with the job, and I was enjoying it. (Other times?) I hated it. Other times I was getting by. Just completely depends on many, many factors' (Participant 1).

Some participants believed that they had an ongoing career crisis that could be characterised by waves of intense crisis periods followed by slow-burn crisis periods, as participant 16 explains:

'It's a bit like the Coronavirus thing. I feel like it's peaked probably last year. It was probably when I felt really stressed. And now it's gone down a bit. But, again, I feel like that is because right now I have a sort of plan. But I'm aware that the anxiety levels might build again, if that does not work out. /// But, yeah, so, I would say it was definitely probably about- probably like eight, nine months where it was quite intense. /// (If it's?), for example, two years, I don't think you're in a constant crisis for two years. I think it's more, like I said, like you have waves of it. So, it could be a constant issue' (Participant 16).

Some participants described their crisis as intermittent:

'Interviewer: Mm. So, in total, how long did your crisis last?

Respondent: Erm, probably about two and a half years on and off' (Participant 6).

Thus, instead of seeing career crisis as something that develops linearly in stages, it may be more fruitful (and possibly more valid) to see this kind of crisis as a continuous wave similar to a sinusoidal wave. The varying amplitudes of such a wave would be denoting no crisis, low-intensity, and high-intensity crisis periods (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Crisis intensity wave



The implication of this discussion for the design of subsequent quantitative studies is that it seems to be more appropriate to use mild/severe crisis vignettes instead of the early/late crisis stage vignettes that imply a linear development of crisis. Moreover, the original stage-based vignettes were focused on crisis scenarios that were too deterministic. Sometimes research participants struggled to relate to those scenarios because their crises developed differently. Thus, it may be more valid to design vignettes based on the feelings that the interviewees claimed to experience during mild versus severe crisis periods. In this way, the vignettes can be more generic and hence relatable to a greater number of people. As a result, new mild and severe crisis vignettes were developed based on the interviewees' descriptions that were discussed in Section 10.6.2. The old and new versions of the vignettes can be found in Table 8.

Table 8. Original crisis-stage vignettes versus new crisis-intensity vignettes

	Original vignettes	New vignettes
Early-stage/ Mild crisis	<i>'When you were studying at university, you expected that shortly after graduation (in 2-3 months) you would find a full-time job that would be satisfying and personally meaningful. This job would not only pay well, but also allow you to reach your full potential and make a difference. However, in reality, none of those expectations were fulfilled. It has been 4 months since your graduation, and you are still struggling to find a job that would make you happy and generally feel confused about your career direction. All your job applications have been unsuccessful so far, and you find yourself getting more and more anxious about your future. Meanwhile, all your friends seem to have great jobs that they are passionate about, and this makes you feel like you are falling behind'.</i>	<i>'During your career crisis, due to challenging career-related changes in your life you may feel confused/down/lost/worried/concerned about your career and your future in general. You may have made a few attempts to improve your situation, but they were fruitless so far. Nevertheless, despite the challenges that this situation presents, you still believe that things will get better soon. It is a difficult period, but it will pass. You may feel somewhat anxious, struggle to sleep sometimes, and experience lack of energy and motivation to do things. However, apart from that, your crisis did not have any significant effect on your physical or mental health. Although you may be jealous of your peers who are more successful in their careers, your crisis did not have any considerable impact on your social life'.</i>
Late-stage/ Severe crisis	<i>'When you were studying at university, you expected that shortly after graduation (in 2-3 months) you would find a full-time job that would be satisfying and personally meaningful. This job would not only pay well, but also allow you to reach your full potential and make a difference. However, in reality, none of those expectations were fulfilled. It has been 12 months since your graduation, and you are still struggling to find a job that would make you happy and feel very confused about your career direction. Meanwhile, all your friends seem to have great jobs they are passionate about, and this fuels your feeling of inadequacy. You suffer from depression and panic attacks. You feel helpless'.</i>	<i>'During your career crisis, due to challenging career-related changes in your life you may feel stressed/depressed/isolated/inadequate/anxious about your career and your future in general. You have been repeatedly trying to improve your situation without any success. You start to feel hopeless and question if anything is ever going to change for you. Your future seems bleak to you. Your crisis may be affecting your social/occupational/psychological/physical functioning. For example, your crisis may cause you noticeable problems with your mental or physical health. A lot of the time you feel that you are struggling to cope. You may also feel like isolating yourself from your social circle, because you feel ashamed of yourself and do not want to answer uncomfortable questions about your career situation'.</i>

10.6.3.2 Multiple career crises

Another common theme in the conducted interviews was the reoccurring nature of career crises. Some interviewees said that they had a series of career crises throughout their life. What is interesting is that those crises seemed to be connected. For example, a popular scenario starts with feeling unsure about what university degree to choose, as participant 1 explains:

'I wasn't 100% sure what I wanted to do anyway when I was choosing a university degree'
(Participant 1).

This often leads to questioning one's choice of a degree after the programme commences. Participant 7, who works as a placements and employability officer at a UK university, states:

'I've got a lot of students, I'm dealing with, that are going through really early career crises, like in the second year of university. Because they are studying something that, you know, they might not want to do, or xx they are not 100% sure' **(Participant 7).**

Indeed, it is difficult for young people, who have little to none of work experience, to make an informed decision about their future profession. The abundance of degree options does not help either. An overload of choice generally contributes to stress, anxiety, bad decisions, and dissatisfaction (Schwartz, 2004), but even more so if the choice concerns something as personally important as career. As a result, quite often, young people have to choose a university degree based on someone else's advice or based on their own interests, without thinking through what will happen after their graduation (e.g., employability prospects, match of that profession to their personality or values, and what specific job they want in that field).

'So, at the time, I chose a degree based on advice from other people' **(Participant 1).**

It is also not uncommon for parents who pay for the degree to make a degree choice for their children, as exemplified by the statement from participant 10:

‘Um, so, the way I entered the legal study, or even the degree as well, was my parents just told me’ (Participant 10).

Then, after completing their university degree, most young people feel social, peer and/or financial pressure to get a job as soon as possible. In addition, many young adults are still confused about what sort of job they want, even after completing their degree (especially, those who complete non-vocational degrees). Once again, they can feel overwhelmed by the abundance of options. As a result, they tend to start applying to jobs chaotically, and they accept the first job they are offered. For example, participant 4 states:

‘So, I wasn't quite sure kind of where I wanted to go after graduating. And I basically kind of applied for loads of jobs as soon as I finished uni. And I took the first job that was offered, basically, which was a sales job down in [CITY NAME] /// And you're no longer in education, so, therefore, you need to be in work as soon as possible regardless of what that job is’ (Participant 4).

Another reason why young adults feel under time pressure to apply for jobs is the recruitment cycle, as participant 16 explains:

‘Well, definitely, it is expected that you find a job shortly after graduation. Because literally all of the uni advertising I've seen has been related to grad jobs, and those typically start in like July or August, so you're straight into it. And (there is?) not an awful lot (to do?) if you don't want to go for a job. So, definitely, I felt a lot of pressure with that’ (Participant 16).

As discussed in Section 10.6.2.1, people experiencing a career crisis tend to engage in negative social comparison, which adds even more pressure to get a job as soon as possible.

‘I do feel like, because there's that kind of unsaid, unspoken timeframe, that you are expected to get a job... I would be at home, everyone else is working, and I would be like

mass emailing my CV to people. Like “Oh, my God, I have to get something”’ (Participant 15).

In some cases, the first job offer is preceded by a prolonged period of failed interviews and job rejections, which can lead to a severe crisis:

‘And I applied for like seven firms, and I got rejected from all. So, that sent me in a very deep- in a very, very dark place’ (Participant 10).

As a consequence of the rushed choice, many recent graduates find themselves having a job that falls short of their expectations (e.g., the job does not match their values or interests, does not pay enough, does not offer much opportunity for career progression, or involves too much stress). However, what makes the situation worse is that many of them feel pressure to stay in that job. Some people stay in an unsatisfying job because they believe that this is what others expect of them. They also feel that at the beginning of their career, they need to obtain work experience and develop their CV.

‘And it’s this feeling, I think, particularly when, you know, you’ve just graduated. You kind of think “Well, I need a job. I need to be earning. I need to be building (up?) my CV, so there’s quite a pressure to stick with a job you don’t like. ///// You know, you’re always thinking “Well, you know, I’ve graduated now. So, I need to be in a full-time job. And I need to be, you know, at this stage in my life” which is, I guess, something which is... You know, what... It’s your view of what the expectation is from others on you, if that makes sense’ (Participant 4).

Others stay because they do not know what a better alternative would be and/or have financial pressures, which was the case for participant 7:

‘So, there were kind of financial pressures. And I think if there wasn’t the financial pressure, I would’ve probably left a lot quicker/// I didn’t want to leave that job for something that I wasn’t passionate about, and then like just do it again, if that makes sense. I didn’t want to leave just for the sake of it’ (Participant 7).

Because of their previous negative experience, some people can develop a fear of making any changes to their careers. They are worried that they can repeat the same mistake.

'I'm just like worrying what if I try something else /// and I don't like it again. So, what will happen then? I can't just keep trying' (Participant 14).

After staying in the unsatisfying job for a while, at some point, people decide to finally quit their unsatisfying job, which sometimes resolves their crisis, and sometimes it gives a new spin to the crisis (e.g., caused by going through a period of unemployment or by getting into another unsatisfying job).

Although the interviews suggest that the scenarios discussed in this section are not uncommon for university-educated young adults in the UK, they are by no means universal for everyone. There are, of course, other possible scenarios that may vary based on the individual's socio-economic status, type of their educational degree (e.g., vocational vs. non-vocational), marital status, and relationship with parents, to name a few. Furthermore, the discussed scenarios do not assume that people have a crisis every time they face a career challenge. It is plausible to suggest that personal circumstances and individual differences affect whether people have one career crisis, several career crises, or no crisis at all throughout their life. What the above scenarios do show, however, is that career crises can be connected. That is, the resolution of a previous crisis (or the absence of such resolution) can affect the dynamics of subsequent crises, which is consistent with the psychoanalytical perspective on crisis that was discussed in Section 1.1.4.

Thus, career crises can be (1) single, stand-alone crises or (2) multiple (sometimes interconnected) crises of different intensities that happen throughout one's life. Since the boundaries between different crises may become blurred, for people who experience multiple career crises, it may be even more challenging to identify the stages of their crises than for

people who experience single crises. In cases where people might have more than one career crisis, using the mild versus severe crisis vignettes would be again more beneficial than using stage-based vignettes. The former is more explicitly linked to career crisis sufferers' current state, thereby simplifying the choice of a vignette.

10.6.4 CAREER SUPPORT PERSUASIVE MESSAGES (STIMULI DEVELOPMENT)

As one of the main purposes of the qualitative stage was to design career support messages (experimental stimuli), interviewees were presented with two drafts of advertisements by a fictional employment agency. One advertisement was promotion-oriented (Figure 6), and the other was prevention-oriented (Figure 7).

Figure 6. The original promotion-oriented ad (Study 1: Interviews)



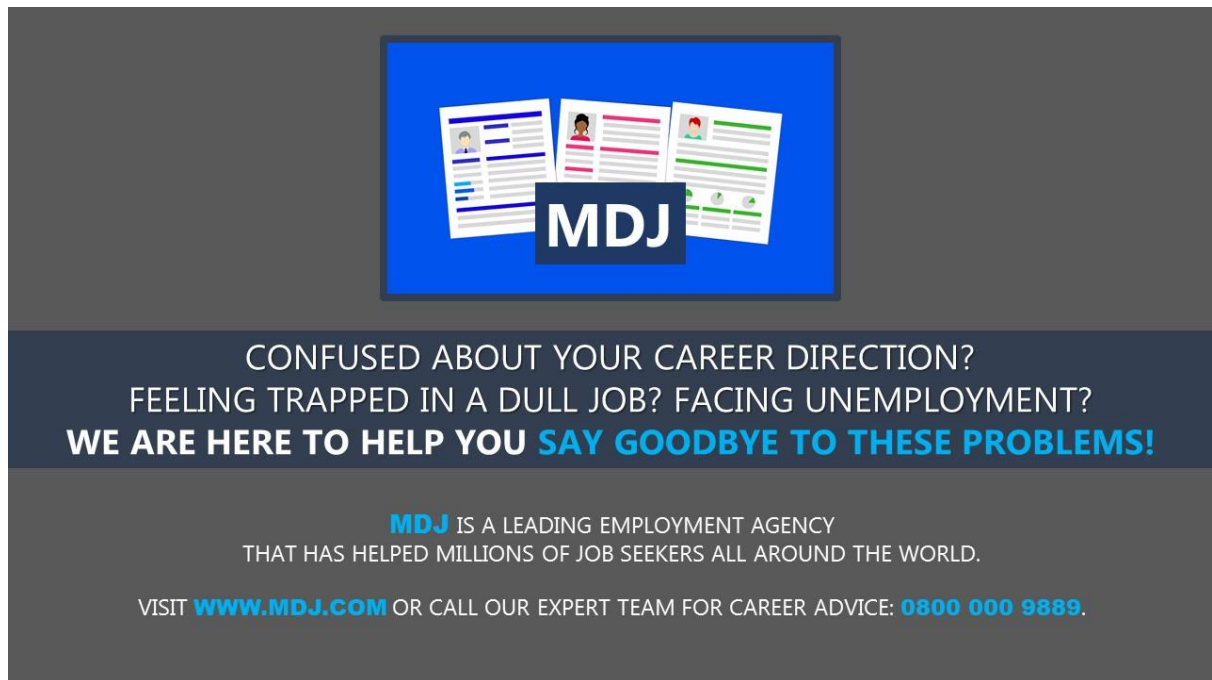
MDJ

STILL LOOKING FOR A JOB THAT DOES NOT FEEL LIKE WORK?
WANT YOUR JOB TO BE PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL AND EXCITING?
WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU FIND YOUR DREAM JOB!

MDJ IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.MDJ.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Figure 7. The original prevention-oriented ad (Study 1: Interviews)



Interview findings showed that people in a mild crisis had a more positive attitude towards the promotion-oriented advertisement than the prevention-oriented advertisement. The promotion-oriented advertisement was perceived by mild crisis sufferers as positive, reassuring, and encouraging. The prevention-oriented advertisement, in contrast, was found to be depressing, anxiety-provoking, and triggering insecurities. For example, participant 12 states:

'It's (promotion ad) sort of looking at the negatives of your career but in a less sort of full-on type of way. And it seems more reassuring. Like the words it uses, "we're here to help you", "your dream job". ///// I feel like this one would be more rewarding. This one, if you went with this agency, I feel like "Oh, maybe there's a chance there could be something with this agency". ///// I feel like the other one (prevention ad) is more maybe like tapping into your insecurities and your problems. And even though it might make you suddenly realise "Oh, you should be doing something", at the same time, it might make you feel maybe more anxious than you would want to' (Participant 12).

Similarly, participant 13 explains:

'I'd say with the first one (the promotion-oriented ad) my emotional response was like excitement and looking forward to the future. Because it sounds like something that I would come across at like a job posting- or non-job posting, careers advisors office, or just like something on the street or where you're just walking through on a normal day. But with the second one (the prevention-oriented), my initial response would be depression, and almost like they've called me out on my failures, and I don't really like that (smiling). So, maybe a bit of anger, but not at them, at the fact that the statement might be true about myself)' (Participant 13).

Interview findings suggest that people in a mild crisis are still hopeful and optimistic about their chances of resolving their crisis. Since the promotion-oriented ad matches their disposition, it results in a better ad attitude. In contrast, the prevention-oriented ad can remind mild crisis sufferers about the worst-case scenarios, which have not happened to them yet and which they do not want to think about. For example, students or recent graduates who were confused about their career direction did not want to think about the prospects of being unemployed or trapped in a dull job.

'And I'd probably just avoid looking at that (the prevention-oriented ad)' (Participant 11).

The opposite was true for severe crisis sufferers. Presented with the promotion-oriented ad, severe crisis sufferers expressed scepticism, which is likely to be caused by disillusionment with the idea of a dream job:

'It's kind of... It seems very fake. Because, you know, "find your dream job" it's a kind of... It's a myth (laughing)' (Participant 5).

The prevention-oriented ad, on the contrary, was reported to be more relatable, personal, and realistic, and led to a better ad attitude in severe crisis sufferers. The prevention-oriented was not depressing or anxiety-inducing for severe crisis sufferers because they already have faced the described scenarios. Instead, they felt understood.

'It's using those very emotive words. And it's saying, you know, "Are you feeling trapped? Are you facing this?". And you'd be like "Yes! Yes, I am!". And, yeah, I just think that's a little bit more personal?' (Participant 6).

Overall, the exploratory interview findings are in line with the hypothesised relationship between career crisis severity and the effectiveness of promotion- vs. prevention-oriented career support advertisements. Specifically, the qualitative findings support the following hypotheses:

H9a: People in a *mild* career crisis have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to *promotion-oriented career support messages* than prevention-oriented career support messages.

H9b: People in a *severe* career crisis have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to *prevention-oriented career support messages* than promotion-oriented career support messages.

However, several participants made several comments regarding the promotion-oriented ad. For example, participant 13 pointed out:

"Looking for a job that does not feel like work?" also sounds unrealistic. Because any job you have, even if it's your favourite job, there's still going to be parts of your job that you're not going to like. So, it will feel like work' (Participant 13).

Since several participants expressed criticism of the clichéd wording of the promotion-oriented ad, it has been decided to use participants' descriptions of an ideal and a least desired job to design new ads. Having flexibility, freedom, and variety were among the desired characteristics for a job:

'I guess something that gives a certain amount of creativity. ///// So, I think something where you are kind of given that trust to work in the way that works best for you. And, yeah,

I think probably, you know, having that variety, having the opportunity to meet lots of new people helps. I'm constantly meeting new people in my role, which is always good. So, yeah, I'd say kind of that variety, flexibility, those kinds of things really help' (Participant 4).

Other desired characteristics of a job were an enjoyable working environment and being valued, as participants 12 and 9 explain:

'And also maybe working in a company that looks after its stuff, not just on the money side, but also like by creating an environment that's quite enjoyable to work in' (Participant 12).

'So, I know that I really want to get along with my colleagues, and (it to be?) a friendly workplace and that I feel comfortable in. And I also feel like recognised as an individual' (Participant 9).

In addition, according to participants, an ideal job is expected to be meaningful (i.e., make a positive difference in the larger community). For example, participant 16 stated:

'I like anything where I feel like I'm actually making a difference to like real lives' (Participant 16).

Being excessively managed and working in a highly commercial environment were among the characteristics of an undesired job.

'As someone that isn't driven by money... This completely goes against what I want to do, essentially. It's a little bit too commercial for me, I suppose' (Participant 1).

'You know, I wouldn't want a job where I was being very kind of (heavily?) micromanaged' (Participant 4).

Based on participants descriptions, the following new advertisements were developed (Figures 8 and 9):

Figure 8. The new promotion-oriented ad (Study 1: Interviews)



DO YOU LIKE THE IDEA OF:
AN EXCITING JOB IN A FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT?
A JOB THAT IS PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL AND SATISFYING?
MORE FREEDOM AND RECOGNITION AT WORK?

WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU GET YOUR DREAM JOB!

CAREER FOCUS IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.CAREERFOCUS.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Figure 9. The new promotion-oriented ad (Study 1: Interviews)



DO YOU HATE THE IDEA OF:
A DULL JOB IN A MONEY-DRIVEN ENVIRONMENT?
A JOB THAT IS MEANINGLESS AND UNSATISFYING?
BEING MICROMANGED AND UNDERVALUED AT WORK?

WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU AVOID THESE PROBLEMS!

CAREER FOCUS IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.CAREERFOCUS.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

10.7 SUMMARY

The present study consisted of 19 online semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom videoconferencing platform. The study had two objectives. The first was to design three crisis vignettes that would be used as crisis assessment tools in the subsequent quantitative studies. The second was to develop positively and negatively framed career support persuasive messages, which would be used as experimental stimuli in the subsequent quantitative studies.

The interview findings showed that the general crisis vignette, i.e., the vignette that described the situations that were likely to provoke a career crisis (i.e., career crisis themes), was accurate. The main themes of a career crisis were indeed a feeling of being confused about one's career direction, struggles to obtain a desired job, or feeling trapped in an unsatisfying job. Overall, interviewees agreed that the vignette was adequately capturing the essence of a career crisis and, therefore, was a suitable tool for the assessment of whether someone was in a career crisis or not. The two additional vignettes provided the descriptions of the different stages of a career crisis (early vs. late) and were initially developed to assess the stage of experiment participants' career crisis. The interview findings showed that a career crisis can affect the psychological, physiological, and behavioural domains of a person's life, and that these effects can differ depending on the severity of a crisis. Specifically, among people experiencing a mild crisis, the typical emotional reactions to a crisis were worry, concern, sadness, and confusion. Also, people in a mild crisis were more optimistic about their chances of resolving their crisis compared with people in a severe crisis. People experiencing a severe crisis, on the other hand, reported a significant impact of a career crisis on their psychological, physical, and/or social functioning. Compared with mild crisis sufferers, severe crisis sufferers more often said that a career crisis made them feel inadequate, isolated, stressed, anxious, and depressed to such an extent that they struggled to

cope. Additionally, severe crisis sufferers felt more hopeless and pessimistic about their chances to resolve their crisis. These findings were subsequently used to update the early and late-stage crisis vignettes.

Further, the findings showed that, although much of the crisis literature suggests that a crisis develops in stages, it is more accurate to describe crisis development in terms of crisis intensity that is going up and down cyclically. Moreover, the findings revealed that career crises can be (1) single, stand-alone crises or (2) multiple (sometimes interconnected) crises of different intensities that happen throughout one's life. For people who experience multiple career crises, it may be challenging to identify the stages of their crises because the boundaries between different crises may be difficult to distinguish. As a result, it was decided to use mild/severe crisis vignettes instead of the early/late crisis stage vignettes. Vignettes that focus on the severity of a crisis rather than its stage are more consistent with the cyclical development of a crisis and more explicitly linked to career crisis sufferers' current state, thereby simplifying the choice of a vignette.

Finally, the interview findings showed that, overall, participants perceived the career support persuasive messages as intended by the researchers. That is, the promotion-oriented message was perceived as positive and achievement-oriented, whereas the prevention-oriented message was perceived as negative and avoidance-oriented. Moreover, the interview findings were in line with the hypothesised relationship between career crisis severity and the effectiveness of promotion- vs. prevention-oriented career support persuasive messages. Specifically, the findings showed that people in a *mild* career crisis tend to have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-oriented career support messages than prevention-oriented career support messages. People in a severe career crisis tend to have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-oriented career support

messages than promotion-oriented career support messages. However, since several participants expressed criticism of the clichéd wording of the promotion-oriented message, it has been decided to use interviewees' descriptions of an ideal and a least desired job to design new promotion- and prevention-oriented career support persuasive messages.

PART IV: STUDY 2 – PILOT STUDY

11.1 OBJECTIVES

Study 2 consists of two pre-tests and a pilot study. The objective of Study 2 is fourfold. Firstly, Study 2 aims to pre-test the stimuli and ensure that the manipulation has the intended effect. Secondly, the study is expected to help with the decision on the position of the manipulation check (MC) in the main experiment – i.e., before vs. after the dependent variables (DVs). Introducing the MC before the DVs may affect the participants' answers to the DVs. Introducing the MC after the DVs may compromise the validity of the MC because participants will not remember their initial reaction to the stimulus. The pilot study aims to test both approaches for the finalised study (Study 3). Thirdly, the study aims to assess the validity and reliability of the crisis intensity vignettes as a measure by comparing participants' vignette choices to their Generalised Contentment Questionnaire (Hudson, 1982) scores. While crisis vignettes can help to assess crisis severity, they are not a validated measure. Using a quantitative measure to confirm that the vignettes are effective at capturing the differences between people in mild and severe crises would improve the validity of research results. It is plausible to suggest that the more severe someone's career crisis is, the less content they are with their life. Therefore, the Generalised Contentment Questionnaire (Hudson, 1982) will be used as a proxy for the measurement of crisis severity. Fourthly, the pilot study will assist with the sample size calculation and the selection of the sampling technique (i.e., convenience vs. quota) for the main studies. Since the main studies are expected to have a quasi-experimental design, it is necessary to ensure that: 1) both quasi-experimental groups (mild crisis vs. severe crisis) would have a sample size with sufficient

statistical power, and 2) there is no considerable difference between the number of participants who are recruited in the mild crisis and severe crisis groups.

11.2 PRE-TESTS

Two pre-tests were conducted: 1) to improve the wording of the questionnaire, 2) to improve the design of the stimuli, and 3) to ensure that the treatment worked as planned. It was necessary to ensure that the wording of the questionnaire (questions and answer options) was easily understood by participants in the manner intended by the researcher. It was also critical to refine the design of the stimuli as it would directly affect the success of the manipulation, and hence on the study's results. In the first pre-test, it proved difficult to make participants perceive the stimuli as intended. Specifically, participants perceived the prevention-oriented ad as promotion-oriented. That erroneous perception arguably stemmed from the participant's inclination to believe that advertisements, in general, were inherently promotion-oriented rather than prevention-oriented. As a result, it took two pre-tests to find optimal wording for the stimuli and the manipulation check.

11.2.1 PRE-TEST 1

Initially, the survey was pre-tested with a convenience sample of 15 participants, who either were experiencing a career crisis at the time of their survey completion or had experienced it in the past. Among these participants, 70% ($N_{\text{male}} = 10$) were male, and 30% ($N_{\text{female}} = 5$) were female. The mean age of participants was 29. The goal of this pre-test was to ensure that survey questions were clear to participants, and that there were no technical

errors or spelling mistakes. The pre-testing also provided an opportunity to gather post-survey qualitative feedback from participants about the survey and the stimuli.

The pre-test revealed several areas for the improvement of the survey's design. First, the pre-test participants reported that the crisis intensity vignettes were verbose, had the same font throughout, and therefore were difficult to interpret, especially on mobile devices. Indeed, participants had to put substantial mental effort into reading the vignettes, identifying the differences between them, and then choosing the one that was most relatable. As a result, to help participants identify the differences between the vignettes, it was decided to use a bold font for the words/phrases that made the vignettes different (Figure 10). To make sure that participants could see the vignettes clearly, it was decided that, in the main studies, the survey would be open only to PC/laptop/tablet users on Prolific (i.e., mobile users would not be recruited).

Figure 10. Crisis severity vignettes (Study 2: Pre-test 1)

Mild

- During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you may face an obstacle to your career goals that you struggle to overcome. Because of that you may feel **confused/down/lost/worried /concerned** about your career and your future in general. You may have made a few attempts to improve your situation, but they were fruitless so far. Nevertheless, despite the challenges that this situation presents, you **still believe that things will get better soon**. It is a difficult period, but it will pass. You may feel somewhat anxious, struggle to sleep sometimes, and experience lack of energy and motivation to do things. However, apart from that, your **crisis did not have any significant effect on your physical or mental health**. Although you may be jealous of your peers who are more successful in their careers, your **crisis did not have any considerable impact on your social life**.

Severe

- During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you may face an obstacle to your career goals that you struggle to overcome. Because of that, you may feel **stressed/depressed/isolated /inadequate/anxious** about your career and your future in general. You have been repeatedly trying to improve your situation without any success. You start to **feel hopeless and question if anything is ever going to change for you**. Your future seems bleak to you. Your crisis may be affecting your social/occupational/psychological/physical functioning. For example, your **crisis may cause you noticeable problems with your mental or physical health**. A lot of the time you feel that you are **struggling to cope**. You may also feel like **isolating yourself from your social circle**, because you feel ashamed of yourself and do not want to answer uncomfortable questions about your career situation.

The second survey design issue was related to the stimuli. The stimuli originally consisted of

a prevention-oriented ad, a promotion-oriented ad, and a neutral (no frame) ad (Figures 11, 12, and 13, respectively). To check that participants read the stimuli carefully, an attention check was introduced. Participants were asked to recall the name of the employment agency from the ad they had been shown. The piloting revealed that five people answered that the name of the agency was Career Mind when, in fact, it was Career Focus. Because the agency's name was recalled incorrectly by a third of participants, it was deemed problematic and therefore changed to Career Mind.

Figure 11. The promotion-oriented ad (Study 2: Pre-test 1)



Career Focus

DO YOU LIKE THE IDEA OF:
AN EXCITING JOB IN A FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT?
A JOB THAT IS PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL AND SATISFYING?
MORE FREEDOM AND RECOGNITION AT WORK?

WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU GET YOUR DREAM JOB!

CAREER FOCUS IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.CAREERFOCUS.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Figure 12. The prevention-oriented ad (Study 2: Pre-test 1)



DO YOU HATE THE IDEA OF:
A DULL JOB IN A MONEY-DRIVEN ENVIRONMENT?
A JOB THAT IS MEANINGLESS AND UNSATISFYING?
BEING MICROMANGED AND UNDERVALUED AT WORK?

WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU AVOID THESE PROBLEMS!

CAREER FOCUS IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.CAREERFOCUS.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Figure 13. The neutral ad (Study 2: Pre-test 1)



ARE YOU LOOKING FOR:
A JOB SEARCH ENGINE?
CAREER ADVICE?
CAREER DEVELOPMENT COURSES?

CAREER FOCUS – ALL YOUR EMPLOYMENT SOLUTIONS IN ONE PLACE!

CAREER FOCUS IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT WWW.CAREERFOCUS.COM OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

In addition, to check participants' attention, two matrix table questions (i.e., multiple statements that should be rated on the same scale) had an attention check statement (e.g., 'Please select Agree'). The participants who pre-tested the survey reported that they were confused by those statements and were not sure about their purpose. For that reason, it was decided to add the following clarification to those statements: 'This statement is to check that you are paying attention. Please select Agree'.

Also, the text of the stimuli (i.e., ads) had to be changed. The original ads were based on the interviewees' descriptions of career crisis triggers (e.g., 'a dull job in a money-driven environment') and ideal jobs (e.g., 'an exciting job in a friendly environment'). However, after conducting the first pre-test, it was acknowledged that the ads may not have resonated with all pre-test participants. As a result, it was decided to go back to the original ads that had been used in Study 1. However, since participants in Study 1 expressed scepticism toward the cliché wording in the promotion-oriented ad, it has been decided to replace the original statements such as 'find your ideal job' and 'a job that does not feel like work' with 'being certain about your career direction' and 'being able to get a desired job', thereby making the promotion-oriented ad mirror the prevention-oriented one. Moreover, to magnify the effect of the manipulation, the phrases 'do you like/hate the idea of...' were replaced with 'imagine: ...'. The colours of the background and text were changed, too. For the altered ads, see Figures 14 and 15 below.

Figure 14. The promotion-oriented ad (Study 2: Pre-test 2)



Career Mind

IMAGINE:

BEING CERTAIN ABOUT YOUR CAREER DIRECTION
BEING ABLE TO GET A DESIRED JOB
HAVING A SATISFYING JOB

WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU GET THAT!

CAREER MIND IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT **WWW.CAREERMIND.COM** OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Figure 15. The prevention-oriented ad (Study 2: Pre-test 2)



Career Mind

IMAGINE:

BEING CONFUSED ABOUT YOUR CAREER DIRECTION
FACING UNEMPLOYMENT
BEING TRAPPED IN AN UNSATISFYING JOB

WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU AVOID THESE PROBLEMS!

CAREER MIND IS A LEADING EMPLOYMENT AGENCY
THAT HAS HELPED MILLIONS OF JOB SEEKERS ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

VISIT **WWW.CAREERMIND.COM** OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Further, to check the effectiveness of the manipulation, a manipulation check was included in the survey. The original wording of the manipulation check was as follows:

‘Please rate to what extent the message in the ad emphasised:

Avoiding career failure ○○○○○○ Approaching career aspirations

Avoiding a bad job ○○○○○○ Getting a good job

Preventing career disappointment ○○○○○○ Achieving career fulfilment.’

The pre-test showed that six participants had failed the manipulation check, which means that the survey manipulation had not worked on them. A potential reason for that could be that participants saw both the prevention and promotion options as approach behaviour, and therefore struggled to differentiate between those options. Both options suggested moving towards a desired state but through different strategies (promotion vs. prevention). To make the manipulation check statements less confusing, it was decided to use prevention and promotion options that were mutually exclusive. Thus, the new wording of the manipulation check was:

“What did the advertisement ask you to imagine?

A career situation you want to avoid ○○○○○○ A career situation you want to be in

An undesirable career situation ○○○○○○ A desirable career situation

A negative career situation ○○○○○○ A positive career situation”.

In addition, to simplify the manipulation, a decision was made to leave the neutral ad out of the survey. Similar to the prevention-oriented ad, the neutral ad was perceived by the participants as promotion-oriented. Due to the neutral nature of the frame, it would have been difficult to change the participants’ perception. That is, it did not seem possible to make it more neutral than it already was. Therefore, to avoid further complications with the

manipulation, the neutral ad was removed from the survey. Once all the above changes were implemented, the second pre-test was launched.

11.2.2 PRE-TEST 2

The second pre-test was conducted with 15 participants recruited through Prolific who were in a career crisis. Among these participants, 70% ($N_{\text{female}} = 10$) were female, and 30% ($N_{\text{male}} = 5$) were male. The mean age of participants was 29. The stimuli consisted of the promotion- and prevention-oriented ads developed following Pre-test 1 (Figures 14, 15).

Despite the implemented changes, the manipulation problem that was identified in the first pre-test persisted in the second pre-test – 6 out of 15 participants failed the manipulation check (4 of them perceived the prevention-oriented ad as promotion-oriented). To find a solution to the problem, a further reading of experimental papers involving regulatory focus and motivational orientation manipulations was conducted. A potential explanation for the manipulation problem was found in a paper by Motyka *et al.* (2014). In their meta-analytic review, Motyka *et al.* (2014) proposed that, in a high involvement condition, regulatory fit results in greater confidence in one's evaluations, which in turn results in polarisation in judgement. That is, positive evaluations become more positive, whereas negative evaluations become more negative. In a low involvement condition, however, it is proposed that regulatory fit results in the greater experience of “feeling good”, which results in a main effect of positivity. That is, both positive and negative evaluations become more positive. As a result, it was decided to develop stimuli that would have a higher information load, be more immersive, and therefore would stimulate higher involvement. Specifically, an e-mail with an attached leaflet (the original ad) was designed. It promoted a governmental career support

initiative. A more detailed description of the final version of the stimuli is provided in Section 11.5 below.

In summary, the two pre-tests were used to improve the stimuli and wording of the survey, and to ensure that mistakes or errors had been minimised. After the pre-tests were conducted, it was decided that a larger sample was required to establish the success of the manipulation. Therefore, once all changes had been implemented, the pilot study was launched. To mitigate the risk of collecting data with a potentially ineffective experimental treatment, the pilot data collection was split into two stages. The survey was piloted with 81 participants ($N_{\text{stage1}} = 81$), then paused for data checks, and then another 69 participants ($N_{\text{stage2}} = 69$) were added. After the first stage, it was confirmed that the manipulation worked as intended. Subsequently, data from both stages were merged and presented together.

11.3 DESIGN AND SAMPLING

The pilot study adopted a 2 (crisis intensity: mild vs. severe) x 2 (message framing: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects design. Participants were recruited through Prolific online panel. Recruiting participants through online panels is a common practice in experimental advertising research (Geuens and De Pelsmacker, 2017: 84). Due to the high cost associated with representative samples and the limitations of convenience samples of college students, many researchers have resorted to using online panel samples that are easy to acquire and relatively inexpensive (Cassese *et al.*, 2013). Research has shown that online panels can be a cost-effective and reliable source of high-quality and representative research data (Paolacci, 2010; Buhrmester *et al.*, 2011; Fort *et al.*, 2011; Sprouse, 2011; Berinsky *et al.*, 2012; Mason and Suri, 2012; Rand, 2012; Crump *et al.*, 2013; Goodman *et al.*, 2013;

Simcox and Fiez, 2014). According to Cassese *et al.* (2013: 774), compared with traditional convenience samples, online panel samples are ‘generally more diverse and seem to respond to experimental stimuli in a manner consistent with the results of prior research’. However, there is a growing concern in academia about ‘non-naïveté’ among online panel workers (Chandler *et al.*, 2015). Researchers often assume that participants recruited through online panels are naïve to experimental materials (Chandler *et al.*, 2015), ignoring the fact that some online panel workers are ‘professional survey takers’ who complete questionnaires and experimental tasks on a daily basis (Marder and Fritz, 2015). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that not all online panels are equally affected by the ‘non-naïveté’ issue. In their comparative study of MTurk, Prolific.ac, and CrowdFlower, Peer *et al.* (2017) found that participants on Prolific.ac and CrowdFlower were more naïve, less dishonest, and more diverse compared with MTurk participants. It was also found that the quality of data collected through Prolific.ac was higher than MTurk’s and CrowdFlower’s (Peer *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, it is argued that Prolific.ac has higher transparency about the subject pool compared with other online panels, and also allows to screen the subject pool in a range of criteria before inviting subjects (Palan and Schitter, 2018). As a result, Prolific.ac was chosen over other online panels for participant recruitment in the present thesis.

To ensure the quality of responses, several measures were taken. Firstly, Qualtrics’ anti-ballot box stuffing option was activated to prevent participants from taking the survey more than once. Secondly, ‘forced response’ was enabled to make sure that participants did not leave key questions unanswered. Thirdly, where applicable, answer options were randomised to eliminate the risk of order bias. Fourthly, on the crisis vignettes’ and stimuli’ pages, a timer was activated to measure the time participants spent on the page. Moreover, minimum duration times for exposure to the stimuli were set to ensure that participants did not read the

stimuli too quickly. Finally, an attempt was made to minimise the participation of unreliable respondents by limiting access to the survey to Prolific workers with a 98% approval rate.

11.4 PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study were native English speakers aged 20-39 years who were in a career crisis. Since there were no strong theoretical grounds to believe that experimental results would vary across the Anglo Cluster countries (Ashkansy et al., 2002), it was decided to recruit participants from several English-speaking countries (the UK, Ireland, the US, and Canada). As was discussed in the previous section, participants were recruited through the online panel Prolific.ac. They were compensated £7 per hour (pro rata) for their efforts and time.

The initial sample for the pilot study was 150 respondents ($N = 150$). However, 9 respondents were excluded because they had never experienced a career crisis; 14 respondents were excluded because they had a career crisis, but in the past; 3 respondents were excluded because they failed an attention check *and* their answers to one of the dependent measures were more than three standard deviations away from the mean (Silva *et al.*, 2019); and 1 respondent was excluded because their survey completion time was substantially more than three standard deviations away from the mean (z-score 11.99). The four outliers previously discussed were removed to ensure the quality of data, and their removal did not change the significance level of the results. Thus, the final sample consisted of 123 respondents ($N = 123$). Among these participants, 73.2% ($N_{\text{female}} = 90$) were female, 25.2% ($N_{\text{male}} = 31$) were male, and 1.6% ($N_{\text{other}} = 2$) chose 'other'. The mean age of participants was 28.44 ($SD = 5.77$). In terms of education level, 6.5% ($N_{\text{GCSE}} = 8$) had a GCSE level education, 18.7% ($N_{\text{A-}}$

level = 23) had an A-level education, 48% ($N_{\text{undergrad}} = 59$) had an undergraduate degree, 21.1% ($N_{\text{postgrad}} = 26$) had a postgraduate degree, 0.8% ($N_{\text{PhD}} = 1$) had a PhD degree, and 4.9% ($N_{\text{none}} = 6$) had none of the above. Thus, 70% of respondents had at least one university degree. Gravetter and Forzano (2015) recommend recruiting 25-30 participants per experimental group. The present study had four experimental groups: group 1 ($N_1 = 36$), group 2 ($N_2 = 26$), group 3 ($N_3 = 35$), and group 4 ($N_4 = 26$). Thus, the size of each group was in line with Gravetter and Forzano's (2015) recommendations for sufficient explanatory power.

11.5 MANIPULATION AND MANIPULATION CHECK

The stimuli were developed in accordance with the information obtained in the preceding qualitative study and two pre-tests. As per Pre-test 2, to increase the information load and make the stimuli more immersive, the stimuli were presented in the form of emails (Figures 16, 18) with promotional leaflets attached (Figures 17, 19). The stimuli promoted a governmental career support initiative and emphasised the pursuit (/avoidance) of career aspirations (/failures). The governmental initiative (i.e., not-for-profit cause) was chosen over a corporate campaign (i.e., for-profit cause) to minimise potential scepticism towards the persuasive messages. Furthermore, to increase perceived source credibility, the emails contained information about recent research findings on the effect of job (dis)satisfaction on physical and mental well-being. According to previous research, higher source credibility can increase persuasion at both high and low levels of cognitive elaboration (Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010). Moreover, as discussed in Section 2.2, according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), message recipients in a high involvement condition (e.g., career crisis sufferers exposed to career support persuasive

messages) tend to pay more attention to the quality of the message's argument, compared with recipients in a low involvement condition.

Additionally, although the stimuli had a considerable information load, careful consideration was given to ensure that the messages clearly reflected a desired manipulation. To strike a balance between realism and control, only those elements that were needed for the manipulation were different across the messages, and the remaining content of the messages was kept simple and identical across the manipulated conditions (Geuens and De Pelsmacker, 2017).

Figure 16. The promotion-oriented email (Study 2: Pilot)

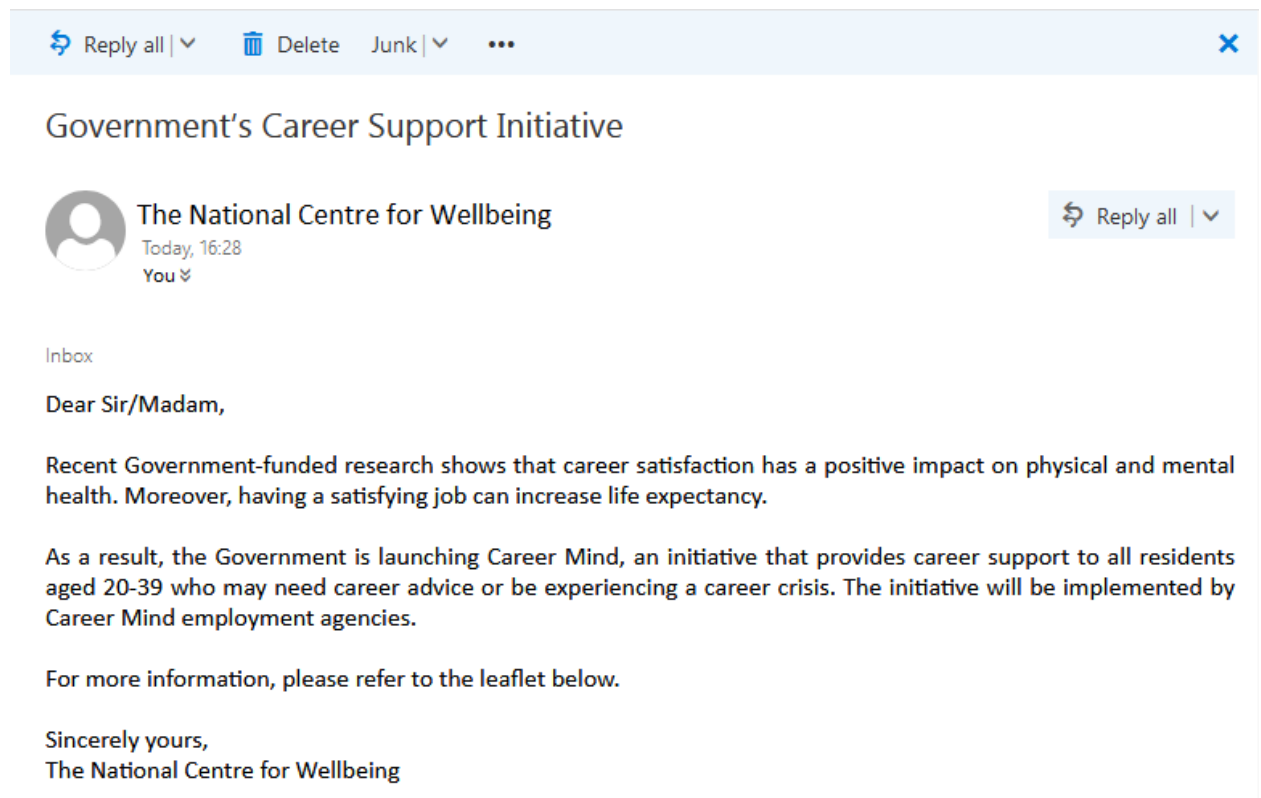


Figure 17. The promotion-oriented leaflet (Study 2: Pilot)



Career Mind

IMAGINE:

**BEING CERTAIN ABOUT YOUR CAREER DIRECTION.
BEING ABLE TO GET A DESIRED JOB.
HAVING A PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL AND SATISFYING JOB.**

WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE THESE GOALS!

CAREER MIND – THE GOVERNMENT'S CAREER SUPPORT INITIATIVE.

VISIT **WWW.CAREERMIND.COM** OR CALL OUR EXPERT TEAM FOR CAREER ADVICE: **0800 000 9889**.

Figure 18. The prevention-oriented email (Study 2: Pilot)

Reply all | Delete | Junk | ...

Government's Career Support Initiative

 **The National Centre for Wellbeing**
Today, 16:19
You

Reply all

Inbox

Dear Sir/Madam,

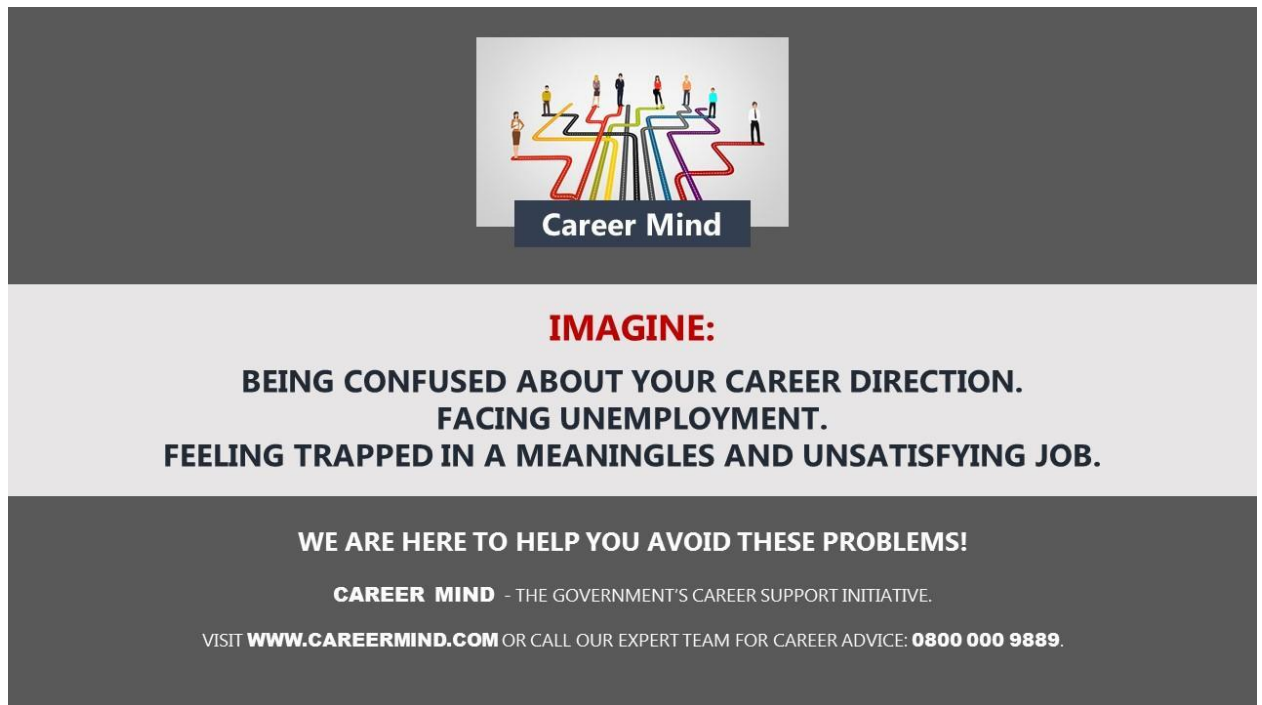
Recent Government-funded research shows that career dissatisfaction has a negative impact on physical and mental health. Moreover, having an unsatisfying job can decrease life expectancy.

As a result, the Government is launching Career Mind, an initiative that provides career support to all residents aged 20-39 who may need career advice or be experiencing a career crisis. The initiative will be implemented by Career Mind employment agencies.

For more information, please refer to the leaflet below.

Sincerely yours,
The National Centre for Wellbeing

Figure 19. The prevention-oriented leaflet (Study 2: Pilot)



To verify the effectiveness of the message frame manipulation, participants were asked to indicate what the leaflet asked them to imagine with the following items:

a career situation they wanted to avoid (1) ○○○○○○ a career situation they wanted to be in (7);

an undesirable career situation (1) ○○○○○○ a desirable career situation (7);

a negative career situation (1) ○○○○○○ a positive career situation (7).

It was acknowledged that presenting the manipulation check (MC) before the DVs could affect the way the participants responded to the DV measures. Conversely, presenting the MC after the DVs could result in the diminished recollection of the stimuli and hence affect the way the participants responded to the MC. Therefore, approximately half of the participants ($N = 57$) were randomly presented with the MC immediately after the ad and before the DVs (Cronbach's α [α hereafter] = .944), and the other half of the participants ($N = 66$) – with the MC after the DVs ($\alpha = .980$). These procedures sought to check that the position of the MC affected neither participants' response to the MC nor their response to the DVs.

11.6 PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the survey, participants were provided with information about the nature of the study, the expected survey completion time, how the data would be used and stored, and the low perceived risk involved. They were also informed that they could withdraw from participation at any point by closing their browser window. Participants confirmed their understanding of the briefing information and gave their consent to participate in the study by ticking corresponding boxes. Forced validation was used to ensure that the consent question could not be left unanswered. In the survey, participants were first shown a generic career crisis vignette and asked if, according to the crisis description in the vignette, they believed that they were currently in crisis. Then, participants were asked to answer questions adopted from the Generalised Contentment Questionnaire (GCQ) (Hudson, 1982).

Next, participants were presented with two vignettes illustrating mild and severe crises, and were asked to indicate which one more closely reflected their crisis. The vignettes were preceded by the following note: ‘Which of the following crisis vignettes most closely reflects your crisis? You do not have to relate to every single word in the chosen vignette but choose a vignette that is *generally* more relatable to you, even if some parts of it are not applicable to your crisis experience’. Based on their choice of a crisis severity vignette, participants were assigned either to the ‘mild crisis’ or ‘severe crisis’ group. After that, participants were randomly exposed either to the promotion-oriented or prevention-oriented email and asked to complete the manipulation check and dependent measures. At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

11.7 MEASURES

The presence of crisis was assessed by showing participants the following vignette (Figure 20):

Figure 20. Crisis vignette (Study 2: Pilot)

PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY:

"A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more difficult and stressful than normal, during which you struggle to cope. A crisis is also an important turning point in your life due to the changes that occur during a crisis episode. Crisis episodes typically last for a year or two but may be shorter or longer. Some people may experience a crisis related to their career. This crisis can manifest itself as a feeling of being confused about one's career direction, or struggling to obtain a desired job, or a feeling of being trapped in an unsatisfying job".

Based on the above description of a career-related crisis, would you say that you are currently experiencing a career-related crisis?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Crisis severity was assessed by means of the following vignettes (Figure 21):

Figure 21. Crisis severity vignettes (Study 2: Pilot)

Mild

- During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you may face an obstacle to your career goals that you struggle to overcome. Because of that you may feel **confused/down/lost/worried /concerned** about your career and your future in general. You may have made a few attempts to improve your situation, but they were fruitless so far. Nevertheless, despite the challenges that this situation presents, you **still believe that things will get better soon**. It is a difficult period, but it will pass. You may feel somewhat anxious, struggle to sleep sometimes, and experience lack of energy and motivation to do things. However, apart from that, your **crisis did not have any significant effect on your physical or mental health**. Although you may be jealous of your peers who are more successful in their careers, your **crisis did not have any considerable impact on your social life**.

Severe

- During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you may face an obstacle to your career goals that you struggle to overcome. Because of that, you may feel **stressed/depressed/isolated /inadequate/anxious** about your career and your future in general. You have been repeatedly trying to improve your situation without any success. You start to **feel hopeless and question if anything is ever going to change for you**. Your future seems bleak to you. Your crisis may be affecting your social/occupational/psychological/physical functioning. For example, your **crisis may cause you noticeable problems with your mental or physical health**. A lot of the time you feel that you are **struggling to cope**. You may also feel like **isolating yourself from your social circle**, because you feel ashamed of yourself and do not want to answer uncomfortable questions about your career situation.

It is necessary to mention that a scenario-based crisis manipulation approach has been considered and subsequently rejected. That is, instead of finding people in a career crisis and asking them to choose a crisis severity vignette that reflects their state, participants could have been asked to imagine themselves to be in a mild or severe crisis. The scenario-based approach has been used in previous framing studies. For example, Cesario, Corker and Jelinek (2013) asked participants ‘We’d like you to imagine as vividly as possible being at risk for contracting the disease while you read it’ and then showed participants descriptions of a fictitious virus and its consequences either for the person’s safety or growth. However, such approach poses a significant threat to the ecological validity of the study. Imagining something one has never experienced is inherently problematic. People who have never experienced a severe career crisis may not be able to accurately imagine their feelings, reactions, and evaluations in such a crisis. As per Study 1, a severe crisis can have a serious effect on the psychological state of an individual. As a result, people who are in a severe crisis

and people who are asked to imagine themselves in a severe crisis can differ in their psychological state, and hence their perceptions, reactions, and evaluations will differ. Moreover, people who have never been in the situation described in a vignette might be more emotionally removed from the situation (Aviram, 2012). In addition, people tend to be susceptible to actor-observer bias, i.e., attribution of one's own behaviours to external causes while attributing other people's behaviours to internal causes (Jones and Nisbett, 1971). For example, one's own career failures are more likely to be attributed to external factors such as the highly competitive labour market, whereas other people's career failures are more likely to be attributed to the person's personality, attitude, or behaviour. It is plausible to suggest that, depending on whether behaviours are attributed to external or internal factors, people will appraise a specific situation differently. According to Wondra and Ellsworth's (2015) appraisal theory of vicarious emotional experiences, an observer experiences the same emotion as an actor only when the observer's appraisal of a situation matches the actor's. Finally, manipulating a mild or severe crisis state is ethically questionable.

Thus, while manipulating the two crisis groups (i.e., asking people to imagine a severe or mild crisis scenario) would have given the researcher more control over the experimental condition and made it easier to find suitable participants, this approach was rejected due to its threats to the ecological validity of the study and for research ethics reasons. Instead, crisis severity vignettes were developed based on the findings of the interviews in Study 1, and were used as a tool for crisis severity assessments. That is, people, who were already in a career crisis at the time of the study, were presented with the description of a mild and severe career crisis and asked to indicate which vignette most closely reflected their current state.

However, measuring the presence and severity of a career crisis with vignettes increases the risk of conceptual fuzziness. Specifically, it is difficult to quantify the difference between

people in mild and severe crises. It is still possible that people who believe that they are in a severe crisis are, in fact, in a mild crisis or vice-versa. Therefore, the Generalised Contentment Questionnaire (GCQ) (Hudson, 1982) was used as a proxy measure for crisis severity. That is, it can be expected that the more severe one's crisis becomes, the less content the person feels about their life. The introduction of this continuous measure makes it possible to measure quantitatively the difference between people in mild and severe crises, thereby creating an opportunity to validate the crisis severity vignettes. Specifically, a median split can be applied to participants' GCQ scores, and the resulting two groups can be compared to the vignette choices of participants.

In addition, the study included dependent measures related to message effectiveness. Specifically, message effectiveness was operationalised as: message attitude, initiative attitude, and service use intention, akin to 'ad attitude, brand attitude, and purchase intention' operationalisation, which is frequently used in studies on the effectiveness of advertising (Simpson, Brown and Widing, 1998; Drossos *et al.*, 2007; Sohn and Youn, 2013; Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020). These DVs were included solely for the purpose of examining how they may be affected by the manipulation check's positions (before and after the DVs). The present study did not investigate the effect of the manipulation itself on these DVs, because it was done in Study 3 with the full set of variables (i.e., mediators included).

Message attitude was measured by three 7-point items anchored at 'dislike extremely/like extremely', 'very bad/very good', and 'very unfavourable/very favourable' ($\alpha = .928$). The items have been previously used to measure ad attitude in advertisement studies (e.g., Homer and Yoon, 1992; Graeff, 1996; Yoo *et al.*, 2009).

Attitude towards the initiative was measured by three 7-point items anchored at ‘very unfavourable/very favourable’, ‘very bad/very good’, and ‘very negative/very positive’ ($\alpha = .916$). The items were adapted from Lee and Aaker's (2004) measures of brand attitude.

Intention to use the promoted career support service was measured on a 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree = 1; strongly agree = 7) with three items: ‘If I was going to use the services of an employment agency, I would choose Career Mind’, ‘I would consider using Career Mind’s services’ and ‘I would recommend that my friends and relatives use Career Mind’s services’ ($\alpha = .865$) (adopted from Chang and Chou [2008]).

11.8 RESULTS

11.8.1 MANIPULATION CHECK

Independent sample t-test revealed that the position of the manipulation check – i.e., before the DVs ($M = 5.40$, $SE = 1.88$) or after the DVs ($M = 5.31$, $SE = 1.96$) – did not affect participants’ response to: the manipulation, $t(121) = .274$, $p > .05$, $d = 1.93$; message attitude measure, $t(121) = -114$, $p > .05$, $d = 1.03$; initiative attitude measure, $t(121) = -278$, $p > .05$, $d = 1.01$; and service use intention measure, $t(121) = -726$, $p > .05$, $d = 1.02$ (Appendix D-1). As a result, it has been decided to place the manipulation check before the DVs in Study 3. This survey flow felt most organic.

The results of an independent samples t-test (Appendix D-2) showed that, on average, participants who were presented with a promotion-oriented message ($M = 6.25$, $SD = 1.052$) rated the message as more promotion-oriented compared with participants who were presented with a prevention framed message ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 2.160$). This difference, 1.816,

BCa 95% CI [1.204, 2.440], was significant $t(86.63) = 5.91$, $p < .001$, and represented an effect of $d = 1.694$.

11.8.2 CRISIS SEVERITY VS. GENERALISED CONTENTMENT

An independent samples t-test (Appendix D-3) revealed that, overall, participants in mild crisis were more content (i.e., less discontent) with their life ($M = 48.23$, $SE = 12.43$) than participants in severe crisis ($M = 63.29$, $SE = 11.58$). This difference, -15.063, BCa 95% CI [-19.29, -10.48], was significant $t(121) = -6.83$, $p < .001$, and represented an effect of $d = 12.08$.

11.9 SUMMARY

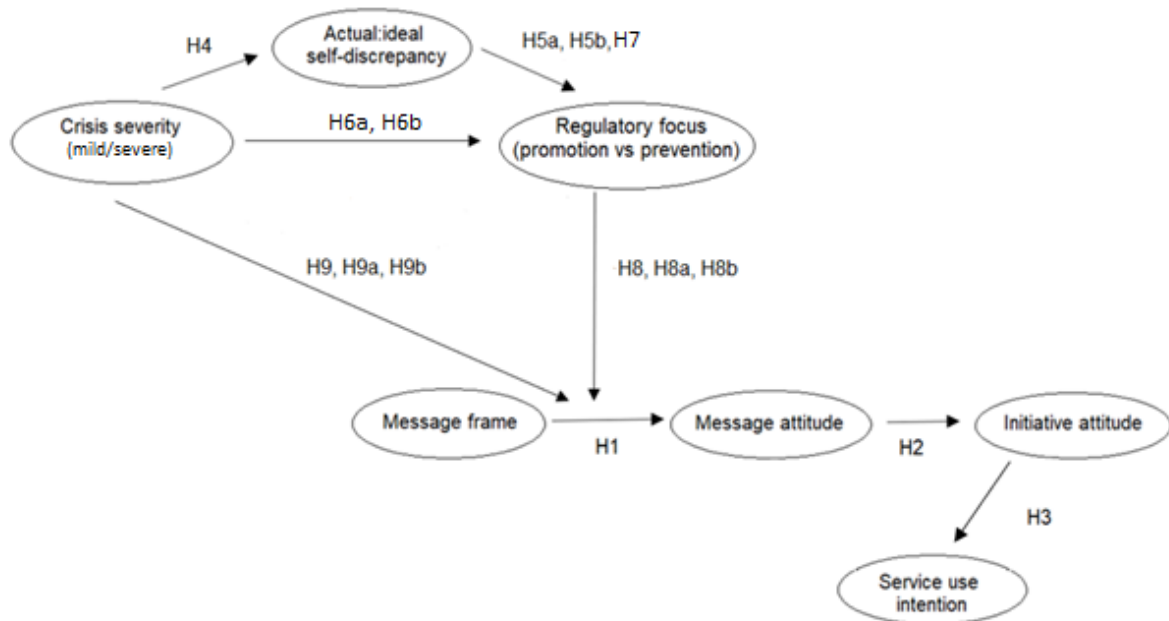
Study 2 has met its objectives as stated in section 9.1. Firstly, it confirmed that the manipulation worked as intended. Secondly, the position of the manipulation check (MC) was found to have no significant effects, and it was therefore decided to present the MC after the manipulation and before the DVs, as this looked most organic. Thirdly, by comparing participants' crisis severity vignette choices to their Generalised Contentment Questionnaire (Hudson, 1982) scores, it was possible to validate the vignettes quantitatively. Fourthly, the pilot study helped with the calculation of the sample size and the selection of the sampling technique for the main experiment (Study 3). The online convenience sampling procedures produced crisis groups of comparable sizes (mild = 71; severe = 52). Therefore, it was decided that a minimum sample of $N = 240$ ($2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8 \times 30 = 240$) would be sufficient for producing groups of adequate power (Gravetter and Forzano, 2015).

PART V: STUDY 3

12.1 OBJECTIVES

The key objective of Study 3 was to test the proposed conceptual model (Figure 22) and its hypotheses:

Figure 22. Conceptual model (Study 3)



Research hypotheses:

H1: Message framing will have a significant positive relationship with message attitude.

H2: Message attitude will have a significant positive relationship with initiative attitude.

H3: Initiative attitude will mediate the relationship between message attitude and service use intention.

H4: People in a severe crisis will experience a greater magnitude of crisis-related self-discrepancy than people in a mild crisis.

H5a: The *greater the magnitude* of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the *greater the prevention orientation* of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.

H5b: The *lesser the magnitude* of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the *greater the promotion orientation* of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.

H6a: People in a *severe crisis* will be more *prevention-oriented* than people in a mild crisis.

H6b: People in a *mild crisis* will be more *promotion-oriented* than people in a severe crisis.

H7: Self-discrepancy magnitude will have a mediating effect on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus.

H8: Regulatory focus of crisis sufferers will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.

H8a: *Prevention-oriented* crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to *prevention-framed* support persuasive messages than promotion-oriented messages.

H8b: *Promotion-oriented* crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to *promotion-framed* support persuasive messages than prevention-oriented messages.

H9: Crisis severity will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.

H9a: When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient's crisis, recipients in a *severe crisis* will have a more favourable message attitude to *prevention-oriented* messages than promotion-oriented messages.

H9b: When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient's crisis, recipients in a *mild crisis* will have a more favourable message attitude to *promotion-oriented* messages than prevention-oriented messages.

12.2 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The model was analysed by means of partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 3 software. PLS-SEM has been called 'a silver bullet' (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011), 'the holy grail' (Matthews, Hair and Matthews, 2018), and 'an essential element of marketing researchers' methodological toolbox' (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2022: 1035). Its advantages over ANOVA, PROCESS-Macro, and covariance-based SEM have been extensively discussed by various scholars (Hayes, Montoya and Rockwood, 2017; Breitsohl, 2019; Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020). In order to justify the use of PLS-SEM in the present thesis, the sections below will discuss in further detail why PLS-SEM was chosen over more conventional techniques as well as its compatibility with the epistemological stance of the researcher.

12.2.1 PLS-SEM vs. ANOVA

While more than 50% of articles in the four premiere marketing journals – Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Marketing Science and Journal of Marketing

Research – are experimental (Koschate-Fischer and Schandelmeier, 2014), ‘[f]ew marketing researchers employ structural equation modelling (SEM) with experimental data’ (Michon and Chebat, 2008: 299). One of the reasons may be the training that marketing researchers receive, and hence their familiarity with different methods of analysis. In UK universities, experimental design is normally taught to students in tandem with ANOVA and MANCOVA. The same problem seems to exist in American universities (Aiken, West and Millsap, 2008). Together with the historical divide between experimental and ‘correlational’ research, this may have created a misconception that SEM should be used mainly in non-experimental designs (Breitsohl, 2019). Yet, compared with PLS-SEM, ANOVA is more restrictive as a modelling approach (Breitsohl, 2019). Researchers using ANOVA model only single, observed variables or the mean of multiple indicators. The latter violates ‘a central assumption under which the measure was developed’ (Breitsohl, 2019: 656), especially in multi-dimensional measures. PLS-SEM, on the other hand, considers the contribution of each indicator to the model and also allows to measure complex models involving multiple mediators and moderators.

12.2.2 PLS-SEM vs. PROCESS

To understand and explain complex causal processes in social structures, marketing researchers often test moderation and/or mediation models (Hayes, Montoya and Rockwood, 2017; Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020). Mediation analysis is ‘almost mandatory for new social-psychology manuscripts’ (Bullock, Green and Ha, 2010: 550), as well as consumer research manuscripts (Pieters, 2017). Within the 2014–2016 period (volumes 41 and 42), out of 121

experimental articles in the Journal of Consumer Research, 71% contained at least one mediation analysis (Pieters, 2017).

One of the popular tools that estimate mediation and moderation models is the PROCESS macro introduced by Hayes (2013). Its popularity is ‘evidenced by its appearance in a variety of business journals and research presented at academic conferences’ (Hayes, Montoya and Rockwood, 2017: 77). The main advantage of PROCESS over PLS-SEM is its simplicity and availability – i.e., it can be easily downloaded and installed on SPSS free of charge. Moreover, PROCESS and SEM produce largely identical results for observed variable models (Hayes, Montoya and Rockwood, 2017: 77). However, while PROCESS assumes that data is normally distributed, PLS-SEM employs bootstrapping and therefore does not make any assumptions about data normality (Hair *et al.*, 2014). PLS-SEM also has higher levels of statistical power and is suitable for smaller sample sizes (Matthews, Hair and Matthews, 2018). Additionally, the choice of models in PLS-SEM is far less restricted compared with PROCESS.

Although PROCESS has merit for analysing mediation and moderation processes in observed variable models, it has several limitations when it comes to estimating complex latent variable models (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020), i.e., the model in this thesis. Firstly, PROCESS treats model relationships (the elements of the effect chain $Y1 \Rightarrow M1 \Rightarrow Y2$) as isolated processes (Spencer, Zanna and Fong, 2005), which contradicts the idea that ‘mediation is a single process’ (Pek and Hoyle, 2016: 153). Secondly, these isolated processes do not include ‘potential antecedent constructs of Y1, Y2, or M1’ (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020: 191), which has been shown to have a strong impact on mediation effects (Iacobucci, Saldanha and Deng, 2007). Thirdly, PROCESS overlooks the effect of measurement error (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020). PROCESS tests mediated relationships separately, thereby increasing the likelihood of the

correlation of one mediator to another, which in turn results in the overstatement of the indirect effect (Hair *et al.*, 2017). This problem is aggravated in models that involve moderated mediation (i.e., a model with two error-prone measures) because the interaction effect increases the diluting effect of measurement error (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020). As a result, researchers have argued that composite-based SEM methods (e.g., PLS-SEM), which estimate the entire structural model in a single analysis and correct for measurement error, are the superior approach to mediation and moderation analyses (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020).

12.2.3 PLS-SEM vs. CB-SEM

PLS-SEM also has an advantage over covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) methods (i.e., those implemented by programs such as AMOS, Mplus, LISREL, and EQS) (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, PLS-SEM offers more flexibility when it comes to specifying highly complex models, e.g., models with multiple mediators and moderators (Nitzl, Roldan and Cepeda, 2016). It works with formative measurement models, models with higher-order constructs, continuous moderators, unobserved heterogeneity, multi-group analysis, and smaller sample sizes ($N \leq 100$) compared with CB-SEM (Matthews, Hair and Matthews, 2018; Hair, Howard and Nitzl, 2020). Moreover, because it is nonparametric, PLS-SEM does not have strict assumptions in terms of data normality and homoscedasticity of data, and can be used with non-metric data (e.g., ordinal and nominal) (Matthews, Hair and Matthews, 2018; Vinzi *et al.*, 2010). A potential weakness of PLS-SEM compared with CB-SEM could be that it does not provide model modification indices to easily address possible issues of model misspecification (e.g., as created by omitted variables) (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2020). However, the newer versions of Smart-PLS software provide model fit estimation

(standardised root mean square residual – SRMR – index), thereby providing a solution of some sort. It must be noted that some researchers advise against the routine use of the SRMR measure in the context of PLS-SEM (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Since the main goal of PLS-SEM is prediction rather than explanatory modelling, PLS-SEM requires a different type of validation.

12.2.4 COMPATIBILITY WITH CRITICAL REALIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Partial least squares path modelling (PLS) in general (Cadogan and Lee, forthcoming) and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in particular (Henseler and Schubert, forthcoming) have been argued to be incompatible with a realist stance. Specifically, it is argued that PLS is incompatible with scientific realism, which accepts a single mind-independent reality, because the nature of the composites and inter-composite relationships constructed by PLS is nonuniversal (Cadogan and Lee, forthcoming). In PLS models, there is no observable causal connection between conceptual variables (theoretical entities) and their PLS composites (observable data). Therefore, it is impossible to test whether or not the composites provide a true representation of the conceptual variables. PLS composites are also the product of the choices made by the researcher. It is the researcher who chooses the set of composites and items that are entered into a PLS analysis, which means that they are socially constructed and non-universal. While these arguments are valid, it is important to acknowledge that the authors, who claim that PLS in general (Cadogan and Lee, forthcoming) and PLS-SEM in particular (Henseler and Schubert, forthcoming) are at odds with a realist stance, focus on scientific realism, not critical realism.

As discussed in Chapter 5, similar to scientific realism, critical realism (i.e., the philosophical stance adopted by the thesis) holds that there is a single objective reality (Danermark *et al.*, 2001; Fleetwood, 2005). However, unlike scientific realism, critical realism also asserts that there can be multiple perceptions of a single observer-independent reality (Easton, 2002; Bisman, 2010). In other words, critical realism can be seen as a philosophical stance, which integrates a realist ontology (i.e., there is a single objective reality, and its existence is independent of our perceptions) with a constructivist epistemology (i.e., knowledge of reality is socially constructed) (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). The latter has been argued to be compatible with PLS techniques (Cadogan and Lee, forthcoming). Unlike scientific realists, critical realists do not argue that the existence of something is contingent on its observability (Sayer, 2000; Danermark *et al.*, 2001). While scientific realists' reality is reduced to a single empirical domain, critical realists' reality consists of three domains: the empirical (observable), the actual (may or may not be observable) and the real (typically unobservable) (Bhaskar, 1978, 1989; Koopmans and Schiller, 2022). Therefore, the observable causal connection between conceptual variables and their composites is not required by critical realists.

The critical realist epistemological stance suggests that our understanding of reality is never exhaustive (Reed, 2005), hence all theories are fallible (Danermark *et al.*, 2001). However, that does not mean that researchers should forsake their attempts to develop new theories. It merely implies that the complexity of (social) reality should be acknowledged. This complexity should be reflected in the way the data is collected and analysed. In fact, Hayes and Rockwood (2020) state that, in behavioural sciences, researchers have been moving away from merely establishing effects and their boundary conditions. Increasingly more research efforts are being dedicated to 'understanding the mechanisms by which effects

operate and the factors that influence the size or strength of those mechanisms’ (Hayes and Rockwood, 2020: 49). Thus, the PLS-SEM technique with its focus on discovering mechanisms behind relationships is in line with CR epistemology and recent trends in behavioural sciences. Therefore, the use of PLS-SEM in the present thesis is not only dictated by technical considerations but also by the philosophical stance of the researcher.

12.3 DESIGN, SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

Study 3 employed a two-part design. The first part involved a screening survey which was designed to identify participants in a career crisis. This survey contained only one vignette question. In this question, participants were shown a career crisis vignette as per Study 2, and then asked: “Based on the above description of a career-related crisis, would you say that you are currently experiencing a career-related crisis?”. Subsequently, those who had answered “Yes” were invited to participate in the second part of the study, which was the main survey. The screening step was introduced to minimise participant recruitment costs. Study 3 was longer and required substantially more participants than Study 2. Therefore, it was decided to introduce the screening procedure. Moreover, since the screening survey was very short, the monetary compensation was low, which helped to reduce the risk of undue inducement. In other words, the participants were less likely to lie about being in crisis to get a financial reward. The second part of Study 3 (the main survey) had a structure similar to the structure of the pilot study (see Section 12.5).

As per Study 2, Prolific online panel was used to recruit participants for both Part 1 and Part 2 of Study 3. Participants were compensated £7 per hour (pro rata) for their effort and time (for a justification of the sampling technique, see Study 2, Section 11.3). Participants

were native English speakers aged 20-39 years who were experiencing a career crisis at the time of the study. Since there were no strong theoretical grounds to believe that experimental results would vary across Anglosphere countries, participants were recruited from several Anglosphere countries (the UK, Ireland, the US, and Canada).

Five hundred ($N = 500$) respondents completed the screening survey. Those who answered that they were in a career crisis were subsequently invited to participate in the main survey. Thus, the initial sample for Study 3 consisted of 359 respondents ($N = 359$). However, 13 respondents did not fully complete the survey, i.e., dropped out; 12 respondents were excluded because they had never experienced a career crisis; 28 respondents were excluded because they had a career crisis, but in the past; 2 respondents were excluded, because they failed 2-3 attention checks; 2 respondents were deleted because they were extreme outliers ($z\text{-score} > 3.29$) for two variables (message attitude and initiative attitude). Removing the outliers and those who failed attention checks did not change the significance level of the results. After removing the outliers and those who failed attention checks, the final sample was $N = 302$.

The mean age of participants was 27.66 ($SD = 5.30$). In terms of education level, 6.6% ($N_{GCSE} = 20$) had a GCSE level education; 19.5% ($N_{A\text{-level}} = 59$) had an A-level education; 51% ($N_{\text{undergrad}} = 154$) had an undergraduate degree, 14.2% ($N_{\text{postgrad}} = 43$) had a postgraduate degree, 2.3% ($N_{\text{PhD}} = 7$) had a PhD degree, and 6.3% ($N_{\text{none}} = 19$) had none of the above. Thus, 67.5% of respondents had at least one university degree.

12.4 MANIPULATION AND MANIPULATION CHECK

The message frame stimuli were identical to Study 2. Although the effectiveness of the manipulation was verified in Study 2, further checks to ensure the manipulation continued to work on the current sample were conducted. As per Study 2, to verify the effectiveness of the message frame manipulation, participants were asked to indicate what the leaflet asked them to imagine:

a career situation they wanted to avoid (1) ○○○○○○○ a career situation they wanted to be in (7);

an undesirable career situation (1) ○○○○○○○ a desirable career situation (7);

a negative career situation (1) ○○○○○○○ a positive career situation (7).

12.5 PROCEDURE

The structure of the survey was similar to the structure of the pilot study. However, two additional measures of interest were also included: regulatory self-focus and self-discrepancy magnitude. The remainder of the survey was as the same as the pilot study (a copy of the survey questionnaire can be found in Appendix E-2).

12.6 MEASURES

The presence of crisis, crisis severity and manipulation check ($\alpha = .952$) were as per the pilot study.

As per Study 2, message effectiveness was operationalised as: message attitude, initiative attitude, and service use intention, akin to the 'ad attitude, brand attitude, and purchase

intention' operationalisation of message effectiveness, which is frequently used in studies on the effectiveness of advertising (Simpson, Brown and Widing, 1998; Drossos *et al.*, 2007; Sohn and Youn, 2013; Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020). The measures of message attitude ($\alpha = .912$), initiative attitude ($\alpha = .944$), and service use intention ($\alpha = .831$) were the same as in Study 2.

To measure regulatory focus, Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda's (2002) 18-item scale was used. The scale was developed to measure academic goals, which are conceptually similar to career goals. The scale is not only context specific, but it was also found to have good internal consistency (the prevention sub-scale $\alpha = .759$; the promotion sub-scale $\alpha = .898$). The scale covers cognitive, behavioural, and affective aspects of regulatory focus. It also focuses on current and future goal pursuit rather than past goals, and has been validated by advertising studies (Chang and Chou, 2008). Regulatory focus was measured before the manipulation to avoid risking the validity of the results. That is, since the manipulation consisted of promotion- and prevention-oriented messages, they could act as primers for regulatory focus, thereby affecting participants' response to the regulatory focus measures. To establish participants' regulatory focus, their total promotion and prevention scores were calculated first. Then the total prevention score was subtracted from the total promotion score (same as in the procedure employed by Chang and Chou, 2008). If the obtained score was negative (i.e., below 0), that indicated that the participant was predominantly prevention-oriented. If the score was positive (i.e., above 0), that indicated that the participant was predominantly promotion-oriented. If the obtained score was 0, that indicated that the participant was equally promotion- and prevention-focused. Since the size of the balanced group was small ($N = 16$) and balanced regulatory focus was not part of the conceptual model, the values of this group were deleted and treated as missing values. The produced categorical variable was

transformed into a dummy variable (0 = prevention, 1 = promotion) for the purpose of a moderation test in PLS-SEM.

Self-discrepancies were measured after the manipulation rather than before, because ‘activation or priming of individuals’ ideals or oughts can temporarily increase their accessibility, thereby creating momentary states of promotion or prevention focus, respectively’ (Pham and Higgins, 2005: 10). To measure actual:ideal self-discrepancy, a short, explicit, single item measure, that has been validated in previous studies (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009; Huber, Eisele and Meyer, 2018), was used. Specifically, the magnitude of participants’ *actual:ideal self-discrepancy* was measured by a single question: ‘Within your career, how close are you to your ideal self?’ (adapted from Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009; Huber *et al.*, 2018). The question was answered on a 7-point scale (1 = very close to the ideal self; 7 = very far from the ideal self). Before the question, the following definition of ideal self was provided: ‘Ideal self is defined as your beliefs concerning the qualities you would like *ideally* to possess; your ultimate goals for yourself’ (adopted from Higgins *et al.* [1985]).

In addition, the survey measured the magnitude of actual:ought self-discrepancy. While this self-discrepancy was not part of the specified PLS-SEM model, its magnitude was measured to justify the choice of actual:ideal self-discrepancy. Measuring both self-discrepancies would allow to confirm that actual:ideal self-discrepancy is the most prevalent type of self-discrepancy among career crisis sufferers. The magnitude of participants’ *actual:ought self-discrepancy* was measured by a single question: ‘Within your career how close are you to your ought self?’ (adapted from Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009; Huber *et al.*, 2018). The question was answered on a 7-point scale (1 = very close to the ought self; 7 = very far from the ought self). Before the question, the following definition of ought self was provided: ‘Ought self is defined as your beliefs concerning the qualities you believe you *should* or *ought*

to possess; your unwritten rules or prescriptions for yourself” (adopted from Higgins *et al.* [1985]).

12.7 RESULTS

12.7.1 MANIPULATION CHECK

The results of an independent samples t-test (Appendix E-1) showed that, on average, participants who were presented with a promotion-oriented message ($M = 6.53$, $SD = .069$) rated the message as more promotion framed compared with participants who were presented with a prevention framed message ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .188$). This difference, 1.99, BCa 95% CI [1.60, 2.38], was significant $t(193.11) = 9.98$, $p < .001$, and represented an effect of $d = 1.763$. Therefore, it has been concluded that the manipulation check worked as intended.

12.7.2 SELF-DISCREPANCIES

The specified model could potentially work with actual:ideal and actual:ought self-discrepancies (SD). As a result, both types of SDs were measured, and the most prevalent SD was chosen for the analysis. The findings showed that actual:ideal SD (39.7 %; $N_{\text{ideal}} = 120$) was more prevalent than actual:ought SD (22.8%; $N_{\text{ought}} = 69$) among career crisis sufferers. The rest of the participants had more than one dominant self-discrepancy, i.e., actual:ideal and actual:ought SDs were equally dominant (37.4%, $N_{\text{balanced}} = 113$). As a result, it has been decided to present the specified model with actual:ideal SD.

12.7.3 MEASUREMENT MODEL EVALUATION AND MODEL FIT

The model was fully reflective. *Crisis severity*, *actual:ideal self-discrepancy*, *regulatory focus*, and *message frame* were single-item constructs, which means that the construct and the indicator are equivalent (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the direction of the relationships between the construct and the indicator (i.e., formative vs. reflective measurement model) does not make a difference. *Message attitude*, *initiative attitude*, and *service use intention* require the reflective measurement model, because the direction of causality is from the construct to the indicators (Jarvis, MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2003). Specifically, changes in one particular indicator (e.g., ‘like extremely’) are unlikely to influence the construct (e.g., message attitude) but likely to affect other indicators (e.g., ‘very favourable’, ‘very good’) (Jarvis, MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2003). Changes in the construct, on the other hand, would cause changes in the indicators. For example, if someone develops a more negative message attitude, this would imply that responses to the message attitude measures would change accordingly. Furthermore, the indicators are interchangeable (‘very good’ can be replaced by ‘very favourable’). Since the model is fully reflective, Consistent PLS Algorithm was used to evaluate the measurement model.

The size of outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of .708 (Table 9), which indicates construct validity (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Cronbach’s α and composite reliability scores were within the acceptable range of 0.70-0.95 (Table 9) indicating internal consistency reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2017). The average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs was higher than the recommended minimum threshold level of .50 (Table 9), thereby indicating that the constructs explain more than 50% of the variance of their indicators (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

All pairwise correlations had an HTMT value below the maximum threshold of .90 (Table 10), hence no discriminant validity issues were detected (Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2015;

Garson, 2016). Although Fornell-Larcker (Appendix E-3) and cross-loadings (Appendix E-4) also detected no discriminant validity issues, they were not used for discriminant validity assessment. Existing research has demonstrated that these approaches are not reliable at detecting the lack of discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2015).

Table 9. Factor structure and PLS results

Construct and Indicators	Type of indicators	Outer Loading	Cronbach's A	Composite reliability	AVE
Message frame (<i>single item</i>) Promotion frame – dummy (1, 0)	Reflective	--	--	--	--
Crisis severity (<i>single item</i>) Mild crisis – dummy (1, 0)	Reflective	--	--	--	--
Actual-ideal self-discrepancy (<i>single item</i>)	Reflective	--	--	--	--
Regulatory focus (<i>single item</i>)	Reflective	--	--	--	--
Message attitude MA1 - dislike extremely/like extremely MA2 - very bad/very good MA3 - very unfavourable/very favourable	Reflective	0.885 0.855 0.903	0.912	0.913	0.777
Initiative attitude IA1 - very unfavourable/very favourable IA2 - very bad/very good IA3 - very negative/very positive	Reflective	0.935 0.930 0.899	0.944	0.944	0.850
Service use intention SUI1 - If I was going to use the services of an employment agency, I would choose Career Mind SUI2 - I would consider using Career Mind's services SUI3 - I would recommend that my friends and relatives use Career Mind's services	Reflective	0.805 0.784 0.777	0.831	0.832	0.622

Table 10. Discriminant validity using the HTMT criteria

	Actual-ideal SD	Crisis severity	Crisis severity * Message frame	Frame	Initiative attitude	Message attitude	Reg. focus	Reg. focus * Message frame *
Crisis severity	0.221							
Crisis severity * Message frame	0.027	0.002						
Frame	0.107	0.060	0.002					
Initiative attitude	0.113	0.003	0.089	0.259				
Message attitude	0.133	0.024	0.117	0.247	0.827			
Reg. focus	0.261	0.344	0.042	0.106	0.132	0.107		
Reg. focus * Message frame	0.028	0.042	0.342	0.004	0.087	0.068	0.034	
Service use intention	0.142	0.053	0.087	0.177	0.774	0.775	0.086	0.074

Hair *et al.* (2017) comment critically on the practical utility of the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) in the context of PLS-SEM. SRMR represents ‘the root mean square discrepancy between the observed correlations and the model-implied correlations’ (Hair *et al.*, 2017: 204). This model fit measure is normally used in CB-SEM, which has a primary goal to minimise the discrepancy between the observed correlations and the model-implied correlations. Whereas, in PLS-SEM, the discrepancy results from the model estimation, which has a primary aim to maximise the explained variance of the endogenous constructs. Nevertheless, the SRMR value will still be reported in the present study to facilitate a comparison between PLS and covariance-based SEM. SRMR for the specified model was 0.024 (saturated) and 0.046 (estimated), which meets even the most rigorous criteria for model fit (SRMR<0.08; Hu and Bentler, 1999). Therefore, according to the SRMR model fit measure, the specified model can be considered an appropriate fit for the data.

12.7.4 COMMON METHOD BIAS

Common method bias was assessed using the Harman's Single Factor test on crisis severity, actual-ideal self-discrepancy, regulatory focus (nine promotion items, and nine prevention items), message attitude, initiative attitude, and purchase intention. A single factor accounted for 26.7% of the total variance, which is below the accepted threshold of 50.00%, suggesting the absence of common method bias (Aguirre-Urreta and Hu, 2019). However, it was acknowledged that, despite its widespread use, the Harman's Single Factor test does not guarantee the absence of common method bias (Baumgartner, Weijters and Pieters, 2021). Therefore, it has been decided to mitigate the risks of common method bias by conducting a full collinearity test, which has been suggested as a comprehensive procedure for testing common method bias in the context of PLS-SEM (Kock, 2015). The results of the test showed that all [facto-level] VIFs were lower than 3.3, which indicates that the specified model can be considered free of common method bias (Ibid.).

12.7.5 STRUCTURAL MODEL EVALUATION

Although the relevance of the issue of multicollinearity is questionable for reflective models such as the present one (Garson, 2016), constructs were still tested for variance inflation factor (VIF). All inner VIF loadings were within the recommended range of 0.2-5.0 (Hair *et al.*, 2017), thereby confirming that findings are not inflated by multicollinearity (Appendix E-5).

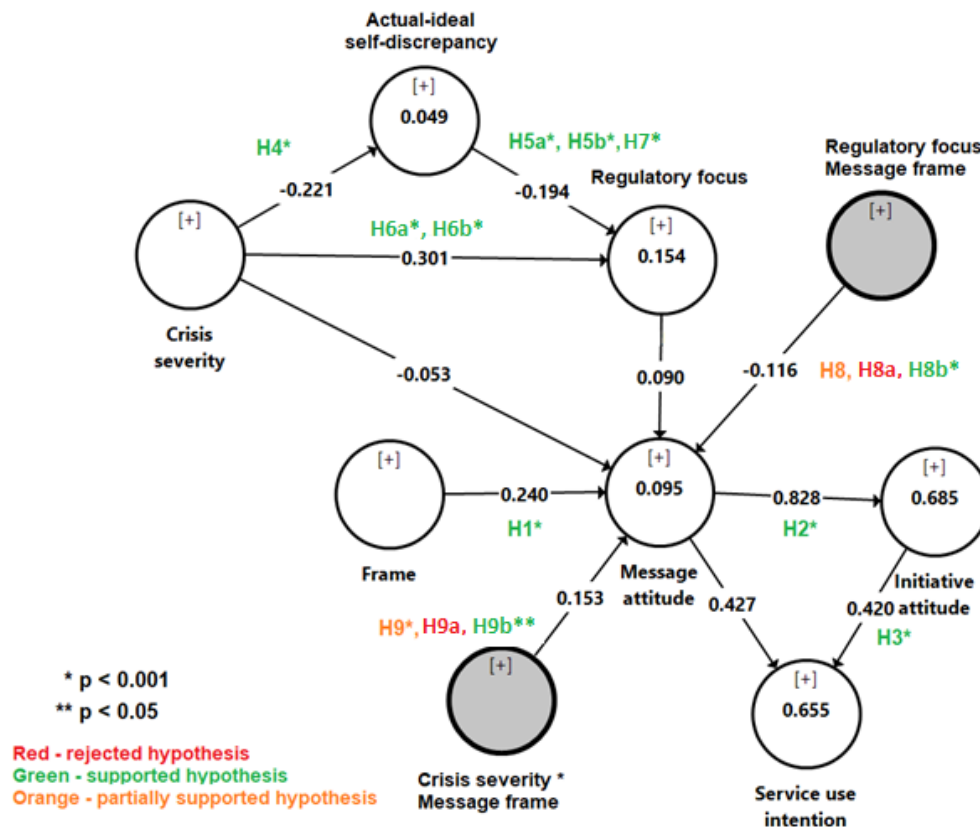
Consistent PLS (PLSc) was used with bootstrapping set to 5000 samples. The results of the structural assessment of the path model are summarised in Table 11. Figure 23 provides a

graphical representation of the PLS-SEM results. The obtained direct, moderating, and mediating effects will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Table 11. The results of the structural assessment of the path model

	Path coefficients (β)	t-Statistics	p-Values	BI 97.5% CI
Actual-ideal self-discrepancy -> Regulatory focus	-0.194	3.586	0.000	[-0.301; -0.087]
Crisis severity -> Actual-ideal self-discrepancy	-0.221	3.975	0.000	[-0.331; -0.110]
Crisis severity -> Message attitude	-0.053	0.856	0.392	[-0.176; 0.073]
Crisis severity -> Regulatory focus	0.301	5.515	0.000	[0.192; 0.408]
Crisis severity * Message frame -> Message attitude	0.153	2.461	0.014	[0.032; 0.277]
Message frame -> Message attitude	0.240	4.343	0.000	[0.124; 0.342]
Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	0.420	4.113	0.000	[0.211; 0.609]
Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	0.828	26.262	0.000	[0.757; 0.882]
Regulatory focus -> Message attitude	0.090	1.443	0.152	[0.224; 0.634]
Regulatory focus * Message frame -> Message attitude	-0.116	1.910	0.056	[-0.038; 0.209]

Figure 23. PLS-SEM results



12.7.5.1 Direct effects

The results support all hypothesised direct effects. Specifically:

H1 – Message framing has a significant positive relationship with message attitude ($\beta = .240, p < .001$). Moreover, on average, the promotion-oriented message results in a more favourable message attitude than the prevention-oriented message.

H2 – Message attitude has a significant positive relationship with initiative attitude ($\beta = .828, p < .001$).

H4 – People in a severe crisis experience a greater magnitude of crisis-related self-discrepancy than people in a mild crisis ($\beta = -.221, p < .001$)*.

*The same trend was found for *actual:ought* self-discrepancy ($\beta = -.170, p = .002$).

H5a and **H5b** – the *greater (lesser)* the magnitude of career-related *actual:ideal* self-discrepancy, the greater the *prevention (promotion)* orientation of crisis sufferers is in their career domain ($\beta = -.194, p < .001$)*.

*The same trend was found for *actual:ought* self-discrepancy ($\beta = -.215, p < .001$).

H6a and **H6b** – People in a *mild (severe)* career crisis are more *promotion-oriented (prevention-oriented)* than people in a *severe (mild)* career crisis ($\beta = .301, p < .001$).

12.7.5.2 Moderating effects

The results also partially support the hypothesised moderating effects. The interaction effect of regulatory focus and message frame on message attitude was non-significant ($\beta = -.116; p = .056$), indicating that H8, H8a and H8b were not supported. However, the effect was only marginally higher than the significance threshold of $p = .05$. Therefore, ANOVA and a

simple effects analysis were employed to gain a more detailed picture of the moderation. A simple effects analysis breaks down the interaction and determines the effect of the message frame variable at each level of the crisis severity variable and vice versa (Price *et al.*, 2017). This analysis essentially helps to split each main effect into two simple effects. In a 2x2 design, two main effects are split into four simple effects.

The results of the ANOVA test (Appendix E-7) confirmed that the interaction effect of message frame and regulatory focus on message attitude was non-significant, $F(1, 282) = 1.300$, $p = .255$, $\eta^2_p = .005$. The results also showed that the main effect of message frame on message attitude was significant, $F(1, 282) = 15.820$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .053$, whereas the main effect of regulatory focus on message attitude was non-significant, $F(1, 282) = 1.847$, $p = .175$, $\eta^2_p = .007$. According to Tybout and Sternthal (2001: 9), '[r]egarding the testing of simple effects, clearly the preference is to do so after having demonstrated a significant interaction. If the interaction itself is not significant, one must proceed carefully. If the main effect of A is significant and B is not, one may conduct the [simple] tests of SSB@a1 and SSB@a2, but not SSA@b1 or SSA@b2. If the main effect of B is significant and A is not, one may conduct the tests of SSA@b1 and SSA@b2, but not SSB@a1 or SSB@a2. 2. If neither main effect is significant, any of the four simple effects is defensible'. Therefore, since the main effect of message frame (A) was significant, and the main effect of regulatory focus (B) was not, the below simple effects test examined each regulatory focus group at different levels of message frame (SSB@a1 and SSB@a2).

The results of the simple effects analysis revealed that both promotion-oriented ($p = .030$) and prevention-oriented ($p < .001$) crisis sufferers reported a more favourable message attitude when they were exposed to the promotion-oriented message compared with the prevention-oriented message (Table 12, Figure 24). Therefore:

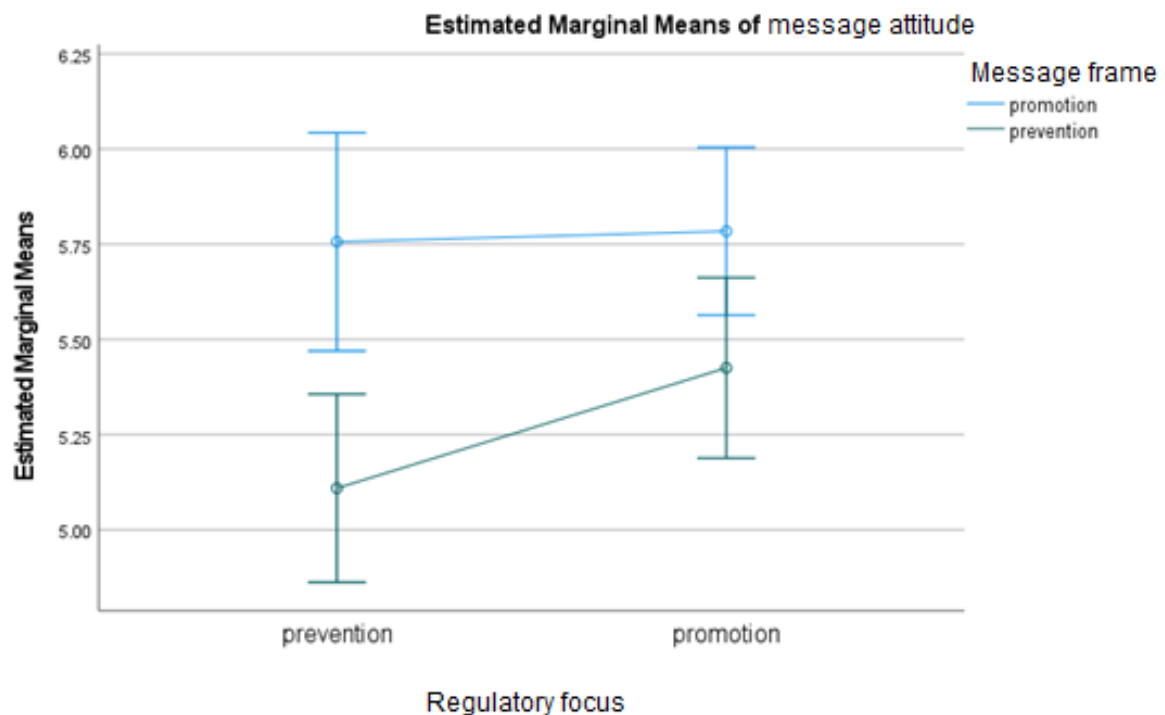
H8a (prevention-oriented crisis sufferers have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-framed messages than promotion-oriented messages) is rejected.

H8b (promotion-oriented crisis sufferers have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-framed messages than prevention-oriented messages) is supported.

Table 12. Simple effects analysis for message frame in the regulatory focus and message frame interaction (DV: message attitude) (Study 3)

	(I)	(J)	Mean	Std.		95% CI for Difference ^b	
			Difference			Lower	Upper
RF regulatory focus	Ad_frame	Ad_frame	(I-J)	Error	Sig ^b	Bound	Bound
Prevention	Promotion	Prevention	.647*	.192	<.001	.269	1.025
	prevention	Promotion	-.647*	.192	<.001	-1.025	-.269
Promotion	Promotion	Prevention	.359*	.164	.030	.035	.682
	prevention	Promotion	-.359*	.164	.030	-.682	-.035
Based on estimated marginal means							
*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.							
b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni							

Figure 24. Regulatory focus and message frame plot (Study 3)



Moreover, a simple effects test for 2x2x2 (crisis severity * regulatory focus * message frame) has revealed that both promotion-oriented ($p = .005$) and prevention-oriented ($p = .003$) people in a mild crisis reported a more favourable message attitude when they were exposed to the promotion-oriented message compared with the prevention-oriented message (Table 13, Figure 25). In other words, the effect of message frame was significant for both promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented people in a mild crisis. The test has also revealed that the effect of message frame was significant only for prevention-oriented people in a severe crisis, thereby suggesting that being promotion-oriented while in a severe crisis eliminates the effects of message frame (Table 13, Figure 26). Therefore:

H8 – regulatory focus moderates the relationship between message framing and message attitude – is partially supported.

*Table 13. Simple effects analysis for message frame in the crisis severity*regulatory focus*message frame interaction (DV: message attitude)*

		(I)	(J)	Mean	Std.		95% CI for	
		Message	Message	Difference			Difference	Lower
Crisis severity	Regulatory focus	frame	frame	(I-J)	Error	Sig.	Bound	Bound
Mild	Prevention	Promotion	Prevention	1.030*	.340	.003	.361	1.699
		Prevention	Promotion	-1.030*	.340	.003	-1.699	-.361
	Promotion	Promotion	Prevention	.564*	.200	.005	.170	.958
		Prevention	Promotion	-.564*	.200	.005	-.958	-.170
Severe	Prevention	Promotion	Prevention	.462*	.231	.047	.007	.917
		Prevention	Promotion	-.462*	.231	.047	-.917	-.007
	Promotion	Promotion	Prevention	-.074	.287	.797	-.639	.492
		Prevention	Promotion	.074	.287	.797	-.492	.639
Based on estimated marginal means								
*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.								
b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni								

Figure 25. Regulatory focus and frame plot for the mild crisis group (Study 3)

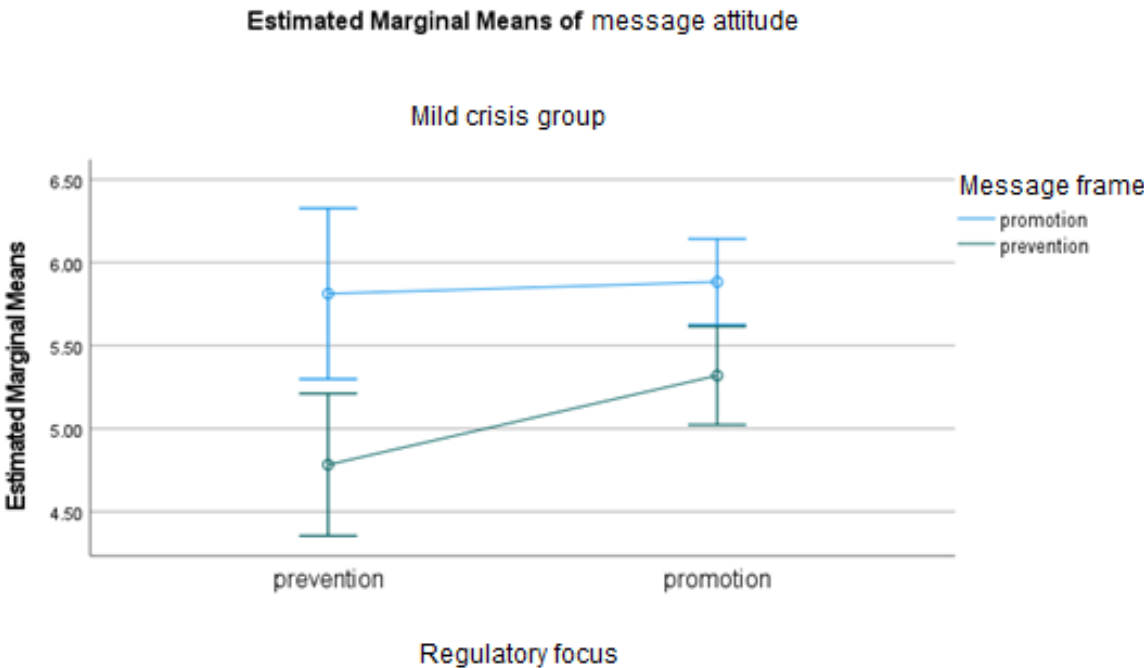
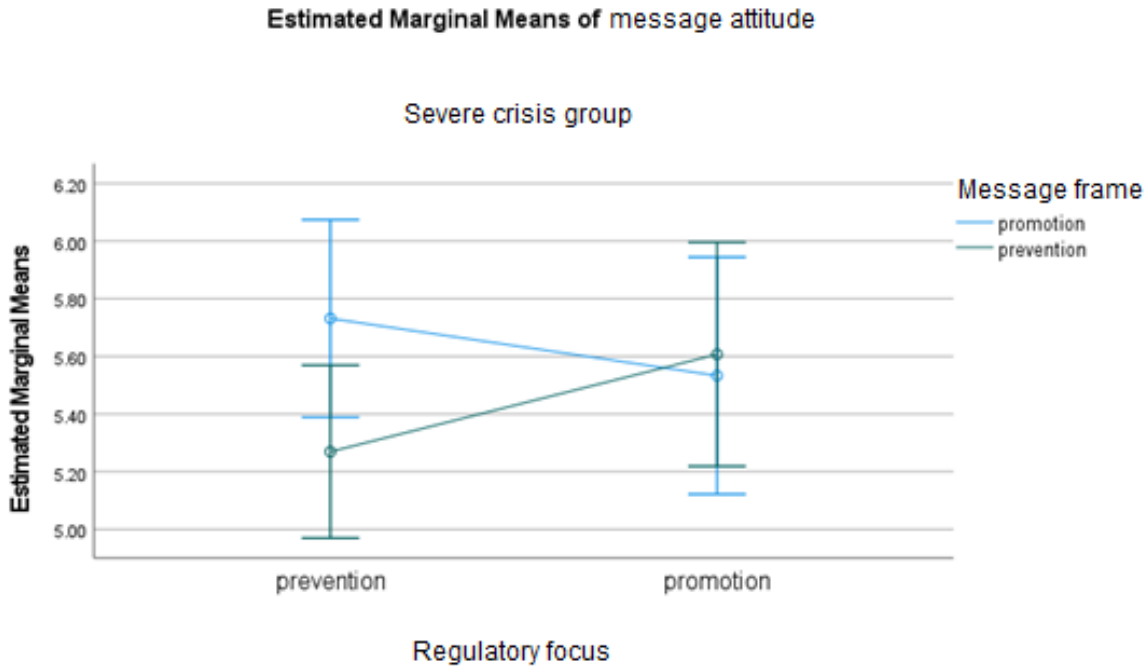


Figure 26. Regulatory focus and frame plot for the severe crisis group (Study 3)



The interaction effect of crisis severity and message frame on message attitude was significant ($\beta = .153$; $p = .014$), suggesting that H9 – crisis severity moderates the relationship between message framing and message attitude – is supported. Crisis severity dummy variable was coded as 0 = severe crisis and 1 = mild crisis. Message frame dummy variable was coded as 0 = prevention frame and 1 = promotion frame. Therefore, the positive path coefficient ($\beta = .153$) indicates that, for people in a mild career crisis, the relationship between the promotion-oriented message and favourable message attitude is stronger. Therefore, **H9b** – people in a mild career crisis have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-oriented career support messages than prevention-oriented career support messages – is supported. However, since the direct effect of message frame on message attitude is $p < .001$, it was possible that the highly significant effect of message frame was inflating the significance of the interaction effect of message frame and crisis severity on message attitude.

Thus, in order to get a more nuanced insight into the moderation effect and to confirm the moderating role of crisis severity in the message frame*crisis severity interaction effect, an ANOVA test was employed. The ANOVA test allowed to obtain results for simple main effects. The results of the ANOVA test (Appendix E-6) confirmed that the interaction effect of message frame and crisis severity on message attitude was significant, $F(1, 298) = 3.989$, $p = .047$, $\eta^2_p = .013$.

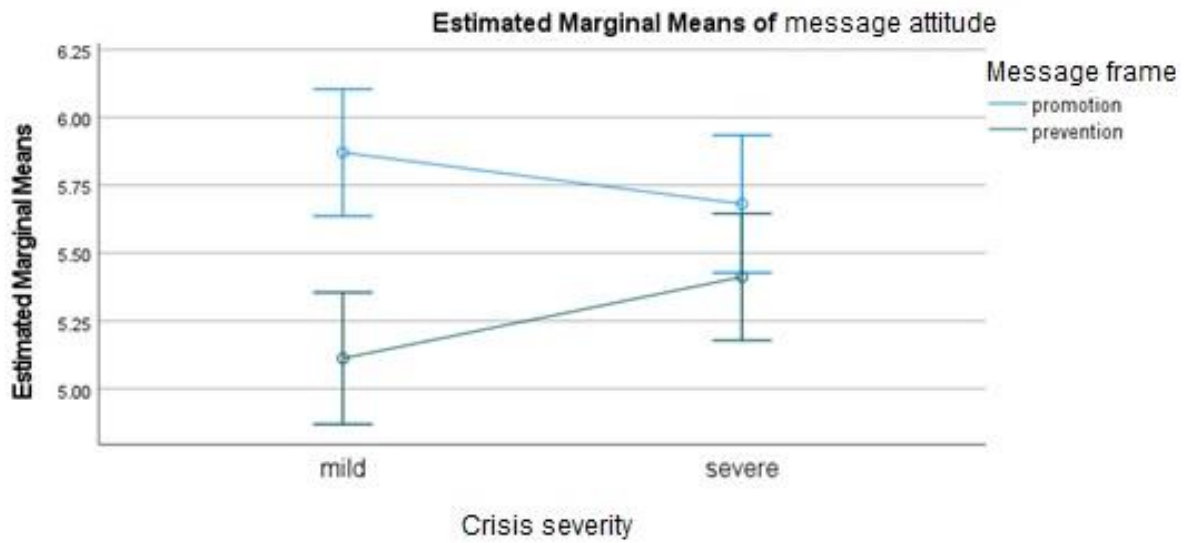
The results of the simple effects test for message frame in the crisis*frame interaction showed that for people in a mild crisis, but not for those in a severe crisis, there is a statistically significant simple effect of message frame on their message attitude ($p < .001$; Table 14). The visual representation of the interaction (Figure 27) suggests that there is a ‘spreading interaction’, i.e., ‘there is an effect of one independent variable at one level of the

other independent variable and there is (...) no effect of that independent variable at the other level of the other independent variable' (Price *et al.*, 2017: 162). Specifically, the message frame manipulation led to a significant change in the mean of message attitude for the mild crisis group, but not for the severe crisis group. Therefore, H9, which was supported in PLS-SEM analysis, is only partially supported in a simple effects analysis. As a result, **H9** – crisis severity moderates the relationship between message framing and message attitude – is partially supported. Additionally, **H9a** – people in a severe career crisis have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-oriented career support messages than promotion-oriented career support messages – is rejected.

Table 14. Simple effects analysis for message frame in the crisis severity and message frame interaction (DV: message attitude) (Study 3)

Crisis severity	(I) Message frame	(J) Message frame	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% CI for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Mild	Promotion	Prevention	.758*	.171	<.001	.421	1.095
	Prevention	Promotion	-.758*	.171	<.001	-1.095	-.421
Severe	Promotion	Prevention	.269	.175	.126	-.076	.614
	Prevention	Promotion	-.269	.175	.126	-.614	.076
Based on estimated marginal means							
*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.							
b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.							

Figure 27. Crisis severity and message frame plot (Study 3)



12.7.5.3 Mediating effects

Mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating effect of initiative attitude on the relationship between message attitude and service use intention. The results (Appendix E-8) revealed that the total effect of message attitude on service use intention was significant ($\beta = .774, p < .001$). With the inclusion of the mediating variable, the direct effect of message attitude on service use intention remained significant ($\beta = 0.427, p < .001$). The specific indirect effect of message attitude on service use intention through initiative attitude was also significant, and the $x \Rightarrow y$ path became weaker ($\beta = .348, p < .001$) (Appendix E-9). Therefore, a partial mediating effect of initiative attitude on the relationship between message attitude and service use intention has been established. Therefore, **H3** is supported.

Mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating effect of actual:ideal self-discrepancy on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus. The results (Appendix E-8) revealed that the total effect of crisis severity on regulatory focus was

significant ($\beta = .344, p < .001$). With the inclusion of the mediating variable, the direct effect of crisis severity on regulatory focus remained significant ($\beta = 0.301, p < .001$) (Table 10, at the beginning of the section). The specific indirect effect of crisis severity on regulatory focus through actual-ideal self-discrepancy was also significant, and the $x \Rightarrow y$ path became weaker ($\beta = .043, p = .006$) (Appendix E-9). Therefore, a partial mediating effect of actual:ideal self-discrepancy on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus has been established, and **H7** is supported*.

*A partial mediating effect of actual:ought self-discrepancy on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus was also established. Total effect: $\beta = .344, p < .001$. Direct effect: $\beta = 0.307, p < .001$. Specific indirect effect: $\beta = .037, p = .015$.

12.7.5.4 Q^2

The Blindfolding procedure was used to assess the path model's predictive relevance (Q^2) for all endogenous constructs. All obtained Q^2 values were larger than 0 (Table 15), which suggests that the model has predictive relevance for all endogenous constructs.

Table 15. The path model's predictive relevance (Q^2)

	Q^2
Actual-ideal self-discrepancy	0.045
Initiative attitude	0.525
Message attitude	0.067
Regulatory focus	0.144
Service use intention	0.386

12.7.5.5 The coefficient of determination (R^2)

To evaluate the explanatory power of the model, the coefficient of determination (R^2) of each non-endogenous variable was examined. Figure 23 (shown at the beginning of this section) demonstrates that the model explains 4.9% ($R^2 = .049$) of the variance in actual:ideal self-discrepancy, 15.4% ($R^2 = .154$) of the variance in regulatory focus, 9.5% ($R^2 = .095$) of the variance in message attitude, 68.5% ($R^2 = .685$) of initiative attitude, and 65.5% ($R^2 = .655$) of service use intention. Marketing researchers tend to rely on the general rule of thumb according to which R^2 values of .75, .50, or .25 indicate substantial, moderate, or weak levels of predictive accuracy, respectively (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011). However, in consumer behaviour research, those criteria are more liberal. Specifically, R^2 of .20 is considered substantial in the consumer behaviour discipline (Ibid.), presumably due to the complexity of factors affecting consumer behaviour. By the general marketing standards, the specified model explains a small percentage of variance in actual ideal self-discrepancy (4.9%), regulatory focus (15.4%), and message attitude (9.5%). However, when the complex nature of the constructs is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that it is unrealistic to expect that such constructs would be predicted by one, two or even three major contributors. For example, apart from crisis severity, actual:ideal self-discrepancy, and regulatory focus, there can be a range of other factors affecting message attitude such as message design, general scepticism towards advertisements, ad connectedness (the extent to which the ad was found relatable), emotions evoked by the message, positive or negative outcome expectancy, self-efficacy, and self-discrepancy velocity (the perceived speed of reduction of self-discrepancy). When the variety of potential factors affecting message attitude is acknowledged, 9.5% of explained variance in message attitude seems reasonable. In addition, in the case of message attitude, it is likely that the low R^2 score was caused to an extent by the partially (instead of

fully) significant interaction effect of crisis severity*regulatory focus*message frame on that construct. As discussed in Section 12.7.5.2, message frame was significant only for prevention-oriented people in a severe crisis but not for promotion-oriented, which is an important finding. Thus, while the R^2 scores of the key constructs are modest, it should not invalidate the model.

12.7.5.6 Effect size (f^2)

Some scholars believe that effect size statistics is redundant in terms of path coefficients, and that it should be optional to report it (Hair *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, in the present thesis, it has been decided to report effect sizes (f^2) to demonstrate the change in the R^2 value when a specified exogenous construct was removed from the model (Hair *et al.*, 2017). Conventionally, f^2 values of .02, .15, and .35 are considered to represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Therefore, based on the obtained f^2 results (Table 16), it can be concluded that the effect size of actual-ideal self-discrepancy on the R^2 value in regulatory focus is small ($f^2 = .042$); the effect size of crisis severity on the R^2 value in actual-ideal self-discrepancy is small ($f^2 = .051$); the effect size of crisis severity on the R^2 value in regulatory focus is small ($f^2 = .102$); and the effect size of message frame on the R^2 value in message attitude is small ($f^2 = 0.063$). The effects sizes that are large are: message attitude on the R^2 value in initiative attitude ($f^2 = 2.175$), message attitude on the R^2 value in service use intention $f^2 = 0.166$, and initiative attitude on the R^2 value in service use intention ($f^2 = 0.161$).

While the effect size of the crisis severity and message frame interaction on the R^2 value in message attitude is small ($f^2 = .023$), it should be noted that there are reasons to believe that

Cohen's criteria are too strict for moderators. Aguinis *et al.* (2005) have demonstrated that the average effect size in moderation analysis is $f^2 = .009$. Kenny (2016) proposes that, in tests of moderation, .005, .01, and .025 constitute more realistic (yet still optimistic), standards for small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively. Thus, according to Kenny (2016), the effect size of the crisis severity and message frame interaction on the R^2 value in message attitude is medium.

Table 16. *Effect sizes (f^2)*

	Actual-ideal self-discrepancy	Initiative attitude	Message attitude	Regulatory focus	Service use intention
Actual-ideal self-discrepancy				0.042	
Crisis severity	0.051		0.003	0.102	
Crisis severity*Message frame			0.023		
Message frame			0.063		
Initiative attitude					0.161
Message attitude		2.175			0.166
Regulatory focus			0.008		
Regulatory focus*Message frame			0.013		
Service use intention					

12.8 SUMMARY

Study 3 tested the proposed conceptual model (Figure 22, Section 12.1) and its hypotheses. Table 17 summarises the results of the hypothesis testing. All direct and mediating effects were supported. Specifically, the findings confirmed that message framing has a significant relationship with message attitude (**H1** – supported). As expected, message attitude was found to have a significant positive relationship with initiative attitude (**H2** – supported) and initiative attitude was found to mediate the relationship between message attitude and service use intention (**H3** – supported). The relationships between crisis severity, actual:ideal self-

discrepancy, and regulatory focus were as predicted. People experiencing a severe career crisis were found to have a greater magnitude of crisis-related actual:ideal self-discrepancy than people experiencing a mild crisis (**H4** – supported). The *greater* magnitude of a crisis-related *actual:ideal* self-discrepancy was associated with the *greater prevention* orientation of crisis sufferers in their crisis domain (**H5a** – supported). In contrast, the *lesser* magnitude of a crisis-related *actual:ideal* self-discrepancy was associated with the *greater promotion* orientation of crisis sufferers in their crisis domain (**H5b** – supported). Consequently, people in a severe crisis were more prevention-oriented than people in a mild crisis (**H6a** – supported), and people in a mild crisis were more promotion-oriented than people in a severe crisis (**H6b** – supported). The results confirmed a partial mediating effect of actual-ideal self-discrepancy on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus (**H7** – supported).

While all the direct and mediating effects were supported, the analysis of moderating effects of crisis severity and regulatory focus on the relationship between message framing and message attitude yielded some unexpected results. Specifically, PLS-SEM analysis revealed a non-significant moderating effect of regulatory focus on the relationship between message framing and message attitude. However, a simple effects analysis revealed that both promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented crisis sufferers reported a more favourable message attitude when they were exposed to the promotion-oriented message compared with the prevention-oriented message (**H8** – partially supported, **H8a** – rejected, **H8b** – supported;). Moreover, a simple effects test for 2x2x2 (crisis severity * regulatory focus * message frame) has revealed that promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented people in a mild crisis as well as prevention-oriented people in a severe crisis reported a more favourable message attitude when they were exposed to the promotion-oriented message compared with the prevention-oriented message. However, for promotion-oriented people in a severe crisis

the message frame manipulation did not result in a significant change in the mean of message attitude, which suggests that being promotion-oriented while in a severe crisis eliminates the effects of the message frame.

Further, while PLS-SEM analysis revealed a significant moderating effect of crisis severity, a simple effects analysis showed that the effect was significant for the mild crisis group but not for severe crisis group (**H9** – partially supported). People in a severe career crisis were not found to have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-oriented career support messages than promotion-oriented career support messages (**H9a** – is rejected). For this group, the message frame manipulation did not result in a significant change in the mean of message attitude. People in a mild career crisis, on the other hand, as expected, had a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-oriented career support messages than prevention-oriented career support messages (**H9b** – is supported).

Finally, the findings suggest that the specified model has predictive relevance for all endogenous constructs. Although the R^2 scores of the key constructs and effects sizes were found to be modest, which was expected due to the complex nature of the constructs.

Table 17. Summary of hypothesis test results

Hypothesis	Result
H1: Message framing will have a significant positive relationship with message attitude.	Supported
H2: Message attitude will have a significant positive relationship with initiative attitude.	Supported
H3: Initiative attitude will mediate the relationship between message attitude and service use intention.	Supported
H4: People in a severe crisis will experience a greater magnitude of crisis-related self-discrepancy than people in a mild crisis.	Supported
H5a: The <i>greater the magnitude</i> of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the <i>greater the prevention orientation</i> of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.	Supported
H5b: The <i>lesser the magnitude</i> of a crisis-related self-discrepancy, the <i>greater the promotion orientation</i> of crisis sufferers in the crisis domain.	Supported
H6a: People in a severe crisis will be more <i>prevention-oriented</i> than people in a mild crisis.	Supported
H6b: People in a mild crisis will be more <i>promotion-oriented</i> than people in a severe crisis.	Supported
H7: Self-discrepancy magnitude will have a mediating effect on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus.	Supported
H8: Regulatory focus of crisis sufferers will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.	Partially supported
H8a: <i>Prevention-oriented</i> crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to <i>prevention-framed</i> support persuasive messages than promotion-oriented messages.	Rejected
H8b: <i>Promotion-oriented</i> crisis sufferers will have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to <i>promotion-framed</i> support persuasive messages than prevention-oriented messages.	Supported
H9: Crisis severity will moderate the relationship between message framing and message attitude.	Partially supported
H9a: When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient's crisis, recipients in a <i>severe crisis</i> will have a more favourable message attitude to <i>prevention-oriented</i> messages than promotion-oriented messages.	Rejected
H9b: When a persuasive message is related to the domain of the recipient's crisis, recipients in a <i>mild crisis</i> will have a more favourable message attitude to <i>promotion-oriented</i> messages than prevention-oriented messages.	Supported

PART VI: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the above findings, examines the main theoretical contribution of this thesis, and concludes with consideration for future research. Section 13.1 discusses the findings related to the effect of message framing on the effectiveness of career support messages. Section 13.2 presents a critical examination of the moderating effect of career crisis severity on the relationship between message framing and the effectiveness of career support messages. Section 13.3 critically analyses the relationships between career crisis severity, self-discrepancy, and regulatory focus. Section 13.4 dissects the moderating effect of regulatory focus on the relationship between message framing and the effectiveness of career support messages. Finally, Section 13.5 provides a conclusion.

13.1 THE EFFECT OF MESSAGE FRAME ON MESSAGE EFFECTIVENESS

The results of PLS-SEM analysis in Study 3 showed that message framing affects message attitude. Moreover, message attitude affects initiative attitude directly and influences service use intention indirectly through initiative attitude, which is in line with existing literature (Spears and Singh, 2004). Since message attitude, initiative attitude, and service use intention were identified as determinants of message effectiveness (Simpson, Brown and Widing, 1998; Drossos *et al.*, 2007; Sohn and Youn, 2013; Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020), it can be concluded that message frame affects message effectiveness.

It was also found that promotion-oriented messages result in a more favourable message attitude than prevention-oriented messages. There are several potential explanations for this effect. One of these explanations is that this effect could be produced by expectancy violation.

That is, promotion-oriented career support messages result in a more favourable message attitude because they are expected to be promotion-oriented. Prevention-oriented messages, on the other hand, may result in a surprise, which would lead to higher scrutiny of the message (Smith and Petty, 1996) and reduce the message framing effect.

Another explanation can be provided based on the feelings-as-information theory, according to which recipients may simplify a complex judgemental task by using a 'How do I feel about it?' heuristic (Schwarz and Clore, 1988). Specifically, when participants are asked to indicate whether they like or dislike a message, they may assess their feelings toward the message and use them to form a judgement about the message, instead of assessing the content of the message. It is possible that prevention-oriented messages result in negative feelings or a bad mood, which, in turn, results in the negative evaluations of message attitude. Additionally, recipients who are in a bad mood may apply stricter criteria when evaluating the message (Schwarz, Bless, and Bohner, 1991). Also, individuals in a bad mood have been argued to engage in more in-depth information processing (Ibid.), which, combined with the stricter criteria discussed previously, can result in an unfavourable message attitude if the presented message is not convincing enough.

The findings in this section contribute to the literature on message framing. Existing literature provides mixed results with regard to which message frame (positive vs. negative) is more persuasive and under what conditions (Levin, Schneider and Gaeth, 1998). There does not seem to be a single, universal manner in which message framing affects persuasion (Smith and Petty, 1996). The present research contributes to existing research on message framing by suggesting that promotion-oriented career support messages result in a more favourable message attitude in career crisis sufferers than prevention-oriented career support messages. Moreover, this is likely to be applicable not only to career crisis sufferers but to any crisis

sufferers exposed to persuasive messages related to the theme of their crisis. The findings also have implications for marketing communication practitioners. Specifically, the findings suggest that, when designing persuasive messages that target people who are likely to be in a psychological crisis, preference should be given to promotion-oriented message framing.

13.2 THE MODERATING EFFECT OF CRISIS SEVERITY

The findings confirmed the moderating role of crisis severity in the relationship between message frame and message attitude. However, a closer inspection of the moderating effect through a simple effects analysis revealed that only mild crises had a moderating effect, and no moderating effect was found for severe crises. Specifically, people in a *mild career crisis* were found to have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to the *promotion-oriented career support message* than the prevention-oriented career support message. For people in a *severe career crisis*, however, the message frame manipulation did not result in a significant change in the mean of message attitude. A subsequent mediation analysis for crisis severity, actual:ideal, and regulatory focus, as well as a moderation analysis for the interaction effect of message framing*regulatory focus on message attitude, provided an explanation for this effect (discussed in Section 13.3 below). However, a supplementary explanation may be that people in a severe crisis have low self-efficacy. Previous research has found that people with low levels of self-efficacy are equally persuaded by gain- and loss-framed messages (Van't Riet *et al.*, 2010).

Overall, the findings in this section contribute to framing literature by introducing a new moderator for the message framing effect. While valuable work has been conducted on the role of depression severity in the effectiveness of message framing (Lueck, 2018), there is

scant research about the effect of career crisis severity on the persuasive effectiveness of career support messages. Understanding the latter provides not only a theoretical contribution to the message framing literature but also has a practical implication, as it unpacks when crisis sufferers are most responsive to persuasive attempts. Specifically, the findings suggest that promotion framing can improve the persuasiveness of career support messages, if the message recipients are in a mild rather than severe crisis.

13.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRISIS SEVERITY, SELF-DISCREPANCY, AND REGULATORY FOCUS

In order to understand the mechanism behind the moderating effect of crisis severity on the relationship between message frame and message attitude, a mediation analysis was performed to test the relationships between crisis severity, the magnitude of self-discrepancy (SD), and regulatory focus. The latter has been argued by various scholars to account for the persuasiveness of message framing effects (Lee and Aaker, 2004; Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004, Study 1; Zhao and Pechmann, 2007; Latimer *et al.*, 2008). As predicted, people in a mild career crisis were found to be more promotion-oriented than people in a severe career crisis, and people in people in a severe career crisis were found to be more prevention-oriented than people in a mild career crisis. This finding has an important implication for crisis intervention policies. Combined with the previously discussed finding about the lack of effectiveness of message framing on people in a severe crisis, it suggests that career crisis interventions and career support services should be implemented as early as possible while crisis sufferers are still responsive to persuasive attempts and more proactive in their approach to crisis resolution.

The mediation analysis confirmed the presence of a partial mediating effect of the magnitude of SD on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus. The results of PLS-SEM analysis showed that people experiencing a severe career crisis have a greater magnitude of career-related SD than people experiencing a mild career crisis. The same trend was found for actual:ought SD. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the mechanism behind SD formation – the research area that is relatively underresearched compared to the consequences of SDs.

Additionally, the results of PLS-SEM analysis showed that the *greater* the magnitude of career-related *actual:ideal* SD, the greater the *prevention* orientation of crisis sufferers in their career domain. The results also supported the inverse hypothesis. That is, the *lesser* the magnitude of career-related *actual:ideal* SD, the greater the *promotion* orientation of crisis sufferers in their career domain. Moreover, the same trend was found for actual:ought SD. These findings shed new light on, and therefore contribute an original understanding of, the antecedents of regulatory focus. While existing literature suggests that the different types of SDs (actual:ideal vs. actual:ought) are associated with different regulatory foci (promotion vs. prevention, respectively) (Higgins *et al.*, 1994; Higgins, 1997), the present research suggests that regulatory focus can be determined by the magnitude of SD regardless of the type of SD. Using the magnitude of SD as a determinant of regulatory focus can be especially useful when the population of interest has a large proportion of people with more than one dominant SD (i.e., actual:ideal SD and actual:ought SD are equally dominant), which was the case in the present study (37.4%, N = 113).

13.4 THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF REGULATORY FOCUS

Since existing literature suggests that regulatory focus accounts for the persuasiveness of message framing effects (Lee and Aaker, 2004; Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004, Study 1; Zhao and Pechmann, 2007; Latimer *et al.*, 2008), a moderation analysis was performed to test the moderating effect of regulatory focus on the relationship between message frame and message attitude. The results of the moderation analysis showed that the moderating effect of regulatory focus was non-significant but close to the significance threshold of $p = .05$ ($p = .056$). Once again, a closer inspection of the moderating effect through a simple effects analysis revealed a more complex picture.

The results of the simple effects analysis revealed that both promotion-oriented ($p = .030$) and prevention-oriented ($p < .001$) career crisis sufferers reported a more favourable message attitude when they were exposed to promotion-oriented compared with prevention-oriented messages. This partially contradicted what has been initially hypothesised. While the findings confirmed the expected trend for promotion-oriented career crisis sufferers (i.e., promotion-oriented crisis sufferers were expected to have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to promotion-framed messages), the trend was expected to be reversed for prevention-oriented crisis sufferers (i.e., prevention-oriented crisis sufferers were expected to have a more favourable message attitude when exposed to prevention-framed messages). The latter was not the case. Instead, prevention-oriented crisis sufferers were more responsive to promotion-framed messages, which contradicts the existing message framing studies that found that individuals with strong prevention focus tend to be more responsive to prevention-oriented or loss-oriented persuasive messages than promotion-oriented or gain-oriented persuasive messages (Lee and Aaker, 2004; Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004, Study 1; Zhao and Pechmann, 2007; Latimer *et al.*, 2008).

The contradictory result is unlikely to be due to any differences in the operationalisation of regulatory focus. Existing findings tend to support the regulatory fit principle regardless of whether regulatory focus is manipulated (e.g., Lee and Aaker, 2004; Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004, Study 1) or measured by means of the regulatory focus questionnaire (Higgins *et al.*, 2001; e.g., Cesario, Grant and Higgins, 2004, Study 2) or through the Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda (2002) questionnaire (e.g., Zhao and Pechmann, 2007). It is more likely that prevention-oriented crisis sufferers discounted prevention-oriented messages because those messages described career situations they feared to be in, thereby intensifying their existing career-related anxieties and worries. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that emotionally compatible message appeals (i.e., appeals that evoke the same negative emotion as being incidentally experienced by the recipient) are less effective due to defensive message processing that is motivated by a desire to regulate the existing negative emotion (Agrawal and Duhachek, 2010).

The actual trend was not only reversed but also more robust for prevention-oriented crisis sufferers (i.e., the effects of the promotion and prevention messages on message attitude were more polarised), which is opposite to what would be expected based on the examination of the moderation effect of crisis severity on the relationship between message frame and message attitude. To reiterate, for people in a *severe career crisis*, the message frame manipulation did not result in a significant change in the mean of message attitude. Since people in a severe crisis were found to be more prevention oriented, it would be expected that the message frame manipulation would not be effective for prevention-oriented crisis sufferers. To understand the reasons why that was not the case, a simple effects test for 2x2x2 (crisis severity * regulatory focus * message frame) was conducted.

The simple effects test revealed that the message frame effect was present only for promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented people in a mild crisis as well as prevention-oriented people in a severe crisis. These groups reported a more favourable message attitude when they were exposed to the promotion-oriented message compared with the prevention-oriented message. No significant effect of message frame was found for promotion-oriented people in a severe crisis, which suggests that being in a severe crisis and being promotion-oriented eliminates the effects of message frame on message attitude. One of the explanations for this effect could be related to dispositional optimism and perceived efficacy. It could be that promotion-oriented people in a severe crisis have dispositional optimism. Existing literature suggests that dispositional optimism affects coping strategies and results in the preference for active coping (i.e., the problem-focused approach of direct action) (Scheier and Carver, 1985). Dispositional optimism is likely to result in high perceived efficacy (i.e., certainty that using the promoted career support services will lead to a desired outcome). Previous findings revealed that high efficacy leads to less elaborative message processing in which positively and negatively framed messages are equally persuasive (Block and Keller, 1995).

13.5 CONCLUSION

13.5.1 KEY RESULTS

This thesis examined the effects of a career crisis on the effectiveness of career support persuasive messages. The results revealed that message framing has a significant main effect on the message attitude of career crisis sufferers, with promotion framing being more effective than prevention framing. Message attitude, in turn, was found to affect initiative

attitude directly and service use intention indirectly through initiative attitude. The research results also showed that crisis severity (mild vs. severe) plays a moderating role in the relationship between message framing (promotion vs. prevention) and message attitude. People in a mild career crisis were found to be more sensitive to promotion-oriented career support messages than prevention-oriented career support messages. People in a severe career crisis showed no significant difference in their responsiveness to promotion versus prevention messages. Consistently with the philosophical stance guiding the thesis (i.e., critical realism), a causal mechanism behind the moderating effect of crisis severity was examined.

It was hypothesised and subsequently confirmed that the magnitude of self-discrepancy had a partial mediating effect on the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus, and the latter had a partial moderating effect on the relationship between message framing and message attitude. More specifically, it was found that crisis severity positively affects the magnitude of the discrepancy between actual and desired self-states. The magnitude of self-discrepancy, in turn, influences regulatory focus in that the greater the magnitude of self-discrepancy, the more prevention-oriented people are. Reversely, the lesser the magnitude of self-discrepancy, the more promotion-oriented people are. Consequently, people in a mild crisis are more promotion-oriented, whereas people in a severe crisis are more prevention-oriented.

A PLS-SEM moderation analysis showed that regulatory focus has a non-significant, but close to being significant, moderation effect on the relationship between message framing and message attitude. As a result, a simple effects analysis was performed to break down the interaction and determine the effect of the message frame variable at each level of the regulatory focus variable. The results of the simple effects analysis revealed that both promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented career crisis sufferers reported a more favourable

message attitude when they were exposed to promotion-oriented compared with prevention-oriented messages. However, a follow-up simple effects analysis of the effect of the message frame variable at each level of the crisis severity *and* regulatory focus variables revealed a more complex picture. The results showed the presence of a significant message framing effect for promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented people in a mild crisis as well as prevention-oriented people in a severe crisis, whereas no significant message framing effect on message attitude was found for promotion-oriented people in a severe crisis. Therefore, in the specified model, regulatory focus has a partial moderating effect on the relationship between message framing and message attitude.

To summarise, the thesis results establish that, when people are in a mild crisis, promotion-framed career support messages are more persuasive than those with a prevention frame. The same trend is observed when people are in a severe crisis but only for those who are prevention-oriented. Being in a severe crisis and being promotion-oriented, however, eliminates the effects of message frame on message attitude and, by extension, on initiative attitude and service use intention. Thus, the results of the present thesis broaden understanding of how to improve the persuasiveness of career support messages by determining what type of career support messages are more persuasive, to whom, and when.

13.5.2 CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The thesis has three domains of theoretical contribution. Firstly, the thesis extends the profile and role of message recipients' vulnerable psychological states in persuasive communication research. Secondly, the thesis establishes a new moderator for message framing, thereby contributing to the development of message framing theory. Thirdly, the

thesis extends knowledge of the determinants of self-discrepancy and regulatory focus. Each of these contributions as well as corresponding practical and social implications are discussed below.

The first theoretical contribution of the thesis is that it broadens the spectrum of segmentation bases for persuasive communication by demonstrating that psychological crisis severity is an important recipient characteristic, which can affect the effectiveness of persuasive messages – especially when they are related to the domain of the crisis. Persuasive messages that target a group of vulnerable recipients often fail to capture the heterogeneity of that group. For example, in healthcare marketing, it is not uncommon to segment recipients by disease condition, neglecting the fact that individuals with the same disease but different severity of the symptoms are likely to react differently to marketing campaigns targeted towards them (see Schmid *et al.*, 2008). While emerging evidence indicates the importance of segmenting vulnerable persuasive message recipients based on the severity of their vulnerable state (e.g., matching depression help-seeking messages with the ‘stages’ of depression – Lueck 2018), research in this area is still in a nascent stage of development. This theoretical contribution has an important practical implication as knowledge of the subgroup’s characteristics and its subsequent use for segmentation allow marketing practitioners and policymakers to allocate campaign resources strategically and economically by targeting their relevant audience.

The second contribution of the present thesis is to the message framing literature. Previous studies have found conflicting results for goal framing (see Thorsteinson and Highhouse, 2003). Consequently, researchers have been attempting to identify moderators of the framing effect. The thesis establishes a new moderator for goal framing by demonstrating how a psychological crisis can influence the effectiveness of goal framing when the message is

related to the theme of the crisis. The research findings revealed that the effect of message framing is more pronounced when people are in a mild crisis than in a severe crisis. Moreover, the research also showed that promotion-framed messages are more effective than prevention-prevention-framed messages. The latter is consistent with Thorsteinson and Highhouse's (2003) proposition that the career domain is generally promotion-focused (as opposed to the health domain, which is predominantly prevention-focused). Finally, the research also showed that, except for people who are in a severe crisis and promotion-oriented (i.e., those who have reduced sensitivity to message framing), both promotion- and prevention-focused crisis sufferers are more persuaded by promotion-focused messages than prevention-focused messages. This suggests that the principle of regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000) does not work with crisis sufferers.

One of the implications of these findings is the importance of promoting support services as early as possible, while people are in a mild crisis and, therefore, more receptive to persuasive attempts. Another implication is that, when developing career support messages for people who are likely to be in a career crisis, the preference should be given to promotion-oriented messages rather than prevention-oriented messages. These implications are significant because they can help to improve the effectiveness of the persuasive messages that promote support for people who are likely to be in a psychological crisis, thereby increasing the likelihood of crisis sufferers seeking professional support. This, in turn, can help prevent the development of severe mental health problems in people experiencing psychological crises.

Thirdly, the thesis extends knowledge of the determinants of self-discrepancy and regulatory focus and, therefore, answers Covey's (2014) call for research on the factors that shape the influence of recipient characteristics. Specifically, the thesis establishes a link

between psychological crisis severity and self-discrepancy magnitude, thereby contributing original insights on self-discrepancy formation, which is an under-researched area (Hardin *et al.*, 2007). While the topic of how self-discrepancy affects the way in which consumers interact with the marketplace is an established area of research (for a review, see Mandel *et al.*, 2017), further research has been needed on how to predict the presence of self-discrepancy in consumers. By addressing this research gap, the present research produces findings, which can aid consumer profiling. Unlike self-discrepancy, which is largely an unobservable characteristic, a psychological crisis can potentially be predicted and identified based on demographic data (e.g., age and education history in the case of a career crisis), online search history, social media activity (Agarwal *et al.*, 2020) and data gathered by fitness tracking wearable devices (Pedrelli *et al.*, 2021). Further, the thesis extends the seminal work of Tory Higgins (Higgins *et al.*, 1994; Higgins, 1997) on the relationship between self-discrepancy and regulatory focus by demonstrating that self-discrepancy magnitude, as opposed to self-discrepancy type, can act as a determinant of regulatory focus. This is important because people often possess more than one dominant self-discrepancy (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009), which renders self-discrepancy type less effective as a determinant of regulatory focus compared to self-discrepancy magnitude.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, the thesis also makes a methodological contribution by developing an effective and easy-to-use instrument (vignettes) which can help with the assessment of an important yet under-researched recipient characteristic, i.e., career crisis severity. This is significant because existing literature lacks career crisis severity assessment tools, especially those that could be used for self-assessment. The vignettes could also be adapted to other (non-career) contexts and further tested to examine their suitability for other types of psychological crises.

The research also has important practical implications. A combination of message targeting and message tailoring is considered the most optimal communication strategy for message effectiveness and resource efficiency when the promoted behaviour is not overly complex (Schmid et al., 2008). The present thesis shows how both persuasive message targeting and message tailoring can be improved, especially in the context of career crisis sufferers and career support initiatives. In terms of message targeting, the research offers an effective approach to the segmentation of career support message recipients as well as a career crisis severity assessment tool to aid such segmentation. In terms of message tailoring, the research demonstrates which message frame (if any) should be used with which target audience, thereby offering insights that can help advertising practitioners make informed decisions about career support message design. Thus, the thesis offers specific guidelines and message design tactics for advertising practitioners and policymakers who seek to improve the effectiveness of persuasive messages aiming to support crisis sufferers – and, importantly, in the context of career crises. Among the parties that could benefit from this are governmental agencies promoting support for people who are likely to be in a crisis, university well-being and career support services, marketing professionals promoting services or products aimed to help people overcome their crises (e.g., career development online courses and career coaching), crisis intervention centres and counsellors.

13.5.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all research, this empirical work has several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, the present research examined the role of a psychological crisis in the effectiveness of message framing by using the example of a career crisis. However, the results

may be applicable to other types of psychological crises (e.g., a marriage or relationship crisis, financial crisis, or mid-life crisis). Hence, future studies may wish to replicate the research for different types of psychological crises and examine whether the present research findings will still hold.

Future studies could also test the mediating role of other variables on the interaction between crisis severity and message framing. For example, in the present research, no significant message framing effect was found for severe career crisis sufferers who were promotion-oriented. It was suggested that dispositional optimism may account for this effect. Future research may test this proposition by including dispositional optimism in the proposed framework. Further, it is possible that the mechanism behind the moderating effect of career crisis severity on the relationship between message framing and message attitude is, to an extent, related to the emotions evoked by the messages. Previous research has shown that a discrepancy between the actual and ideal self-states induces dejection-related emotions (e.g., disappointment, dissatisfaction and sadness), whereas a discrepancy between the actual and ought self-states induces agitation-related emotions (e.g., fear, restlessness, threat, shame, guilt) (Higgins, 1987). Therefore, future studies may also include emotions in the model. In addition, the present research examined only actual:ideal and actual:ought self-discrepancies (SDs). However, it is possible that the findings will hold with other types of SDs. Future studies could seek to test the model with other types of SDs, such as actual:undesired SD (Ogilvie, 1987) and actual:feared SD (Carver, Lawrence and Scheier, 1999). By incorporating other types of SDs into the proposed model, future studies could obtain a more encompassing understanding of the relationship between a psychological crisis and SDs, and their consequences for the effectiveness of persuasive messages related to the theme of crisis.

Another limitation is that some of the causal inferences in the model are not able to be experimentally tested because it would not be possible or ethical to manipulate crisis severity. For example, it could be argued that regulatory focus is a stable personality trait, and therefore it predicts crisis severity, not the opposite. However, according to Higgins *et al.* (2020: 77):

“[A] person's regulatory focus is not necessarily set in stone: While people tend to maintain a chronic regulatory focus as a result of historical or recurring situations (e.g., growing up with a caregiver who has a specific regulatory focus), regulatory focus is also a state that can vary as a function of one's current situation as well as changes across the lifespan”.

Therefore, it is plausible to argue that an individual's career situation and work experiences can affect their regulatory focus in the career domain. For example, Brockner and Higgins (2001) have previously suggested that the nature of the feedback managers provide to employees, the rhetoric managers use (i.e., using the language or symbols that emphasise ideals vs responsibilities), the reward system at work (i.e., rewarding employees for a job well done vs. withholding recognition when the job is not well done) can influence employees' regulatory focus. In line with this logic, Koopmann *et al.* (2016) have demonstrated that work events can result in the daily shifts of employees' regulatory focus. The authors argue that negative work events (e.g., receiving negative information about one's performance) are likely to make security needs and losses more salient, thereby focusing employees on meeting responsibilities, which in turn increases their daily prevention focus. Career crises normally stem from negative career events or experiences, and hence they are likely to convey 'loss' information in the career domain. Career sufferers can be expected to perceive threat or loss in their career domain and, as a result, be preoccupied with avoiding further loss. In other words, the more severe the crisis is, the more security needs would be activated, resulting in a

stronger prevention motivation. Thus, while the ‘crisis severity => regulatory focus’ causal inferences in the present thesis could not be tested experimentally, the proposed model has a stronger theoretical grounding (at least, in the context of career crises) than the alternative model where regulatory focus is a predictor of crisis severity. Nevertheless, future studies could conduct a longitudinal research, which would help make stronger causal claims regarding the relationship between crisis severity and regulatory focus.

The next limitation that needs to be acknowledged is that Study 3 included a battery of items, some of which were subsequently excluded from the analysis and could have acted as potential confounding variables. Therefore, the possibility of the order effect cannot be fully excluded. Study 3 also did not include control variables. For example, gender and culture could have been used as control variables. However, after examining the sample size per experimental condition, it has been decided that splitting the data even further would present a risk to statistical power. Future studies could use gender as a control variable to investigate whether the model holds equally well across different genders. In terms of cultural differences, all participants were recruited from the Anglo Cluster countries, i.e., countries of the former British Empire that share similar cultural values and practices (Ashkansy *et al.*, 2002). To understand the effect of a psychological crisis on the effectiveness of message framing in more depth, future studies could also test the specified model with participants in developing countries.

Furthermore, like most experimental research, this thesis utilised researcher developed marketing stimuli (i.e., persuasive messages promoting a career support initiative). Greater ecological validity may be ascertained in future with cooperation from marketing creative designers. The study also did not include a control group for the message framing condition (i.e., no message frame). The reason for this decision was the difficulty in making participants

see the message as neutrally-framed rather than as promotion-framed, when pre-testing the message. Future studies could include a control group in the proposed framework and examine if messages with no frame are more effective than messages with promotion or prevention framing.

Next, it is necessary to acknowledge that the self-reported crisis severity assessment procedure (i.e., vignettes) may not be as accurate as the assessment of crisis severity by a trained specialist or by a validated self-reported scale. Replacing the self-assessment procedure with the assessment by a trained specialist can be problematic and indeed impossible due to the associated costs and practical difficulty of recruiting an adequate sample size. Developing a career crisis severity scale, however, is a promising and important avenue for future research because measuring career crisis severity with dichotomous vignettes inevitably leads to a loss of information (e.g., the moderate crisis group disappears). Since the moderate crisis group was not part of the conceptual model, the absence of this group is justified in the present thesis. However, by developing and employing a career crisis scale, future studies could examine the impact of being in a moderate career crisis on the effectiveness of career support messages.

Finally, a couple of areas for further research can also be identified based on the characteristics of the sample employed in this thesis. Specifically, the present research focused on career crisis sufferers aged 20-39 years and deliberately excluded other age groups. Although this adds value to the research by reducing the risk of overgeneralisation, it must be acknowledged that the findings cannot be generalised beyond this age group. Future studies may focus on the older age groups of crisis sufferers, because those groups may exhibit different patterns of response to career support persuasive messages. The research also focused only on university-educated young adults. Although this group was identified as the

main target population, future studies may extend the sample frame to include young adults without a university education.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A – Information sheet

EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF NORMATIVE LIFE CRISIS IN EARLY ADULTHOOD ON THE PERCEPTION OF ADVERTISEMENT

Participant Information Sheet for Interview Participants

You are being invited to take part in a study conducted by a PhD student at the University of Birmingham in the UK. It is important for you to understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of normative life crisis in early adulthood (also known as the quarter-life crisis) with a focus on career expectations. The study also examines how this career-crisis may affect responses to advertisements.

A **normative life crisis** can be seen as a period in adult life that is noticeably more difficult, stressful than normal, during which we struggle to cope. A crisis is also an important turning point in our lives due to the changes that occur. Crisis episodes typically last for a year or two but may be shorter or longer. People in their 20's or 30's can experience a crisis related to their careers. This crisis can manifest itself as **a feeling of being confused about one's career direction, a struggle to obtain a desired job, or a feeling of being trapped in an unsatisfying career.**

The aim of this project is to explore how the career crisis develops, what sort of career-crisis stages can be identified, as well as how people respond to ads that address the object of the career-crisis (i.e., ads that address issues related to careers).

Why have I been chosen for the study?

You are invited to participate in this study because you have indicated that:

- You are aged 20-39;
- You are currently experiencing a career-crisis or have experienced it in the past.

Note: Talking about your career-crisis can be an emotional experience. While every care is taken to ensure a safe and sympathetic interview environment, we recommend that participants consider their wellbeing before agreeing to participate in an interview.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?

Personal information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and made anonymous, but your anonymised answers to research questions will be used in research analysis, academic conferences and journal articles. By consenting to having your interview audio-recorded, you are also consenting to all recordings being destroyed once they have been transcribed. Full transcripts from the research will only be viewed by the research team and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and password-protected computer. All data from the research will be destroyed after 10 years.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part, as participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, please retain this information sheet and complete the consent form at the beginning of the interview, to indicate that you understand your rights in relation to this research and that you are happy to participate. You are free to withdraw the information you provide within two weeks (14 days) from the date of the interview, without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw, or a decision not to take part, will not affect you in any way. If you decide to withdraw the information you provided to us (within two weeks), all electronic data with your interview will be erased, and all paper-based information will be disposed as confidential waste.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide to take part in the research, you will be invited to participate in an online interview with the PhD researcher. Before the start of the interview, you will be given the opportunity to ask as many questions as you want about the research and what your participation involves. During the interview, you will be asked to describe your career-crisis, and how it has been/was developing. You will be shown a number of career-crisis stories and advertisements and asked to comment on them.

Where will the online interviews take place?

The interviews will be conducted online via Zoom. Participant will need to have a Zoom mobile app or desktop application for Windows or Mac. However, there will be no need to create a Zoom account.

What are the benefits of taking part?

By telling us about your views and experiences of career-crisis, we will be able to disseminate this information in various forms (e.g., through academic publications, conference presentations, media outlets) to various audiences. Also, you will get a chance to talk to someone about career-crisis.

What if I don't feel great when I talk about career-crisis?

You have the right to stop the interview at any point, without giving a reason. You are also free to withdraw the information you provide within two weeks (14 days) from the date of the interview, without giving a reason.

Where can I find counselling services and/or sources of support?

In the unlikely event that you feel unwell as a result of taking part in the interview, you may want to consider the following mental health services and resources:

- **University of Birmingham Self-Help Guides:**
<http://www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/birmingham/>
- **Wellbeing Officers at the University of Birmingham** (if you are a student at the UoB): <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/Your-Wellbeing/wellbeing-officers.aspx>
- **Mind.org's guide** explaining what mental health crisis services are available, how they can help and when to access them. Also provides guidance on how you can plan for a crisis:
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/#.Xfp9qWT7Suk>
- **NHS** – How to access mental health services:
<https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/how-to-access-mental-health-services/>
- **Carr's Lane** voluntary holistic counselling service
(<https://www.carrslanecounselling.co.uk>)

What will happen with the results of this research?

The results of this study will be presented through academic publications, conference presentations, media outlets aimed at academics and anyone interested in the subject matter. All data will be anonymised.

Making a Complaint

If you are unhappy with any aspect of this research, please contact Elena Osadchaya () in the first instance. In your email please provide as much detail about the research as possible, the name of the researcher and indicate in detail the nature of your complaint. If, after discussing your concerns with the lead researcher (Elena Osadchaya) you are still unhappy with any aspect of the research, please contact the lead supervisor, Dr David Houghton ().

Who is organising the research?

The researcher carrying out this research project is Elena Osadchaya. The lead supervisor is Dr David Houghton.

Who do I contact for more information?

If you have any questions or are unclear about any of the information provided above, please contact Elena Osadchaya at

EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF NORMATIVE LIFE CRISIS IN EARLY ADULTHOOD ON THE PERCEPTION OF ADVERTISEMENT

Interview Consent Form

You are invited to take part in this research project seeking to explore normative life crisis in early adulthood (also known as the quarter-life-crisis) with a focus on career expectations, and particularly how different stages of this career-crisis affect responses to advertisements. Your participation will be in the form of **an online interview**. The interview will be conducted via **Zoom** videoconferencing platform.

Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from UK institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore **read the accompanying information sheet** and then, should you wish to participate, sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- The interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be produced. The transcript will be sent to you for your approval if you request it, or if we feel that there are statements that need further confirmation or clarification.
- All audio-recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed verbatim. Transcripts from the research will only be viewed by the research team and will be stored in a secure location until they are destroyed (i.e., 10 years after the completion of this study).
- Any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be 307irmingham so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed.
- In the unlikely event that you feel unwell as a result of taking part in the interview, you may want to consider the following **mental health services and resources**:

- **University of Birmingham Self-Help Guides**: <http://www.selfhelpguides.nth.nhs.uk/birmingham/>
- **Wellbeing Officers at the University of Birmingham** (if you are a student at the UoB): <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/Your-Wellbeing/wellbeing-officers.aspx>
- **Mind.org's guide** explaining what mental health crisis services are available, how they can help and when to access them. Also provides guidance on how you can plan for a crisis: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/#.Xfp9Gwt7Suk>
- **NHS** – How to access mental health services: <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/how-to-access-mental-health-services/>

- Carr's Lane voluntary holistic counselling service (<https://www.carrslanecounselling.co.uk>)

Note: Talking about your career-crisis can be an emotional experience. While every care is taken to ensure a safe and sympathetic interview environment, we recommend that participants consider their wellbeing before agreeing to participate in an interview.

Please do not hesitate to ask me questions if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information about any aspect of this research. It is important that you feel able to take the necessary time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Should you require any further information about the research, please contact **Elena Osadchaya** at [REDACTED]

1	I confirm that I am 20 years or older.	YES	NO
2	I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	YES	NO
3	I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I am free to withdraw (including the information I provide) <u>during the interview and within 2 weeks (14 days) from the interview date</u> without giving a reason.	YES	NO
4	I understand that all the information I provide will be 308irmingham and personal details will be treated in confidence.	YES	NO
5	I am happy for my answers to interview questions to be used in a PhD thesis, academic conferences, and journal publications produced by the researcher.	YES	NO
6	I am happy for my interview to be audio-recorded and transcribed.	YES	NO
7	I agree to take part in the above study.	YES	NO
8	In the unlikely event that you feel unwell as a result of talking about crisis, I understand that I can use the below resources and services: • University of Birmingham Self-Help Guides: http://www.selfhelpguides.ntw.nhs.uk/308irmingham/ • Wellbeing Officers at the University of Birmingham (if you are a student at the UoB): https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/student/Your-Wellbeing/wellbeing-officers.aspx • Mind.org's guide explaining what mental health crisis services are available, how they can help and when to access them. Also provides guidance on how you can plan for a crisis: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/#.Xfp9Gwt7Suk • NHS – How to access mental health services: https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/how-to-access-mental-health-services/ • Carr's Lane voluntary holistic counselling service (https://www.carrslanecounselling.co.uk)	YES	NO

Participant's Name	Date	Signature
If you would like to receive a summary of the research results when available, please provide your email address:	[Insert email here]	
Researcher	Date	Signature

What if I have concerns about this research?

If you are unhappy with any aspect of this research, please contact Elena Osadchaya () in the first instance. In your email please provide as much detail about the research as possible, the name of the researcher and indicate in detail the nature of your complaint.

If, after discussing your concerns with the lead researcher (Elena Osadchaya) you are still unhappy with any aspect of the research, please contact the lead supervisor, Dr David Houghton ().

If after contacting the lead researcher and the lead supervisor, you are still concerned about how this research is being conducted, you can contact Susan Cottam (Research Ethics Officer, University of Birmingham) at ().

APPENDIX C – Syntax for transcript encoding

Pauses	Denote short pauses during talking by a series of dots (...), whose length depends on the amount of time elapsed (e.g., two dots for less than half a second, three dots for 1 second, and so on. Denote longer pauses by the word "pause" in parentheses: "(pause)," for 2-3-second breaks. Use "(long pause)" to indicate pauses of 4 or more seconds.
Laughing	Indicate in parentheses, for example, (laughing) to denote one person; (laughter) to denote several laughing.
Coughing, etc.	Indicate in parentheses, for example, (coughs), (sigh), (sneeze).
Interruptions	Indicate when someone's speech is broken off midsentence by including a hyphen (-) at that point where the interruption occurs (e.g., What do you-).
Overlapping speech	Use a hyphen to indicate when one speaker interjects into the speech of another, include the speech of the other with "overlapping" in parentheses, then return to where original speaker interrupted (if they continue). For example: R: He said that was impos- I: (overlapping) Who, Bob? R: No, Larry.
Garbled speech	Flag words that are not clear with square brackets and question mark, if guessing what was said, for example, At that, Harry just [doubled? glossed?] over. Use "x"s to denote passages that cannot be deciphered at all (number of xs should denote approximate number of words that cannot be deciphered), for example, Gina went xxxxx xxxxx xxxxx, and then [came? went?] home.
Emphasis	Use caps to denote strong emphasis, for example, he did WHAT? (do not use boldface or underlining because it is often lost when text files are imported into qualitative analysis software programs).
Held sounds	Repeat the sounds that are held, separated by hyphens. If they are emphasized, then capitalize as well. For example: "No-o-o-o, not exactly," or "I was VER-r-r-y-y-y happy."
Paraphrasing others	When interviewees assume a voice that indicates they are parodying what someone else said or an inner voice in their heads, use quotation marks and/or indicate with (mimicking voice) in parentheses. R: Then you know what he came out with? He said (mimicking voice) "I'll be damned if I'm going to let YOU push ME around." And I thought to myself: "I'll show you!"

Source: *Alternative Abbreviated Instructions for Transcribers* (Poland, 1995: 302-303)

Poland, B. D. (1995). Transcription quality as an aspect of rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 1(3), 290-310.

In addition:

//// – omitted sentences

() – parentheses are used for researcher's comments

APPENDIX D-1 – Study 2 (Experiment 1): The position of the manipulation check in the survey (before DVs vs after DVs)

Independent samples t-test results										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Manipulation check	Equal variances assumed	.041	.840	.274	121	.784	.095	.348	-.594	.785
	Equal variances not assumed			.275	119.688	.784	.095	.347	-.592	.782
Message attitude	Equal variances assumed	.123	.726	-.114	121	.909	-.02127	.18574	-.38898	.34645
	Equal variances not assumed			-.114	117.859	.909	-.02127	.18595	-.38950	.34697
Initiative attitude	Equal variances assumed	1.781	.184	-.278	121	.782	-.05077	.18288	-.41283	.31129
	Equal variances not assumed			-.275	113.606	.784	-.05077	.18435	-.41598	.31444
Service use intention	Equal variances assumed	1.885	.172	-.726	121	.469	-.13424	.18483	-.50015	.23168
	Equal variances not assumed			-.714	106.572	.477	-.13424	.18791	-.50677	.23829

Independent Samples Effect Sizes				
		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval
				Lower Upper
Manipulation check	Cohen's d	1.925	.050	-.305 .404
	Hedges' correction	1.937	.049	-.303 .401
	Glass's delta	1.963	.049	-.306 .403
Message attitude	Cohen's d	1.02720	-.021	-.375 .334
	Hedges' correction	1.03362	-.021	-.373 .332
	Glass's delta	1.01988	-.021	-.375 .334
Initiative attitude	Cohen's d	1.01141	-.050	-.405 .304
	Hedges' correction	1.01773	-.050	-.402 .302
	Glass's delta	.95895	-.053	-.407 .302
Service use intention	Cohen's d	1.02218	-.131	-.486 .224
	Hedges' correction	1.02857	-.131	-.483 .222
	Glass's delta	.90795	-.148	-.503 .208
a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes. Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation. Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor. Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control group.				

APPENDIX D-2 – Study 2 (Experiment 1): Manipulation check

Group Statistics							
			Bootstrap ^a				
Message frame					BCa 95% CI		
		Statistic	Bias	Std. Error	Lower	Upper	
Manipulation check	Promotion	N	62				
		Mean	6.25	.00	.13	5.97	6.49
		Std. Deviation	1.052	-.021	.169	.738	1.317
		Std. Error Mean	.134				
	prevention	N	61				
		Mean	4.44	.00	.28	3.82	4.97
		Std. Deviation	2.160	-.016	.121	1.928	2.348
		Std. Error Mean	.277				
a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples							

Independent Samples Test											
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
						One - Sided p	Two - Sided p				
Manipulation check	Equal variances assumes	53.923	<.001	5.942	121	<.001	<.001	1.816	.306	1.211	2.420
	Equal variances not assumes			5.912	86.627	<.001	<.001	1.816	.307	1.205	2.426

Bootstrap for Independent Samples Test							
			Bootstrap ^a				
		Mean		Std.	Sig.	BCa 95%	
		Difference	Bias	Error	(2-tailed)	Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
Manipulation check	Equal variances assumed	1.816	.005	.304	<.001	1.204	2.440
	Equal variances not assumed	1.816	.005	.304	<.001	1.204	2.440
a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples							

Independent Samples Effect Sizes					
		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Manipulation Check	Cohen's d	1.694	1.071	.691	1.448
	Hedges' correction	1.705	1.065	.687	1.439
	Glass's delta	2.160	.841	.454	1.222
a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes. Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation. Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor. Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control group.					

APPENDIX D-3 – Study 2 (Experiment 1): Crisis severity and GCQ

Group Statistics							
Crisis severity			Statistic	Bias	Bootstrap ^a		
					Std. Error	BCa 95% CI	
					Lower	Upper	
GCQ	mild	N	71				
		Mean	48.2254	.0229	1.4904	45.2114	51.1440
		Std. Deviation	12.43290	-.15610	1.1774	10.29017	14.30070
				9			
	Std. Error Mean	1.47551					
	severe	N	52				
		Mean	63.2885	-.0291	1.5699	60.1316	66.2353
		Std. Deviation	11.57641	-.21515	1.2187	9.55925	13.33223
			9				
Std. Error Mean	1.60536						
a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples							

Independent Samples Test													
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means							
		F		Sig.		T	Df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI Difference	
								One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
GCQ	Equal variances assumed	.370	.544	-6.832	121	<.001	<.001	-15.06311	2.20477	-19.4284	-10.69818		
	Equal variances not assumed			-6.908	114.191	<.001	<.001	-15.06311	2.18044	-19.38247	-10.74375		

Bootstrap for Independent Samples Test							
		Mean	Bias	Std. Error	Bootstrap ^a		
		Difference			Sig. (2- tailed)	BCa 95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
GCQ	Equal variances assumed	-15.06311	.05201	2.15953	<.001	-19.29243	-10.47936
	Equal variances not assumed	-15.06311	.05201	2.15953	<.001	-19.29243	-10.47936
a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples							

Independent Samples Effect Sizes				
		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% CI
				Lower Upper
GCQ	Cohen's d	12.07931	-1.247	-1.635 -.854
	Hedges' correction	12.15483	-1.239	-1.625 -.849
	Glass's delta	11.57641	-1.301	-1.734 -.859
a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes. Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation. Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor. Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control group.				

APPENDIX E-1 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): Manipulation check

Group Statistics					
Message frame	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Manipulation promotion	148	6.5315	.83556	.06868	
check prevention	154	4.5368	2.32923	.18769	

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
						Significance		Mean		95% CI of the Difference
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Difference	Std. Error Difference	
MC	Equal variances assumed	214.267	<.001	9.828	300	<.001	<.001	1.99473	.20297	1.59532 2.39415
	Equal variances not assumed			9.980	193.114	<.001	<.001	1.99473	.19987	1.60053 2.38894

Bootstrap for Independent Samples Test							
		Mean Difference	Bias	Std. Error	Bootstrap ^a	BCa 95% CI	
					Sig. (2- tailed)	Lower	Upper
Manipulation check	Equal variances	1.9947	-.00228	.2063	<.00	1.5923	2.3814
	assumed	3		1	1	9	9
	Equal variances not	1.9947	-.00228	.2063	<.00	1.5923	2.3814
	assumed	3		1	1	9	9
a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples							

Independent Samples Effect Sizes					
		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Manipulation check	Cohen's d	1.76324	1.131	.887	1.374
	Hedges' correction	1.76766	1.128	.885	1.370
	Glass's delta	2.32923	.856	.610	1.100

APPENDIX E-2 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): Survey

Start of Block: INTRODUCTION

intro Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to visit this survey, which is part of a study headed by Elena Osadchaya (a PhD student at Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham). The present survey has two objectives. The first objective is to understand how people experiencing a career-crisis* in early adulthood feel. For that purpose, in the survey, you will be asked to reflect on how you feel about your life at the moment. The second objective is to understand how people react to different types of advertisements. You will be presented with an advertisement and then asked about your feelings, thoughts, and intentions regarding the advertisement.

*A **crisis** can be seen as a period in adult life that is noticeably more difficult and stressful than normal, during which we struggle to cope. A crisis is also an important turning point in our lives due to the changes that occur during a crisis episode. Crisis episodes typically last for a year or two but may be shorter or longer. People can experience a crisis related to their careers. This career-crisis can manifest itself as **a feeling of being confused about one's career direction, or struggling to obtain a desired job, or a feeling of being trapped in an unsatisfying career.**

This survey is expected to last **13 minutes.**

To participate in this survey you need: - to be **20-39 years of age**

Note: Answering questions about your career-crisis can be an emotional experience. While every care is taken to ensure that the questions in this survey will not cause any significant emotional distress to participants, we recommend that participants consider their wellbeing before agreeing to participate in this survey.

By completing this survey you indicate that you understand the following:

- It is not anticipated that you will experience any significant discomfort from answering the questions, beyond that which you may experience in your day-to-day life;
- You may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation without giving a reason at any time by closing the browser window;
- Any information you provide during the study will be treated with strict confidence, and it will not be possible to identify individuals from their data;
- Data will be stored for 10 years in accordance with our research code of conduct and will be used in a PhD thesis, conference papers and academic publications;
- In the unlikely event that you feel unwell as a result of taking part in the survey, you may want to consider the following mental health services and resources:

• **Mind.org's** guide explaining what mental health crisis services are available, how they can help and when to access them. The link also provides guidance on how you can manage a crisis: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/#.Xfp9gWT7SUK>

• **NHS** - How to access mental health services: <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/how-to-access-mental-health-services/>

Please contact Elena Osadchaya [REDACTED] if you have any general questions/concerns. Also, please email Elena if you had to withdraw from participation due to emotional discomfort, so that you will not lose the financial incentive. If, after discussing your questions/concerns with the lead researcher (Elena Osadchaya) you are still unhappy with any aspect of the research, please contact the lead supervisor, Dr David Houghton [REDACTED]

As researchers we cannot complete our work without your help. Thanks again for your time; it is very much appreciated.

	Yes (1)	No (2)
I confirm that I agree to the terms listed above and willingly consent to participating in this survey (1)	☐	☐
I confirm that I am 20-39 years of age (2)	☐	☐

Page
Break

End of Block: INTRODUCTION

Start of Block: Does not consent



No consent As you do not wish/do not qualify to participate in this study, please return your submission on Prolific by selecting the 'Stop without completing' button.

End of Block: Does not consent

Start of Block: Prolific ID



ProlificID

Before you start, please switch off phone/email/music so you can focus on this study.
Thank you!

Please enter your Prolific ID here:

End of Block: Prolific ID

Start of Block: IV1

crisis_present PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY:

“A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more difficult and stressful than normal, during which you struggle to cope. A crisis is also an important turning point in your life due to the changes that occur during a crisis episode. Crisis episodes typically last for a year or two but may be shorter or longer. Some people may experience a crisis related to their career. This crisis can manifest itself as a feeling of being confused about one’s career direction, or struggling to obtain a desired job, or a feeling of being trapped in an unsatisfying job”.

Based on the above description of a career-related crisis, would you say that you are currently experiencing a career-related crisis?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Display This Question:

If PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY: "A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more... = No



crisis_past Have you experienced a career crisis in the past?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No, I have never experienced a career crisis (2)

Page
Break

Display This Question:

If PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY: "A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more... = Yes
Or Have you experienced a career crisis in the past? = No, I have never experienced a career crisis

gcq_instr_present

The next question aims to measure the degree of contentment that you feel about your life and surroundings at the moment. You are a contributor of valuable information, so please answer each question as carefully, honestly and accurately as you can. It is crucial for us to obtain responses that are reflective of your true thoughts and feelings.

Display This Question:

If Have you experienced a career crisis in the past? = Yes

gcq_instr_past

The next question aims to measure the degree of contentment that you felt about your life and surroundings **at the time of your crisis**. You are a contributor of valuable information, so please answer each question as carefully, honestly and accurately as you can. It is crucial for us to obtain responses that are reflective of your true thoughts and feelings.

Display This Question:

If PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY: "A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more... = Yes
Or Have you experienced a career crisis in the past? = No, I have never experienced a career crisis



GCQ_present

To what extent do you feel each of the following statements about your life and surroundings at the moment?

	Rarely or none of the time (1)	A little of the time (2)	Some of the time (3)	Good part of the time (4)	Most or all of the time (5)
I feel powerless to do anything about my life (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel blue (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am restless and can't keep still (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have crying spells (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is easy for me to relax (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have a hard time getting started on things that I need to do (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I do not sleep well at night (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When things get tough, I feel there is always someone I can turn to (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that the future looks bright for me (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel downhearted (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I feel that I am needed (11)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that I am appreciated by others (12)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I enjoy being active and busy (13)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that others would be better off without me (14)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I enjoy being with other people (15)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel it is easy for me to make decisions (16)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel downtrodden (17)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am irritable (18)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I get upset easily (19)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is hard for me to have a good time (20)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have a full life (21)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that people really care about me (22)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

This item is an attention check. Please select "A little of the time" as your answer (23)

☐☐☐☐☐

I have a great deal of fun (24)

☐☐☐☐☐

I feel great in the morning (25)

☐☐☐☐☐

I feel that my situation is hopeless (26)

☐☐☐☐☐

Display This Question:

If Have you experienced a career crisis in the past? = Yes



GCQ_past

To what extent did you feel each of the following statements about your life and surroundings **at the time of your crisis?**

	Rarely or none of the time (1)	A little of the time (2)	Some of the time (3)	Good part of the time (4)	Most or all of the time (5)
I felt powerless to do anything about my life (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt blue (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was restless and couldn't keep still (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I had crying spells (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It was easy for me to relax (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I had a hard time getting started on things that I needed to do (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I did not sleep well at night (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When things got tough, I felt there was always someone I could turn to (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that the future looked bright for me (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt downhearted (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I felt that I was needed (11)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that I was appreciated by others (12)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I enjoyed being active and busy (13)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that others were better off without me (14)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I enjoyed being with other people (15)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt it was easy for me to make decisions (16)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt downtrodden (17)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was irritable (18)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I got upset easily (19)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It was hard for me to have a good time (20)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I had a full life (21)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that people really cared about me (22)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

This item is an attention check. Please select "A little of the time" as you answer (23)

☐☐☐☐☐

I had a great deal of fun (24)

☐☐☐☐☐

I felt great in the morning (25)

☐☐☐☐☐

I felt that my situation was hopeless (26)

☐☐☐☐☐

Page
Break

Display This Question:

If PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY: "A crisis episode is a period in adult life that is noticeably more... = Yes



crisis_severity_pres

Which one of the following statements most closely reflects you and your current situation?*

*You do not have to relate to every single word in the chosen statement but choose a paragraph that is generally more relatable to you, even if some parts of it are not applicable to your crisis experience.

☐ During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you may face an obstacle to your career goals that you struggle to overcome. Because of that you may feel **confused/down/lost/worried/concerned** about your career and your future in general. You may have made a few attempts to improve your situation, but they were fruitless so far. Nevertheless, despite the challenges that this situation presents, you **still believe that things will get better soon**. It is a difficult period, but it will pass. You may feel somewhat anxious, struggle to sleep sometimes, and experience lack of energy and motivation to do things. However, apart from that, your **crisis doesn't have any significant effect on your physical or mental health**. Although you may be jealous of

your peers who are more successful in their careers, your **crisis doesn't have any considerable impact on your social life.** (1)

☐ During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you may face an obstacle to your career goals that you struggle to overcome. Because of that, you may feel **stressed/depressed/isolated/inadequate/anxious** about your career and your future in general. You have been repeatedly trying to improve your situation without any success. You start to **feel hopeless and question if anything is ever going to change for you.** Your future seems bleak to you. Your crisis may be affecting your social/occupational/psychological/physical functioning. For example, your **crisis may cause you noticeable problems with your mental or physical health.** A lot of the time you feel that you are **struggling to cope.** You may also feel like **isolating yourself from your social circle,** because you feel ashamed of yourself and do not want to answer uncomfortable questions about your career situation. (2)

Display This Question:

If Have you experienced a career crisis in the past? = Yes



crisis severity_past

Which one of the following statements most closely reflects how you felt and the situation you were in?*

*You do not have to relate to every single word in the chosen statement but choose a paragraph that is generally more relatable to you, even if some parts of it are not applicable to your past crisis experience.

☐ During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you might have faced an obstacle to your career goals that you struggled to overcome. Because of that you might have felt **confused/down/lost/worried/concerned** about your career and your future in general. You might have made a few attempts to improve your situation, but they were fruitless for a while. Nevertheless, despite the challenges that that situation presented, you **still believed that things would get better soon.** It was a difficult period, but you knew it would pass. You might have felt somewhat anxious, struggled to sleep sometimes, and experienced lack of energy and motivation to do things. However, apart from that, your **crisis did not have any significant effect on your physical or mental health.** Although you might have been jealous of your peers who were more successful in their careers, your **crisis did not have any considerable impact on your social life.** (1)

☐ During your career crisis, due to challenging changes in your life you might have faced an obstacle to your career goals that you struggled to overcome. Because of that, you might have felt **stressed/depressed/isolated/inadequate/anxious** about your career

and your future in general. You were repeatedly trying to improve your situation without any success. You might have felt **hopeless and questioned if anything was ever going to change for you**. Your future seemed bleak to you. Your crisis might have affected your social/occupational/psychological/physical functioning. For example, your **crisis might have caused you noticeable problems with your mental or physical health**. A lot of the time you felt that you were **struggling to cope**. You might have also felt like **isolating yourself from your social circle**, because you felt ashamed of yourself and did not want to answer uncomfortable questions about your career situation. (2)

crisis_timer Timing

- First Click (1)
- Last Click (2)
- Page Submit (3)
- Click Count (4)

Page
Break

End of Block: IV1

Start of Block: IV2

RF To what extent are the below statements true of you?

	Not at all true (1) (1)	(2) (2)	(3) (3)	(4) (4)	(5) (5)	(6) (6)	Very true of me (7) (7)
In general, I am focused on preventing negative evets in my life. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am anxious that I will fall short of my responsibilities and obligations. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I often think about the person I am afraid I might become in the future. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I often think about the person I would ideally like to be in the future. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I typically focus on the success I hope to achieve in the future. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I often worry that I will fail to accomplish my career goals. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I often think about how I will achieve career success. (8)

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

I often imagine myself experiencing bad things that I fear might happen to me. (9)

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

I frequently think about how I can prevent failures in my life. (10)

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

I am more oriented toward preventing losses than I am toward achieving gains. (11)

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

My major goal right now is to achieve my career ambitions. (12)

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

My major goal right now is to avoid becoming a career failure. (13)

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

I see myself as someone who is primarily striving to reach my “ideal self”—to fulfill my

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

hopes, wishes,
and
aspirations.
(14)

I see myself
as someone
who is
primarily
striving to
become the
self I “ought”
to be—fulfill
my duties,
responsibilities,
and
obligations.
(15)

In general, I
am focused on
achieving
positive
outcomes in
my life. (16)

I often
imagine myself
experiencing
good things
that I hope will
happen to me.
(17)

Overall, I
am more
oriented
toward
achieving
success than
preventing
failure. (18)

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

End of Block: IV2

Start of Block: IV3_PROM_WITHIN

prom_within_inst On the next page you will be presented with an email and a leaflet. In order to progress through the survey, you will need to spend at least 40 seconds on that page.



Yes/No_prom_within Please confirm that you understand the above information.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Page
Break

prom_within_email Please view and **carefully** read the following email and leaflet:

prom_within_leaf

prom_within_timer Timing

First Click (1)

Last Click (2)

Page Submit (3)

Click Count (4)

Page
Break

End of Block: IV3_PROM_WITHIN

Start of Block: IV3_PREV_WITHIN

prev_within_timer On the next page you will be presented with an email and a leaflet. In order to progress through the survey, you will need to spend at least 40 seconds on that page.



Yes/No_prev_within Please confirm that you understand the above information.

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Page
Break

prev_within_email Please view and **carefully** read the following email and leaflet:

prev_within_leaf

prev_within_timer Timing

- First Click (1)
- Last Click (2)
- Page Submit (3)
- Click Count (4)

Page
Break

Start of Block: AC_career



AC_career What was the name of the career support initiative in the email?

- ☐ Career Focus (1)
- ☐ Career Mind (2)
- ☐ Career Atlas (3)
- ☐ CareerAppear (4)

End of Block: AC_career

Start of Block: MC_career



manip_check What did the **leaflet** ask you to **imagine**?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	(6)	(7)	
A career situation you want to avoid	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	A career situation you want to be in
An undesirable career situation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	A desirable career situation
A negative career situation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	A positive career situation

End of Block: MC_career

Start of Block: DVs_career



ad_attit_career With the previously displayed email in mind, please indicate your attitude towards the **email** on the following scales:

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	(6)	(7)	
Dislike extremely	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Like extremely
Very bad	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very good
Very unfavourable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very favourable



brand_attit_caree With the previously displayed email in mind, please rate your attitude towards **Career Mind initiative**:

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	(6)	(7)	
Very unfavourable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very favourable
Very bad	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very good
Very negative	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very positive



purch_inten_career Please rate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

	Strong ly disagree (1)	Disagr ee (2)	Somew hat disagree (3)	Neithe r agree nor disagree (4)	Somew hat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strong ly agree (7)
If I was going to use the services of an employment agency, I would choose Career Mind. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would consider using Career Mind's services. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would recommend that my friends and relatives use Career Mind's services. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This item is an attention check. Please select "Agree" as your answer. (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



SDemotions_career Please rate to what extent you experienced the following emotions after reading the email:

	Not at all (1)	To a very small extent (2)	To a small extent (3)	To a moderate extent (4)	To a large extent (5)	To a very large extent (6)
Agitated (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
On edge (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Uneasy (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tense (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Calm (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Relaxed (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Disappoin ted (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Discourag ed (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Low (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sad (10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Happy (11)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Satisfied (12)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stressed (13)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



SD_velocity_career Please rate to what extent the following statements are accurate.

	Not at all (1)	To a very small extent (2)	To a small extent (3)	To a moderate extent (4)	To a large extent (5)	To a very large extent (6)
You are moving quickly toward your career goal. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your progress toward your career goal is slow. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
You are doing better than you expected at your career goal. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐



ad_connect_career How well did the email connect with your crisis experience (i.e., to what extent you found it relatable)?

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	7 (1)	
Not at all	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Very Much

AI_SD_mag_career

Ideal self is defined as your beliefs concerning the qualities you would like *ideally* to possess; your ultimate goals for yourself. Within your career, how close are you to your ideal self?

- ☐ Very close to the ideal self (1)
 - ☐ Close to the ideal self (2)
 - ☐ Somewhat close to the ideal self (3)
 - ☐ Neither far from nor close to the ideal self (4)
 - ☐ Somewhat far from the ideal self (5)
 - ☐ Far from the ideal self (6)
 - ☐ Very far from the ideal self (7)
-

AO_SD_mag_career

Ought self is defined as your beliefs concerning the qualities you believe you *should* or *ought* to possess; your unwritten rules or prescriptions for yourself. Within your career, how close are you to your ought self?

- ☐ Very close to the ought self (1)
 - ☐ Close to the ought self (2)
 - ☐ Somewhat close to the ought self (3)
 - ☐ Neither far from nor close to the ought self (4)
 - ☐ Somewhat far from the ought self (5)
 - ☐ Far from the ought self (6)
 - ☐ Very far from the ought self (7)
-

AF_SD_mag_career

Your feared self is defined as the kind of person you fear being or worry about being. Within your career, how close are you to your feared self?

- ☐ Very close to the feared self (1)
- ☐ Close to the feared self (2)
- ☐ Somewhat close to the feared self (3)
- ☐ Neither far from nor close to the feared self (4)
- ☐ Far from the feared self (5)
- ☐ Very far from the feared self (6)

End of Block: DVs_career

Start of Block: IV4



Ad_scept_career

Please rate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

	Stron gly disagree (1)	Disag ree (2)	Somew hat disagree (3)	Neith er agree nor disagree (4)	Somew hat agree (5)	Agr ee (6)	Stron gly agree (7)
We can depend on getting the truth in most career support advertising. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Career support advertising's aim is to inform the consumer. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe career support advertising is informative. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Career support advertising is generally truthful. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Career support advertising is a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products/services. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Career support advertising is truth well told. (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
In general, career support advertising presents a true picture of the product being advertised. (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I feel I've been accurately informed after viewing most career support advertisements. (8)

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Most career support advertising provides consumers with essential information. (9)

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

End of Block: IV4

Start of Block: SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS



age What is your age? Please type a number (e.g., 20)



gender What is your gender?

☐ Female (1)

☐ Male (2)

☐ Other. Please specify (3)

☐ Prefer not to say (4)

edu_level What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ GCSEs or equivalent (1)
 - ☐ A-levels or equivalent (2)
 - ☐ Undergraduate degree (3)
 - ☐ Master's degree (4)
 - ☐ PhD (5)
 - ☐ None of the above. Please specify (6)
-

Display This Question:

If What is the highest level of education you have completed? = Undergraduate degree

Or What is the highest level of education you have completed? = Master's degree

Or What is the highest level of education you have completed? = PhD

edu_title

Please specify your degree title (e.g., BSc Chemistry). This question is optional.

employ_status What is your current employment status?

- ☐ Student (1)
- ☐ Unemployed (2)
- ☐ Part-time work (3)
- ☐ Full-time work (4)
- ☐ Other. Please specify (5)

Page
Break

Feedback (Optional) Could you please provide us your feedback on the survey? Is there anything you think we could improve?

End of Block: SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS

Start of Block: DEBRIEFING

debrief Thank you for filling in the survey, your time is much appreciated! Should you have any further questions, please contact Elena Osadchaya

You were shown an email and a leaflet about a governmental career support initiative. We would like to emphasise that those materials were fictional. In case you would like to learn more about existing governmental career support, please visit: <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/>

If you feel any emotional discomfort, please consider the following mental health services and resources:

- **Mind.org**'s guide explaining what mental health crisis services are available, how they can help and when to access them. Also provides guidance on how you can plan for a crisis: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/#.Xfp9gWT7SUK>
- **NHS** - How to access mental health services: <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/how-to-access-mental-health-services/>

End of Block: DEBRIEFING

APPENDIX E-3 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	AI	SD	Crisis severi	Crisis severity	Messag e frame	Initiativ e	Message attitude	Reg. focus	Reg. focus*M	Service use
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		ty	* Messag e frame		attitude			essage frame	intentio n
AISD	1.000								
Crisis severity	-0.221								
Crisis severity * Message frame	-0.027	-0.002	1.000						
Frame	-0.107	0.060	0.002	1.000					
Initiative attitude	-0.113	-0.003	0.088	0.258	0.922				
Message attitude	-0.133	-0.013	0.117	0.246	0.828	0.881			
Reg. Focus	-0.261	0.344	0.042	0.106	0.132	0.107	1.000		
Reg focus* Message frame	-0.028	0.042	0.342	0.004	-0.087	-0.068	-0.034	1.000	
Service use intention	-0.141	0.023	0.079	0.176	0.773	0.774	0.079	-0.074	0.789

APPENDIX E-4 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): Cross-loadings

	Actual:ideal self-discrepancy	Crisis severity	Crisis severity * Message frame	Message frame	Initiative attitude	Message attitude	Regulatory focus	Reg focus * Message frame	Service use intention
AISD	1.000	-0.221	-0.027	-0.107	-0.113	-0.133	-0.261	-0.028	-0.141
MF	-0.107	0.060	0.002	1.000	0.258	0.246	0.106	0.004	0.176
MF * CS	-0.027	-0.002	1.000	0.002	0.088	0.117	0.042	0.342	0.079
MF * RF	-0.028	0.042	0.342	0.004	-0.087	-0.068	-0.034	1.000	-0.074
RF	-0.261	0.344	0.042	0.106	0.132	0.107	1.000	-0.034	0.079
MA1	-0.146	-0.009	0.091	0.213	0.731	0.885	0.085	-0.031	0.691
MA2	-0.101	-0.040	0.112	0.245	0.694	0.855	0.105	-0.074	0.662
MA3	-0.105	0.013	0.107	0.194	0.762	0.903	0.093	-0.074	0.694
IA1	-0.131	-0.003	0.075	0.235	0.935	0.780	0.135	-0.073	0.715
IA2	-0.094	0.000	0.085	0.233	0.930	0.765	0.120	-0.086	0.724
IA3	-0.088	-0.006	0.085	0.246	0.899	0.742	0.109	-0.083	0.698
CS	-0.221	1.000	-0.002	0.060	-0.003	-0.013	0.344	0.042	0.023
SUI1	-0.083	-0.035	0.118	0.112	0.612	0.635	-0.007	-0.043	0.805
SUI2	-0.075	0.004	0.077	0.112	0.617	0.595	0.048	-0.068	0.784
SUI3	-0.178	0.087	-0.011	0.193	0.601	0.601	0.149	-0.064	0.777

APPENDIX E-5 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): Inner VIF values

	AISD	Crisis severity	Crisis severity * Message frame	Message frame	Initiative attitude	Message attitude	Reg. focus	Reg. focus* Message frame	Service use intention
AISD							1.051		
Crisis severity	1.000					1.140	1.051		
Crisis severity * Message frame						1.138			
Message frame						1.012			
Initiative attitude									3.175
Message attitude					1.000				3.175
Reg. focus						1.152			
Reg. focus*Message frame						1.141			
Service use intention									

APPENDIX E-6 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): 2x2 ANOVA (crisis * message frame) on message attitude

Source	df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3	7.336	<.001	.069
Intercept	1	8120.279	<.001	.965
Message frame	1	17.575	<.001	.056
Crisis Severity	1	.203	.653	.001
Crisis severity * Message frame	1	3.989	.047	.013
Error	298			
Total	302			
Corrected Total	301			

APPENDIX E-7 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): 2x2 ANOVA (regulatory focus * message frame) on message attitude

Source	Df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3	6.513	<.001	.065
Intercept	1	7624.732	<.001	.964
Regulatory focus	1	1.847	.175	.007
Message frame	1	15.820	<.001	.053
Regulatory focus * Message frame	1	1.300	.255	.005
Error	282			
Total	286			
Corrected Total	285			

APPENDIX E-8 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): Total effects

	Path coefficients	t-Statistics	p-Values	BI 97.5% CI
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	(β)			
AISD -> Initiative attitude	-0.014	1.260	0.208	[-0.042; 0.003]
AISD -> Message attitude	-0.017	1.263	0.207	[-0.051; 0.004]
AISD -> RF	-0.194	3.586	0.000	[-0.301; -0.087]
AISD -> Service use intention	-0.013	1.251	0.211	[-0.040; 0.003]
Crisis severity -> AISD	-0.221	3.975	0.000	[-0.331; -0.110]
Crisis severity -> Initiative attitude	-0.019	0.388	0.698	[-0.115; 0.075]
Crisis severity -> Message attitude	-0.023	0.389	0.698	[-0.138; 0.091]
Crisis severity -> RF	0.344	6.421	0.000	[0.236; 0.448]
Crisis severity -> Service use intention	-0.018	0.387	0.699	[-0.108; 0.070]
Crisis severity * frame -> Initiative attitude	0.126	2.418	0.016	[0.025; 0.233]
Crisis severity * frame -> Message attitude	0.153	2.461	0.014	[0.032; 0.277]
Crisis severity * frame -> Service use intention	0.118	2.407	0.016	[0.025; 0.221]
Frame -> Initiative attitude	0.198	4.133	0.000	[0.102; 0.290]
Frame -> Message attitude	0.240	4.343	0.000	[0.124; 0.342]
Frame -> Service use intention	0.186	4.095	0.000	[0.094; 0.274]
Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	0.420	4.113	0.000	[0.211; 0.609]
Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	0.828	26.262	0.000	[0.757; 0.882]
Message attitude -> Service use intention	0.774	19.441	0.000	[0.689; 0.847]
RF -> Initiative attitude	0.074	1.422	0.155	[-0.031; 0.176]
RF -> Message attitude	0.090	1.433	0.152	[-0.038; 0.209]
RF -> Service use intention	0.069	1.419	0.156	[-0.029; 0.164]
RF*frame -> Initiative attitude	-0.096	1.905	0.057	[-0.195; 0.004]
RF*frame -> Message attitude	-0.116	1.910	0.056	[-0.233; 0.005]
RF*frame -> Service use intention	-0.090	1.904	0.057	[-0.182; 0.004]

APPENDIX E-9 – Study 3 (Experiment 2): Specific indirect effects

	Path coefficients (β)	t-Statistics	p-Values	BI 97.5% CI
AISD -> RF -> Message attitude	-0.017	1.268	0.205	[-0.047; 0.006]
Crisis severity -> AISD -> RF	0.043	2.727	0.006	[0.016; 0.077]
RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude - -> Service use intention	0.057	1.429	0.153	[-0.021; 0.135]
Crisis severity -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	-0.044	0.853	0.393	[-0.146; 0.059]
RF*frame -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	-0.096	1.908	0.056	[-0.194; 0.002]
AISD -> RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	-0.014	1.266	0.206	[-0.039; 0.005]
Crisis severity -> RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	0.022	1.369	0.171	[-0.008; 0.055]
Crisis severity -> AISD -> RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	0.002	1.187	0.235	[-0.001; 0.007]
Crisis severity -> RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	0.017	1.363	0.173	[-0.007; 0.043]
AISD -> RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	-0.011	1.258	0.208	[-0.031; 0.004]
Crisis severity -> RF -> Message attitude	0.027	1.374	0.169	[-0.010; 0.066]
Crisis severity -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	-0.034	0.851	0.395	[-0.113; 0.046]
Crisis severity * frame -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	0.098	2.428	0.015	[0.018; 0.174]
RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	0.074	1.436	0.151	[-0.028; 0.173]
RF*frame -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	-0.074	1.891	0.059	[-0.153; 0.002]
Crisis severity -> AISD -> RF -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	0.003	1.190	0.234	[-0.001; 0.009]
Crisis severity * frame -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	0.126	2.463	0.014	[0.024; 0.225]
Frame -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude	0.198	4.216	0.000	[0.107; 0.291]
Frame -> Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	0.153	3.976	0.000	[0.080; 0.232]
Message attitude -> Initiative attitude -> Service use intention	0.640	14.670	0.000	[0.553; 0.723]
Crisis severity -> AISD -> RF -> Message attitude	0.004	1.188	0.235	[-0.001; 0.011]