

**An Analysis of the Effectiveness of Crisis Communication During a Pandemic at a National
Government Agency: A Case of South African Revenue Service (SARS)**

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DECLARATION OF OWN WORK

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I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

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Date: 19 August 2025

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DEDICATION

With this qualification, I honour my ancestors' wildest dreams and carry their legacy forward with pride.

To my late grandmother, who stepped in as a mother when I lost my own mother, guiding me with her wisdom and love, I dedicate this work. I am because of you Ntombi ka Yaya!

To my loving husband, thank you for your unwavering support, patience and belief in me, even on the days when the journey felt heavy. Your encouragement and quiet strength carried me through this chapter. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

To my precious Ntsika and Thingo, you are my greatest motivation and inspiration. I hope to be a shining example for you, showing you the importance of education. Take the torch I pass to you and blaze your own trails.

And lastly, to my nephews and nieces, I want you to always remember the importance of supporting and uplifting one another. I believe in each of you with all my heart. May this qualification be a beacon of hope, ensuring that from this generation onwards, not a single person in our family will go without the opportunity to learn and grow.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic within a South African national government agency, with a specific focus on managers' perspectives. The occurrence of business crises worldwide is common and the impacts of such crises on businesses can be huge. These crises disturb the expectations of stakeholders as people usually become angry and upset, which threatens the relationship between the enterprise and its stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, exposed numerous vulnerabilities in public sector communication strategies, particularly in times of crisis. Guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), this qualitative study employed an exploratory research design and used semi-structured interviews to gather data from managers at different levels within the agency. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings reveal that while the government agency had a crisis communication plan in place, it was not adequately equipped to address a high-impact and prolonged crisis like COVID-19. Communication efforts were hindered by conflicting information sources and an underdeveloped internal culture of information-sharing. The study also found that the agency predominantly employed an accommodative communication strategy, prioritising transparency to build public trust. However, inconsistent execution of this strategy weakened its overall effectiveness. The study recommends revising crisis communication plans to better address pandemic-specific dynamics, promoting a proactive information-sharing culture, enhancing responsiveness to misinformation, and leveraging data analytics and emerging technologies for improved message dissemination. This research contributes to the literature on public sector crisis communication by offering practical strategies for improving communication effectiveness during pandemics. It also highlights the importance of agility, empathy, and trust-building in maintaining organisational credibility and stakeholder confidence in crisis situations.

Key terms: communication, crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, reputation management, communication channels, two-way communication, barriers to effective communication, defensive strategy, media influence, information overload, pandemic.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CCP	Crisis Communication Plan
BSC	Balanced Scorecard
CERC	Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SCCT	Situational Crisis Communication Theory

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Business-related crises are common across organisations worldwide and can occur in any type of business (Akturan, 2025; Claeys & Coombs, 2020). With increased media visibility and the societal impact of today's organisations, crises have grown in significance, producing negative outcomes that extend beyond financial losses to include reputational damage, operational disruption, environmental harm, or even public health consequences, as evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2024). These crises disturb stakeholders' expectations, often leading to anger or frustration, which can threaten the relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders.

In this context, effective communication during a crisis is critical for all organisations. The way in which an organisation communicates during and after a crisis can determine its ability to survive, maintain stakeholder trust, and recover from negative outcomes (Jin et al., 2021). Poor or ineffective crisis communication can worsen reputational damage, disrupt recovery processes, reduce profitability, and compromise stakeholder relationships. Conversely, proactive and strategic communication can help organisations mitigate the impact of crises and turn them into opportunities for improved performance (Tao & Shi, 2025).

In this chapter, the context of the study is discussed. It provides a definition of the research problem that the study seeks to address, and outlines the aim, objectives, and research questions. The chapter additionally highlights the significance, limitations, and delimitations of the study, and concludes with an overview of how the study report will be presented.

1.2 Background to the study

Business-related crises are common throughout the world, and they can occur in any type of business. With the increase in media visibility and the societal impact of today's organisations, business-related crises are growing in their significance. Crises can produce negative outcomes, which can extend beyond an organisation's financial loss (Aydm & İnce, 2024). Occurrences such

as deaths, environmental harm, or general economic downturn can be the outcomes of crises. The current COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a crisis that has resulted in severe negative outcomes for businesses, including closures.

Communication is very important for the survival of organisations, be it a private or public entity (Hong & Kim, 2020). An organisation's day-to-day operations depend on the constant flow of effective communicative interactions between management and all stakeholders of the enterprise as well as the public. The ways in which an organisation communicates outside the confines of the daily routine becomes of utmost importance to the survival of the organisation when a crisis occurs (Sanjeev et al., 2021:3). What the organisation communicates during and after a crisis is a determinant of the ability of the organisation to survive as well as its viability after the crisis.

Organisational crisis and public relations research have so far offered important insights on the role that communication plays during times of business-related crises (Hine & Bragias, 2020). Effective crisis communication is a prerequisite for successfully managing crises when they arise. According to the Othman and Yusoff (2020), sound and thoughtful communication can help public service managers to prevent fear-driven, ineffective, and potentially damaging responses to serious crises such as bioterrorism and disease outbreak. In addition, appropriate crisis communication procedures promote trust and confidence, which are essential in a crisis situation (Carvache-Franco et al., 2023). Although organisations cannot avoid a crisis event, they can influence the way in which the problems being faced are covered by the media. The crisis communications manager has a responsibility of ensuring that the organisation converts a crisis into an opportunity to improve performance (Capano & Toth, 2025).

The communicative response of an organisation to a crisis can play a huge role in limiting and even repairing the reputational damage that an organisation is exposed to during the crisis (Coombs, 2007:168). The negative impacts of a crisis are worsened when organisations lack effective strategies for communicating during and after the occurrence of the crisis (Flanja, 2021:3). According to Gasana (2024), the absence of effective crisis communication strategies has an effect on the extent of control that managers in the organisation have over the crisis, the recovery process, the performance of the organisation, as well as the ability to retain major stakeholders

such as customers. Sanjeev et al. (2021) cites poor communication as one the major reasons why organisations and nations fail to quickly recover from disasters such as hurricanes, and past occurrences like the September 11 World Trade Centre attack. Sanjeev et al. (2021) further states that most businesses lack the ability to communicate effectively during and after a crisis event and this has an adverse effect on profitability, as well as the sustainability of the business. According to Barclay and Thor (2022), lack of effective communication during and after a crisis can lead to a loss of revenue, increased downtime, and disruption of the recovery process.

In crisis situations, the ability of organisations to communicate is strongly challenged and the organisations faces higher communication demands than in normal circumstances (Flanja, 2021:5). Even with a well-elaborated crisis communication plan, organisations are still tested because the unpredictable and unknown factors that are usually associated with crises demand complex response strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a crisis situation that has required companies to respond in an unprecedented manner. While communication in itself has always presented challenges for organisations, communicating in the midst of a crisis presents even more challenges than everyday interaction (Fuller & LaSala, 2021). When there is a crisis, information is both crucial and limited. It is often difficult to obtain and relay missing information because of the very nature of a crisis. This may result in breakdown of communication between and within organisations (Liu et al., 2020) Considering the important role played by the government agency in the country's economy, the effectiveness of its crisis communication efforts must be evaluated.

1.3 The research problem

Organisational crises are occurring more frequently than before. These crises disturb the expectations of stakeholders as people usually become angry and upset, which threatens the relationship between the enterprise and its stakeholders (Colfer, 2020). Thus, crises are regarded as harmful to the reputation of organisations as they are capable of dramatically interrupting the current activities in an organisation, resulting in a negative influence on the public image of the organisation. To preserve the reputation of the organisation and to minimise the negative impacts of a crisis on an enterprise, there is a need for management to proactively manage their responses to such situations (Gasana, 2024).

While communication has always presented challenges for organisations, communicating in the midst of a crisis presents even more challenges than everyday interaction (Jin et al., 2021). In the face of a crisis, the traditional channels of communication in an organisation become saturated as they are accustomed to responding to normal media attention and not the high-volume and insistent demands for information that are associated with crises (Hapsari & Ananda, 2024). During a crisis, several different players become involved, and these provide their own interpretations of events and their own views of what is supposed to be done, and this puts organisations under pressure with regard to communication (Abd-Elfattah, 2024). Even if an organisation may have prepared a well-elaborated crisis communication plan, the unpredictable and unknown factors that are usually associated with crises demand complex response strategies (Mizrak, 2024). According to Shirk (2022), the efforts of an organisation to communicate effectively during a crisis are made more difficult by the interest that media takes in such situations. On one hand, public relations managers in organisations will be focusing on minimising the damage caused by a crisis situation to the reputation of the entities while on the other hand, journalists will be focusing on producing stories that mostly question the effectiveness of organisations in dealing with the crisis.

Pandemics, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic come with negative impacts on organisations and effective communication is one of the mechanisms for minimising such negative impacts (Flanja, 2021:18). The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, caught all organisations unaware. It was therefore crucial for both public and private organisations to ensure effective dissemination of information to all stakeholders to maintain a smooth flow of operations in the midst of the crisis. Despite the heightened importance of crisis communication during pandemics, there is a notable scarcity of empirical research examining how government agencies in developing countries, particularly in South Africa, manage crisis communication during health emergencies (John et al., 2022; Jong, 2020). Most existing studies on crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic have focused on private sector organisations in developed countries (Macnamara, 2021; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021), leaving a significant knowledge gap regarding the experiences and challenges of public sector institutions in the African context. Furthermore, while crisis communication frameworks and best practices are well-documented in theory, little is known about the extent to which these are operationalised by managers in government agencies during an actual pandemic

(Macnamara, 2021). This study therefore addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the effectiveness of crisis communication at a South African national government agency during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study will contribute practically by informing the development of more effective crisis communication policies and protocols for government agencies, and will contribute to the scholarly body of knowledge on crisis communication in the public sector context of a developing country.

2.4 Research objectives

The main aim of the study is to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a national government agency based on managers' perspectives.

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To describe how crisis communication is practised in a government agency during a pandemic
- To determine the barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in the government agency
- To explore the perceptions of managers on the effectiveness of crisis communication of the government agency during a pandemic.

1.5 Research questions

The research was conducted with the aim of answering the following research questions:

- How is crisis communication practised within the government agency during a pandemic?
- What are the barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in the government agency?
- How do managers perceive the effectiveness of crisis communication of the government agency during a pandemic?

1.6 Significance of the study

The study provides significant practical and theoretical contributions in the field of crisis communication in organisations. When organisations effectively respond to a crisis through

effective communication and other means, they can minimise the reputational damage and other negative effects that are caused by such crises. By analysing the perceptions of managers on crisis communication in the organisation, the study obtained insights into the shortcomings and strengths of the government department's crisis communication strategy and implementation process. Such insights assist in strengthening crisis communication in the organisation, thus, possibly enhancing the organisation's ability to respond effectively to crisis situations. The study also offers strategies the government agency can use to respond effectively to crises. The implementation of such strategies can enable the government agency to emerge from crises with minimum damages and losses.

1.7 Delimitations of the study

The study was conducted on a national government agency in South Africa. The participants of the study are managers in the organisation's different departments as well as top management in the organisation. The study also focused on crisis communication during a pandemic.

1.8 Chapter organisation

The study report is organised in the following five chapters:

Chapter One: Introduction

The first chapter provides an overview of the study. The background of the study, the research problem, and the aim, objectives, and research questions are presented in this chapter. The chapter also states the significance, delimitations, and limitations of the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The conceptual and theoretical framework of the study are presented in the second chapter. The chapter examines the views, perception, and findings of different researchers on effective crisis communication as well as the theories that underpin the study.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Chapter three lays out the methods and techniques that were used in conducting the study. The chapter discusses the research design, research philosophy, research approach, sampling

technique, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the steps that were used to ensure trustworthiness of the research findings as well ensure the study is conducted in an ethical manner.

Chapter Four: Presentation, Discussion, and Interpretation of Findings

The results of the study are presented, discussed, and interpreted in the fourth chapter. The discussion of responses from the interviews are discussed based on the themes identified during thematic analysis and integrated with findings from literature on crisis communication.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The final chapter focuses on the conclusions and recommendations of the study as well as recommendations for further research.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the study that sought to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a government agency in South Africa. In the chapter, the context of the study was discussed. In addition, the chapter provided a definition of the research problem that was addressed by the study. Furthermore, the aim, objectives, and research questions of the study were outlined. The chapter also highlighted the significance, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on reviewing literature that relates to crisis communication. The study sought to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a government agency in South Africa. Reviewing the views and findings of different authors and researchers in the study assists in gaining a better understanding of the research problem. The chapter provides the definition and overview of crisis communication and further discusses the various crisis communication strategies that can be used by organisations. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the characteristics of effective crisis communication in general and effective crisis communication during a pandemic. The chapter concludes with the theoretical foundation of the study.

2.2 Definition and overview of crisis

In the context of crisis communication, different definitions of crisis are presented by scholars. (Bowen et al., 2021) define a crisis as “an event, revelation, allegation, or set of circumstances which threaten the integrity, reputation, or survival of an individual or organisation”. A crisis challenges the values, appropriateness, or sense of safety of the public. Aydın and İnce (2024) refers to a crisis as an unstable time experienced by an organisation, with a high probability of an undesirable outcome. This definition reveals that, when an organisation is facing a crisis, normal procedures cannot be applied. Such a situation may involve shock and if it goes on for a long time, the organisation may experience some unexpected negative outcomes.

Avery et al. (2021) defines a crisis as an event or series of events that are unexpected, specific, and non-routine. Such events create high levels of uncertainty and can pose a threat to the high priority goals of an organisation. According to Akturan (2025), the event or series of events may become worse so that they frequently stimulate investigations by the government and mass media, with the potential of becoming news headlines every day. Furthermore, a crisis may interfere with the daily operations of an organisation and solicit negative public opinions.

A more comprehensive definition of crisis is provided by Citrawijaya et al. (2024), who states that a crisis is a critical period coming after an event that might have negative impacts on an

organisation, and decisions made about such an event affect the organisation's bottom line. He further describes a crisis as a time of exploration that requires quick processing of information and decisive action in order to reduce the damage to the organisation and to make the most of a situation that is potentially damaging. Thus, the definitions provided in this section reveal that a crisis can be recognised by gaining an understanding of its characteristics which can be summarised as follows: a crisis is a specific event; it is enacted; creates high levels of uncertainty, and the best response is to make an anticipatory plan. This study adopts this definition as it provides the basic characteristics of a crisis.

2.3 Impact of crises on organisations

Crises have the potential to harm the success and survival of organisations (Barclay & Thor, 2022). These crises disturb the expectations of stakeholders as people usually become angry and upset, which threatens the relationship between the enterprise and its stakeholders (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). Thus, crises are regarded as harmful to the reputation of organisations as they are capable of dramatically interrupting the current activities in an organisation, resulting in a negative influence on the public image of the organisation. The public image of an organisation refers to the public's view of a company or brand (Barclay & Thor, 2022). It is occasionally referred to as business identity or reputation. Regarding the impact of a crisis on public image, (Erdogan, 2023) gave an example of a crisis when a passenger of the United Airlines was forcibly removed from a plane that had been overbooked. Other passengers took videos, which went viral on social media. The crisis affected the ways in which the public viewed the airline internationally, resulting in a drop in its stock price by as much as 4% within hours. To preserve the reputation of the organisation and to minimise the negative impacts of a crisis on an enterprise, there is a need for management to proactively manage their responses to such situations (Jong, 2025). According to (Kim, 2022), the concept of organisational reputation is defined by key organisational attributes such as perceived quality of products and services, the quality of employees and management, and its capacity for innovation.

Although the nature of crises may vary, they share similar important characteristics. Within a very short time, each type of crisis can fundamentally redefine the reputation of an organisation, disrupt daily routines, attract high media attention, and cause significant damage to the society (Coombs,

2007:165; Jin et al., 2021; Lee & Li, 2024). The BP oil spill that took place in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 is an example of a crisis that had severe negative effects on the company and the society (Lee & Xu, 2023). The crisis involved the explosion of a drilling rig that was drilling oil on behalf of BP, killing 11 employees and injuring 16, as well as causing the Deep Horizon to burn and shrink. The international news media covered the crisis as an environmental disaster and the price of the company's shares dropped drastically, while the CEO was replaced. In addition, the public called for a boycott of BP and there was extensive damage on the local tourism and fishing industries (Kuipers et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic is another example of a crisis that has severely negative effects on businesses worldwide. From this section, it can be noted that there is a need for organisations to manage crises effectively to minimise the negative impacts that they are associated with.

2.4 Definition and overview of crisis communication

Coombs and Holladay (2022:20) define crisis communication as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required in addressing a crisis. According to Coombs (2021:15), the focus of crisis communication is on image repair, and such communication is a symbolic resource for managers. This is supported by Li et al. (2020) who point out that the goal of crisis communication is to maintain a positive reputation for the organisation. Li et al. (2020) suggested that image repair does not accept blame or the offensiveness of the event. Empirical research by Ndone and Kyriakopoulos (2024) found the result of communication responses aimed at minimising offensiveness resulted in better relationships between the organisation and the public. Reynolds and Seeger (2005) definition follows a life cycle of different phases during the stages of a crisis as shown in Figure 2.1.

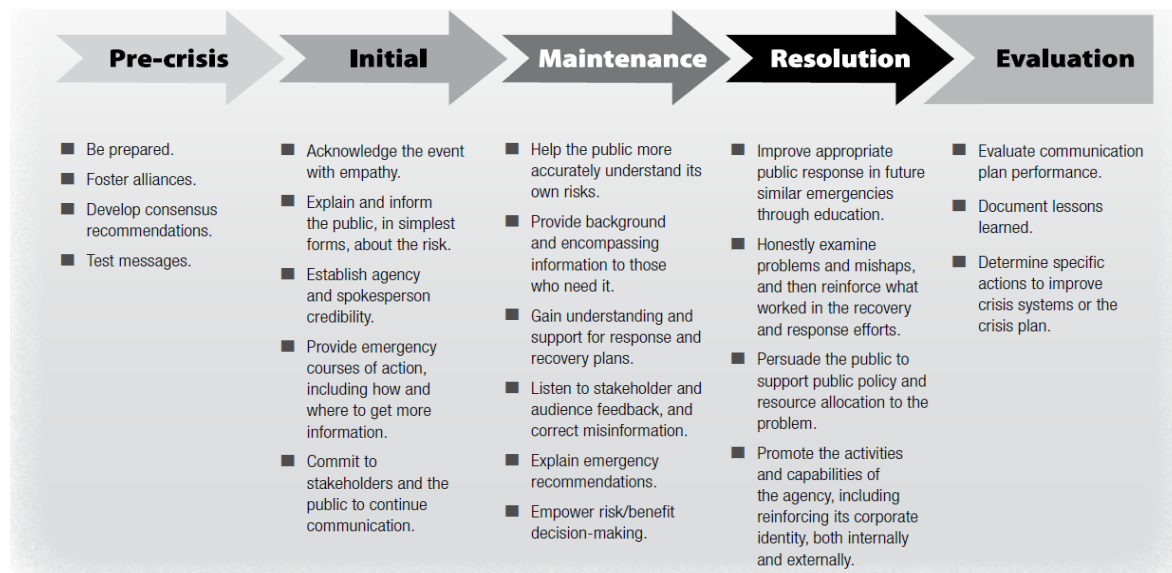


Figure 2.1: Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Lifecycle

Source: Reynolds and Seeger (2005):

According to Reynolds and Seeger (2005), the first phase is the most critical in effective crisis communication since this phase forms the first contact with the public after the onset of the crisis; the situation has to be acknowledged with empathy. The next phase, which is the maintenance phase, involves disseminating more information relating to the incident, following up on response plans, and communicating with all stakeholders. In the resolution phase, the organisation has an opportunity to start closing off the incident. Victims and the public should receive closure, and the organisation should draw lessons from the crisis and responses, applying these to their policies and procedures to ensure improvement in the process. These stages highlighted by Reynolds and Seeger (2005) bring out the importance of developing a systematic way of addressing and communicating a crisis in order to minimise its negative impacts on the organisation.

According to Lee et al. (2024), during a time of crisis, communication needs a mindset that is different from normal operations since all members of the organisation will be in a shock mode. It is not everyone who will be having the basic understanding of what is taking place and the means to rebuild the organisation's reputation is not always available to everyone within the organisation (Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024). Thus, for organisations to survive the crisis and obtain success, it is important to develop crisis communication plans and ensure that these plans are understood by

everyone who plays a role in managing the crisis. Once the organisation has successfully secured the safety of all stakeholders through effective crisis communication, it is now time to work on communicating information to minimise the reputational damage that may be caused (Coombs, 2021).

Coombs (2021) defines crisis communication as a discipline that assists crisis managers in dealing with an organisational crisis in order to limit the negative impact of the crisis event on the entity. One distinct characteristic of crisis communication is that decisions should be taken quickly, and communication should be prepared and disseminated without delay (Malecki et al., 2020). Crisis communication encompasses a set of relationships with an organisation's stakeholders in a continuously evolving environment and requires effective communication aimed at maintaining such relationships. Coombs (2021) warns that an unexpected event can put the significant expectations of stakeholders under threat and have a serious influence on an organisation's performance, thus producing negative results. The primary aim of crisis communication is to initiate dialogue between the organisation and its stakeholders before, during, and after the event to reduce damage to the organisation's reputation.

2.5 Crisis communication in government agencies/public sector organisations

During societal crises, government agencies are expected to engage with the public in purposeful strategic communication, issue recommendations and restrictions, and rely on the public's compliance to attain response goals and fulfil the society's needs (Svenbro & WesteR, 2023). The occurrence of crises threatens the order and security of the society and government agencies therefore need to communicate effectively to ensure that the public complies with directives that are critical for their safety (Shi et al., 2024). In circumstances of high risks and uncertainties, purposeful strategic communication by government agencies, along with their warnings, recommendations, and restrictions, is crucial in efforts to achieve response goals and restore order and security in the society. Crisis communication during pandemics such as COVID-19 therefore plays a central role in managing the crisis.

There are a number of factors that differentiate general private and public sector strategic communication (Shirk, 2022). In the same vein, the public sector faces unique crisis

communication challenges which include federism, politics, and legal frameworks. Politics and legal frameworks imply that crisis managers in government agencies, compared to their private counterparts, face more restrictions in the creativity of message development and have more external influences such as public interest groups (Wang et al., 2021). In addition, government agencies encounter increased complexity regarding decisions on which information to share and the ways of sharing such information. Furthermore, government agencies have higher need for public support for their post-crisis initiatives and programmes (Sanjeev et al., 2021). The issue of centralisation implies that government agencies face additional challenges when it comes to synchronising communication efforts with different government entities. Because of the need to synchronise with several entities can result in sluggish strategic efforts, a definite shortcoming in a crisis.

Sanjeev et al. (2021) cite communicator disconnect with stakeholders as one of the challenges of crisis communication in government entities. During a crisis, government leaders at all levels are pre-occupied with doing what they perceive is needed by people and often fail to keep an eye on the climate of public opinion to establish the actual needs (Svenbro & WesteR, 2023). Furthermore, crisis communication goals often differ according to situation and organisation but usually encompass stakeholder wellbeing and reputation management, which are not mutually exclusive. While both public and private sector organisations are confronted with market pressure, public sector entities face greater expectations to exercise ethical responsibility to stakeholders since their mandate is to serve citizens (Wang et al., 2021). Although earning support for policy decisions is an important objective for government agencies' communicating a priority for the wellbeing of stakeholders might just what government agencies need to achieve that objective. It can therefore be noted that government agencies face more pressure to satisfy stakeholders during crisis communication than private sector organisations.

2.6 Crisis communication plan

The ability of an organisation to survive depends on how effectively it has prepared for a crisis, thus management must establish a crisis communication plan (Poonia & Rajasekaran, 2020). Every crisis communication plan starts with an effort to purposefully steer the story in the direction of a successful conclusion. Even while an organisation may not have any influence over the immediate

aftermath of an unplanned catastrophe, it can nevertheless add to the narrative around the problem (Zhao et al. 2021). By doing this, the organisation can lessen the amount of harm that will be experienced by the business and its stakeholders. According to Ozanne et al. (2020), a functional crisis communication plan specifies not only what to do but also how and when to inform the public, employees, and other stakeholders of the organisation of crucial information. Figure 2.2 shows an example of a crisis communication flow chart.

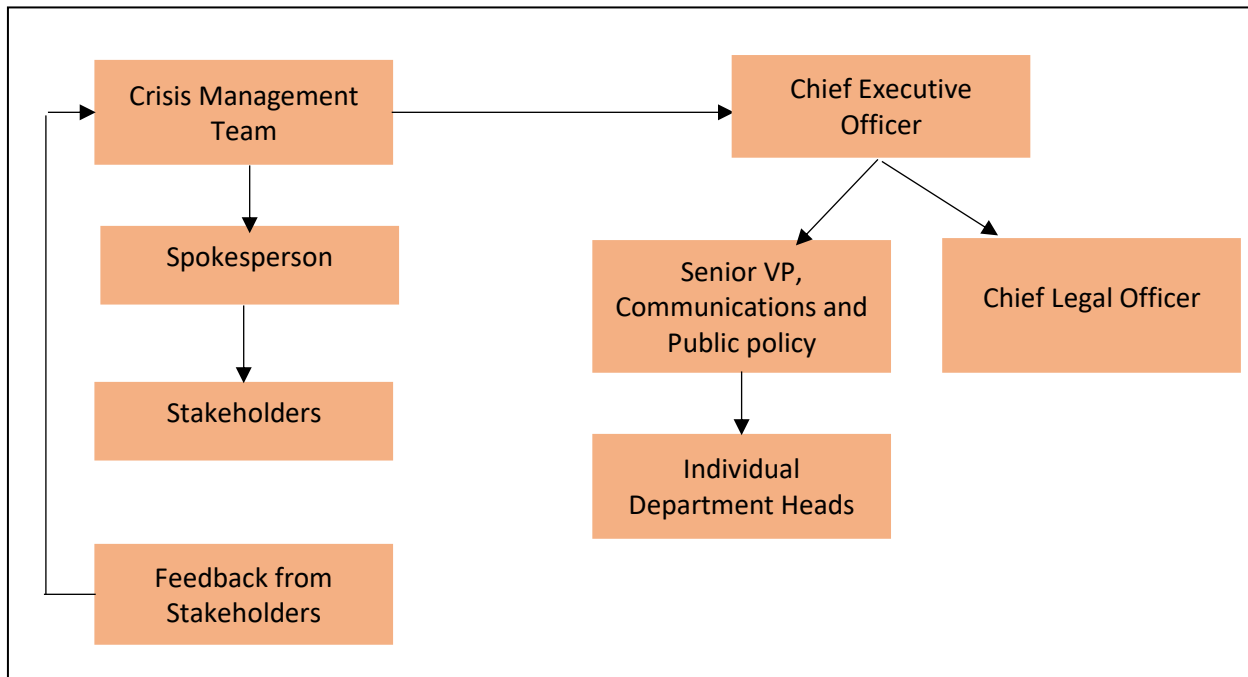


Figure 2.2: Crisis Communication Flow Chart

Source: Ham and Kim (2020)

With a CCP, an organisation can be in a better position to transmit crucial, reliable information during a crisis. Capano and Toth (2025) regards a clear CCP as one of the cornerstones of an effective crisis communication strategy. Such a plan serves as a blueprint for the organisation during crises and enables management to provide an immediate response. The CCP is an emergency plan that outlines the steps to be taken in communication during and after the crisis.

According to Tasnim et al. (2020), implementing a CCP successfully can be seen as a litmus test for an organisation's dedication to creating, maintaining, and reinforcing the community of trust. Mizrak (2024) views during a crisis communication plan (CCP) as a critical component of crisis

management. The CCP contains important information on issues such as the person responsible for disseminating information a crisis, the expected cost of communication, and other important activities during the crisis. Payton (2021) views the CCP as an indication of preparedness on the part of an organisation in dealing with a crisis. According to Yu (2020), a CCP provides a roadmap of how an organisation will handle communication before, during, and after a crisis as well as the strategies that will be used in minimising damage to the corporation's image.

Jin et al. (2021) express that a CCP is a necessity because public perception builds up quickly and the time within which to shape the narrative is very short. Thus, without a planned response strategy, it is difficult for an organisation to effectively handle the crisis and protect the image of the business. In addition, a clear CCP demonstrates sound organisational leadership, which boosts stakeholder faith in the team's capacity to control the crisis (Wang, Hao, & Platt, 2021). Furthermore, when the reputation of an organisation becomes damaged through a crisis, financial damage may also follow, and this can be prevented by developing an effective internal communications plan (Jin et al., 2021). In the absence of forthright and swift communications, an organisation may run the risk of being incompetent, negligent, providing the wrong information and this can in turn result in reputational damage.

Fuller and LaSala (2021) states that a CCP assists management in identifying a single key spokesperson for the organisation. By designating one key spokesperson, the organisation minimises the likelihood of issuing contradicting remarks or conflicting explanations to the media. In a crisis, speaking with one voice is essential. In addition, the CCP aids spokespersons in developing statements and practicing those statements and talking points to the point where they are confident with the content, at ease in front of the media and public, and sufficiently prepared to only occasionally check at notes (Payton, 2021). The CCP should ideally offer practice sessions so that spokespersons can simulate a real crisis press conference before one occurs. Furthermore, the CCP assists in identifying alternative spokespersons, just in case the primary spokesperson is unavailable during a crisis (Ham & Kim, 2019). Major talking points are also developed in the CCP for CEOs, spokespersons, senior executives, and public relations specialists.

The CCP further assists management to avoid prolonging the crisis by holding unnecessary press conferences or engaging in other activities that can keep the crisis in the news (Barclay & Thor, 2022). Thus, a crisis communication plan is crucial as it provides an outline of the ways in which the organisation will respond in the event of a crisis. The crisis communication strategies that will be employed by the organisation should be clearly outlined in the crisis communication plan. The section below discusses some of the crisis communication strategies that organisations can adopt in their crisis communication plans.

2.6.1 Crisis communication strategies

According to Coombs (2021), crisis communication should not be taken as a reactive measure upon the occurrence of a crisis but should be an essential tool utilised throughout the process of crisis management. Avery et al. (2021) points out the need to ensure that crisis communication prevails before, during, and after the crisis in order to capture the whole process of crisis management. Although organisations cannot avoid a crisis event, they can influence the way in which the problems being faced are covered by the media. The crisis communications manager has a responsibility of ensuring that the organisation converts a crisis into an opportunity to improve performance (Dominic, 2025).

The risk plan of an organisation should therefore include crisis communication strategies that may become useful in crisis situations (Gasana, 2024). Crisis communication strategies include pre-emptive actions, which refer to the steps taken before the opposition launches its first attack on the organisation and defensive response, which is a group of strategies that are less aggressive to the critique from opposition (Lee & Li, 2024). Defensive strategies include denial, excuse, and justification. Diversionary response strategies are another group of crisis communication strategies that aim to shift the focus of the public from the problem associated with the organisation (Smith, 2020). The four diversionary response strategies are concession, ingratiation, disassociation, and relabelling. A detailed discussion of crisis communication strategies will be provided in the literature chapter of the dissertation.

In addition, the advent of social media enhanced the capacity of the public to influence the elements of an event that are given emphasis and the features of reality that are highlighted within

communication (Liu et al., 2022). The public perceives social media as a medium for quickly communicating how they interpret the crisis and reach millions of people without the inputs of journalists (Payton, 2021). Such a development has resulted in the public becoming part of the network society and its capacity to influence the views of others has also increased. Due to the importance of the dissemination of information and communication during the evolution of a crisis, the potential of the public to influence the aggregate levels of the crisis understanding and the development of the crisis has been amplified by the presence of social media (Song et al., 2025).

Crisis communication should therefore involve developing ways of managing social media communication in order to minimise the damage that can emerge from it (Margaretha, 2025). To ensure the successful formulation and implementation of a crisis communication strategy, it is crucial for an organisation to develop a strategic map, which is a logical and coherent tool for describing the crisis communication strategy (Ndone & Kyriakopoulos, 2024). Figure 2.3 illustrates a strategic map for crisis communication.

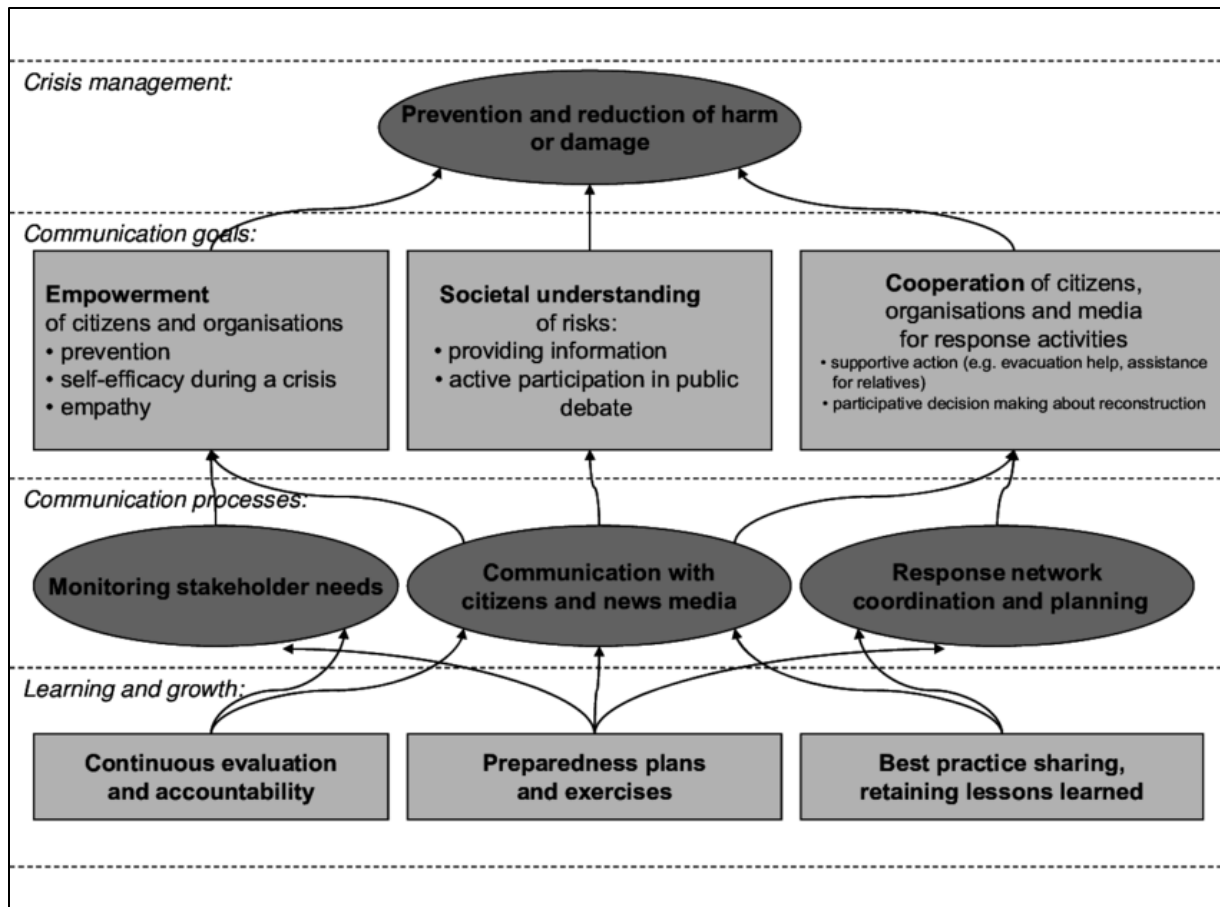


Figure 2.3: Strategic Map for Crisis Communication

Source: Ruggiero et al. (2019)

The strategy map shows the achievement of the organisational objective, which in times of crisis is the stability of the organisation. The strategic goals should include effectiveness indicators of crisis communication, to be aligned with objectives of crisis communication. (Aydın & İnce, 2024) proposed a strategic map for crisis communication based on the general strategy map designed by Kaplan and Norton (1992). The balanced scorecard (BSC) by Kaplan and Norton has four pillars for evaluating an organisation's performance and these are the financial perspective, the customer perspective, the internal business perspective, and the learning and growth perspective. In the strategic map proposed by Kuipers et al., (2023), the customer perspective is replaced by the prospective participants of crisis communication while the internal business perspective is replaced by the perspective of the crisis communication process. The effectiveness of crisis communication is therefore measured against its impact on the four highlighted pillars.

Upadhyay and Upadhyay (2023) state that the choice of a crisis communication strategy is determined by the type and intensity of the crisis. An appropriate strategy must be selected since crisis communication strategies have a direct influence on the reputation of the organisation. Coombs (2007) highlights three objectives of crisis communication strategies which are: to shape the origin of the crisis, to influence the stakeholders' perceptions about the crisis, and to minimize the negative impacts of the crisis. These objectives remain central in later crisis communication scholarship, where crisis communication is positioned as a strategic tool for shaping stakeholder perceptions and reducing harm throughout the crisis lifecycle (Coombs, 2021). Jong (2025) highlights two categories of crisis communication strategies, which are: defensive strategies, and accommodative strategies. These are discussed below.

2.6.1.1 Defensive strategies

In the majority of crises today, the most common strategy adopted by organisations unknowingly is the defensive or denial approach (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). Following a crisis, most organisations immediately adopt a legalistic or defensive approach, resulting in the damage of the original crisis to develop into self-inflicted reputational damage (Kim et al., 2021). The argument of organisations and attorneys is that a failure to involve the legal department in the crisis will result in the organisation suffering from reputational and financial damage and runs the risk of being held liable (Jin et al., 2021). The problem is that the attorneys and the public relations practitioner are not always in agreement on the most suitable approach to follow and the attorneys end up being over-legalistic in their proposed communication and choose the “no comment” communication. According to Bowen et al. (2021) organisations are tempted to use defensive strategies and pursue denial and absent approaches that do not usually succeed in meeting stakeholder expectations, giving rise to another crisis that should be dealt with. The resulting crisis referred to as a double crisis by (Akturan, 2025) can only be dealt with by adopting an accommodative strategy.

2.6.1.2 Accommodative strategy

Organisations do not usually prefer to follow a highly accommodative strategy as it may result in legitimate legal liabilities and financial risks (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). Some of the

accommodative strategies are: offering an apology, showing sympathy, and paying compensation for the damage to protect the image of the organisation (Dominic, 2025). The accommodative strategy often uses social media as the primary form of communication between the organisation and its stakeholders, with the aim of providing stakeholders with the opportunity to respond, forward messages, and discuss the issue (Mohammed et al., 2022). Social media provides a platform on which the organisation incorporates sympathy in its communication strategy to ensure that a relationship of trust is restored with stakeholders and public anger is subdued.

On the other hand, an apology that is perceived as insincere or information that is perceived to be false can exacerbate an emotional distress arising from a crisis (Othman & Yusoff, 2020). Stakeholders may therefore become angry as they may feel that the organisation is not being honest and is not willing to take responsibility. Ruohonen (2024) highlights the importance of ensuring consistent communication during a crisis, as this is crucial for the viability of the organisation. According to Ozanne et al. (2020), the use of an accommodative strategy can result in positive outcomes for an organisation, and the crisis, although not forgotten, will not have a huge impact on the image of the organisation. When organisations genuinely adopt an accommodative strategy during crisis communication, the aim should be to provide a platform for a two-way communication, mainly through social media such as Twitter (Avery, Kim, & Hocke, 2021). The study by Lee and Li (2024) found authenticity of speech and transparency as essential for success of crisis communication on social media while randomly interacting with emotionally charged people can worsen a problem. The use of a one-way communication via mass media implies the adoption of a defensive strategy to stay absent in their communication (Lee & Li, 2024). However, stakeholders will not wait for organisations to adopt an approach of absence; instead, they will find platforms for actively obtaining information and participating in discussions about the crisis. Through such conversations, the reputation of the organisation may be damaged.

2.7 Effective crisis communication

According to Zaremba (2010:98), crises situations need effective organisational communication in order to achieve resolution. Thus, one of the critical aspects of crisis management is a crisis response communication strategy (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). Coombs and Holladay (2007) point out the need for an organisation to first identify the type of crisis facing it to select a communication

response strategy that is best for managing image restoration. The authors suggest that the identification of the type of crisis is determined by the damage or severity accruing to the organisation as well as the history of the organisation regarding crises. Such an approach will provide a resource for informed organisational decision making.

An organisation should have a crisis communication plan (as discussed in section 2.4) that highlights the strategies that the organisation will use for different types of crises (Coombs, 2014). Although it is not possible for organisations to know in advance which problems they will experience in future, plans of possible crises should be developed to ensure that they are ready when the unexpected happens. The crisis communication plan should be consistent with the vision, mission, and values of the organisation and should be capable of enhancing the strategic positioning and competitiveness of the organisation (Naveed & Jalal, 2024). Planning of crisis communication assists in ensuring that the right messages are delivered to the right stakeholders.

Claeys and Coombs (2020) describes an effective crisis communication strategy as one that offers a company the ability to predict an adverse event before it occurs. An effective crisis communication strategy can potentially reduce the extent of damage that a crisis can cause on an organisation and can even prevent an event from evolving into a crisis. To enhance the effectiveness of communication strategies, Citrawijaya et al. (2024) proposes the use of defensive crisis response strategies in managing the crisis. The findings of a study conducted by Capano and Toth (2025) cite compensation and sympathy as crisis communication strategies that are as effective as an apology in influencing the perceptions of stakeholders about the organisation taking responsibility for the crisis. The denial strategy, which is a component of defensive strategies, was also found to be effective as it reduces reputational damage by removing the connection between the organisation and the crisis (Carvache-Franco et al., 2023). However, Aydın and İnce (2024) argues that the use of defensive strategies comes with problems, noting that individuals are bound not to believe the organisation's statements without proof presented by an independent third party. One of the factors that influence effective communication is the ability to set clear communication goals and key messages. A study by Dominic (2025) found that organisations and people often fail in communicating effectively due to lack of clear communication goals and key messages to

support such goals. Management should therefore set such goals and identify supporting messages before issuing any public comment; this is particularly important in a crisis.

2.7.1 The Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Framework

The CERC framework is one of the models that provide important insights into the elements of effective crisis communication. The framework is shown in Figure 2.4.

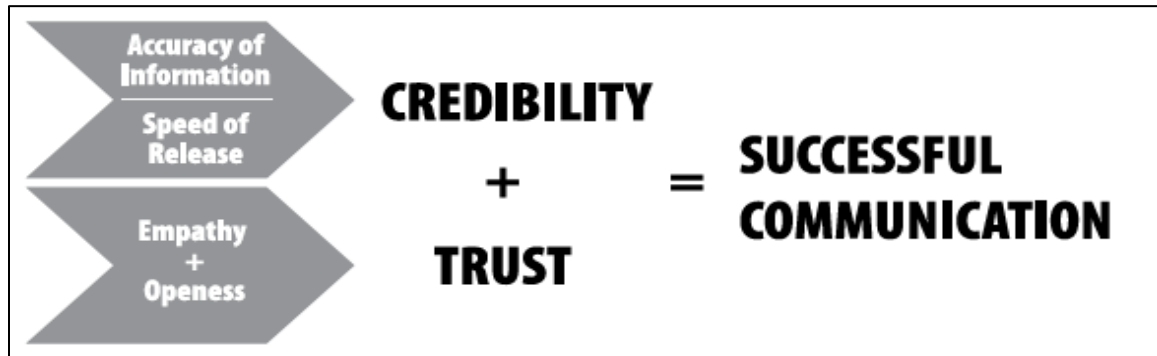


Figure 2.4: CERC Model: Elements of Successful Communication

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2018)

As shown in Figure 2.4, effective crisis communication is achieved where stakeholders have gained credibility and trust from the information provided. In crisis communication, credibility is established when the message to stakeholders is true, communicated with expertise, and can be trusted (Aydn & İnce, 2024). As highlighted by Barclay and Thor (2022), successful crisis communication goes beyond mere damage control. Information accuracy is essential for gaining credibility. Communication practitioners and public relations officers should therefore obtain facts from credible sources and ensure that all the facts are correct. Facts should be repeated as often as possible during the communication. The provision of unconfirmed details early in the communication should, however, be avoided if all the facts are not yet uncovered.

Furthermore, the CERC framework highlights the importance of the speed with which information is disseminated to all stakeholders (Colfer, 2020). When an organisation takes long to communicate after a crisis, stakeholders may develop the perception that the organisation is either withholding information or is not interested. It is therefore important for organisations to have properly formulated crisis communication plans and to be the first to respond, as well as being the

primary source of information, thereby creating good first impressions in the minds of their stakeholders (Jong, 2020). Speedy communication implies that an organisation has in place policies and procedures for crisis communication and has the situation under control, whereas the absence of speed in communication suggests denial of the crisis (Ruohonen et al., 2024).

The CERC framework also highlights the need for empathy and compassion towards the various stakeholders affected by the crisis (Hine & Bragias, 2020). In this regard, Hapsari and Ananda (2024) found that an organisation that is honest and open in its communication will establish sympathy with stakeholders. Margaretha (2025) point out the need for selecting the right spokesperson for crisis communication due to the need to disseminate information with honesty, openness, and candour. Although it may not be possible to have all the information and there maybe uncertainty, the spokesperson should prepare for the communication such that he/she shares sufficient and credible information to establish good first impressions following a crisis. As revealed in the CERC framework, it is crucial for the spokesperson to be viewed as trustworthy and credible in their communication. Reynolds and Seeger (2005) and Barclay and Thor (2022) recommend five elements in which a spokesperson can focus. These are disseminating the message with caring and empathy (Erdogan, 2023; Niu & Ma, 2023), exhibiting competence and expertise, conveying the information with openness and honesty, exhibiting the organisation's commitment and dedication to resolving the crisis, and being accountable for decisions made during the crisis communication.

2.7.2 Communication styles

To achieve effective communication, Barclay and Thor (2022) propose that there should be decentralised communication flow. There is a common view in literature that there is need for a shift from traditional centralised models of decision-making to more decentralised models (Abd-Elfattah, 2024; Claeys & Coombs, 2020). During situations that present high pressure, crises that are time-sensitive create conditions of increased decision-making for lower-level employees and less time for consultation among team members. The resultant autonomy amongst employees at lower levels in the organisation creates a horizontal style of functioning in the team, bringing to question the appropriateness of traditional communication systems that have a tendency of following a rigid hierarchy. Kim (2021) proposed the construction of a horizontal connection of

networks that serve as bridges between groups and their nearby resources, making use of already existing relationships to work in partnerships, as opposed to a rigid hierarchy.

To effectively communicate decisions during a crisis, Gasana (2024) proposed the use of shared mental models, which are illustrated in Figure 2.5.

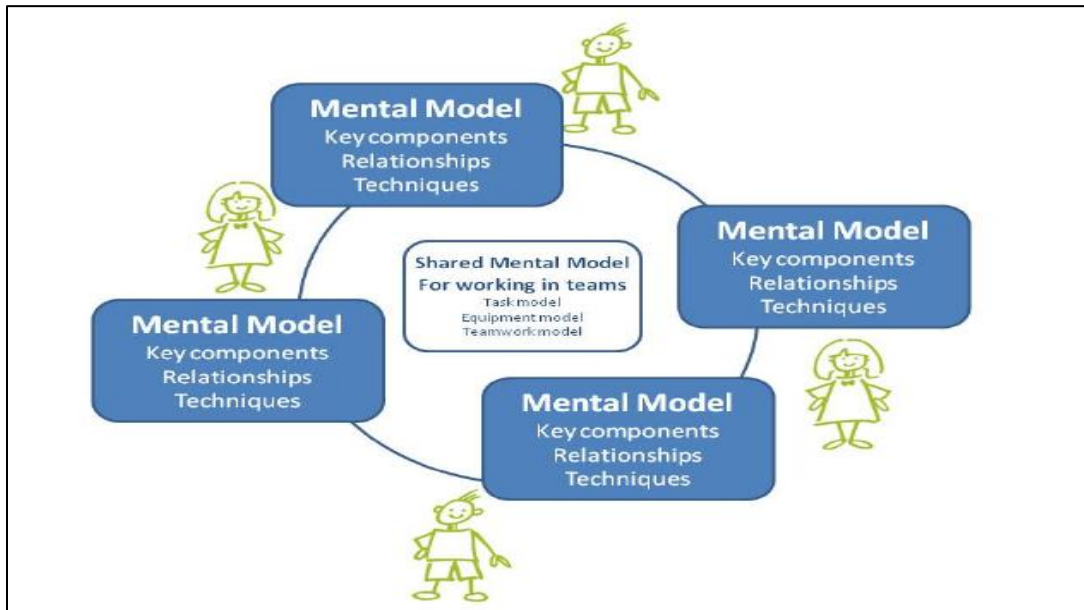


Figure 2.5: Illustration of Shared Mental Models

Source : Gasana (2024)

With shared mental models, a team develops a shared goal and incorporates the construction of a common understanding within the team of the tasks that are required as well as the roles of others in the system. In addition, effective communication is enhanced by vocalising explicit plans to create shared goals that are made easier to understand through a conscious decision-making process (Ozanne et al., 2020). The aim of this process is to prevent the jump from situation assessment to plan execution by focusing on developing a conscious plan foundation.

2.7.3 Stakeholder involvement and social media in crisis communication

With the advent of social media, stakeholders are now integrated into the crisis communication response as they will already be communicating about the crisis at hand through social media platforms (Capano & Toth, 2025). Thus, it is important to incorporate social media forms of

engagement in organisational crisis communication plans. With traditional media, interaction with the public was not necessary. However, with social media, public relations and communication practitioners should engage in dialogue with the public (Othman & Yusoff, 2020). Even though the majority of organisations claim to be open to dialogue, very few of them actually implement the engagement strategy as they usually make attempts to persuade stakeholders (Hine & Bragias, 2020). Lee and Xu (2023) highlight the need for creating a conversational platform as opposed to persuading stakeholders. The dialogue approach to engagement with stakeholders is only effective in cases where several users are affected by the crisis; otherwise, it may appear as if the organisation is making attempts to rally supporters, thus, creating anger among the public (Claeys & Coombs, 2020; Mizrak, 2024).

Research by Aydın and İnce (2024) recommended that the communication strategy should be transparent in terms of the responses from the organisation. When stakeholders perceive an organisation as hiding or deleting previous posts following a crisis, there is likely to be uncertainty and a breakdown in trust (Fuller & LaSala, 2021). Organisations should therefore develop crisis communication plans that define the transparency strategies that will be followed during crisis communication so that spokespersons and public relations practitioners can follow correct procedures and ensure transparency.

2.8 Effective crisis communication during a pandemic

During global pandemics such as the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic, crisis communication is essential for dismissing fear and uncertainty as well as making citizens unite in a collective fight against the disease (Su et al., 2021). A fundamental characteristic of crisis communication is that it is usually adopted as a communication strategy for addressing emergency situations when there are at least three crises that are at play: an unprecedented event that has far reaching economic and individual consequences; a crisis in communication that can prevent stakeholders from working towards a solution; and a potential trust crisis that is already present or is developing, partially as a result of the first two crises (Wu et al., 2020). For the sake of addressing these crises, there are a number of steps that should be taken by organisations and the society at large. Firstly, there is a need to develop an evidence-based, tailored disaster-preparedness plan that has the potential of curbing the pandemic. Secondly, the plan should be carefully executed, with speed and precision. Lastly,

there is a need to communicate the plan as well as the corresponding procedures effectively to the public in a timely, truth-oriented, and transparent manner, thus achieving effective crisis communication (Su et al., 2021). It is paramount to effectively share public health updates with society and organisational members in an honest manner. Figure 2.6 provides a summary of the antecedents to crisis communication and the possible solutions.

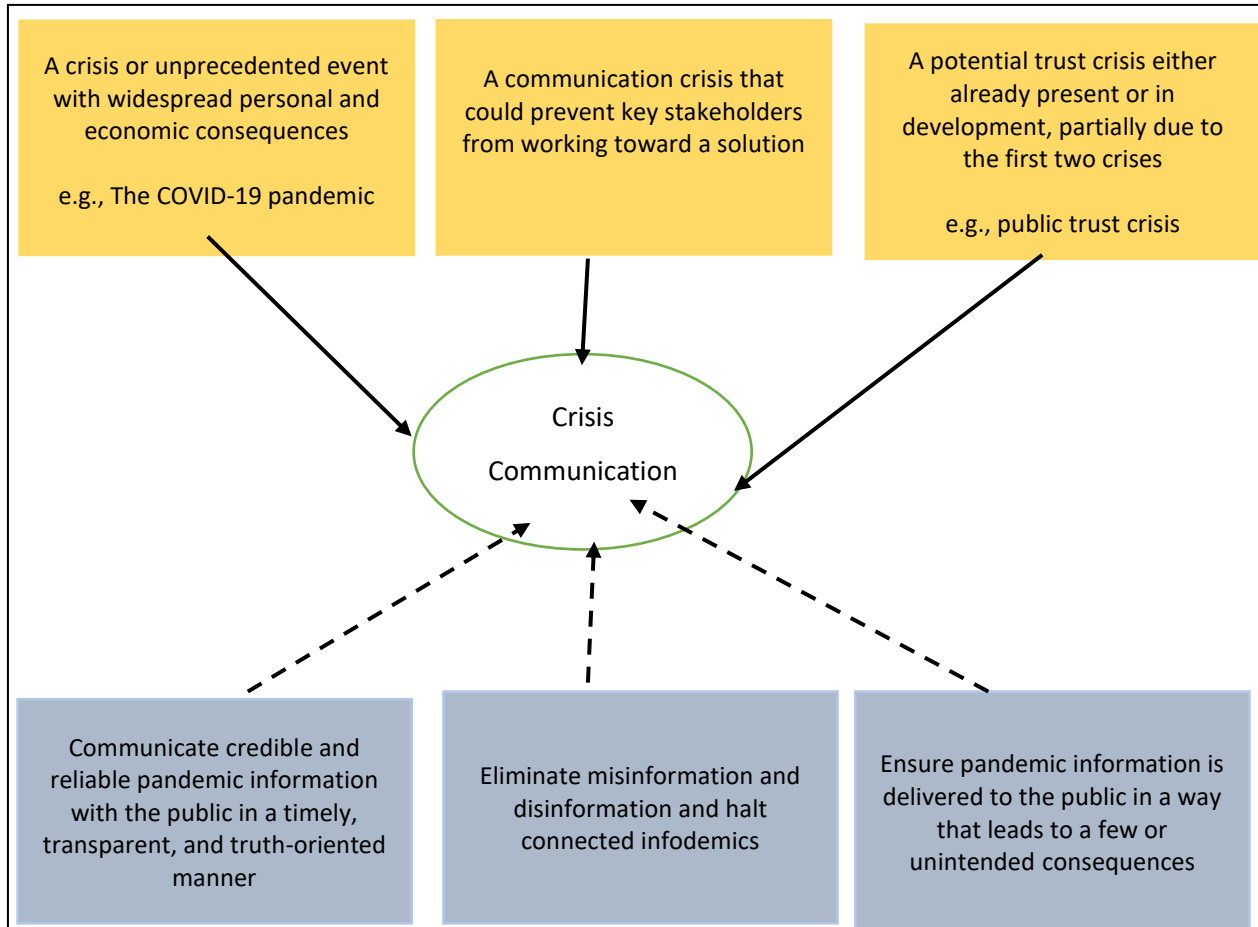


Figure 2.6: Antecedents to Crisis Communication and possible solutions

Source: Su et al. (2021:5)

Figure 2.6 shows that to deliver effective crisis communication during a pandemic, organisations and governments should communicate credible and reliable information relating to the pandemic (Su et al., 2021). Li et al. (2020) give an example of the Chinese government that managed to deliver COVID-19 updates that were tailored to the needs and wants of the public to enhance relevance. Such information was disseminated through social and traditional media outlets to increase reach and impact. The information was also presented by key government and health

officials with the aim of boosting message credibility. According to Colfer (2020), crisis communication during a pandemic should be able to dispel the fear and uncertainty of people regarding the pandemic, as well as improve their compliance with health and safety procedures relating to the pandemic, such as lockdowns and face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. These examples clearly demonstrate that the effectiveness of crisis communication does not only rely on the accuracy of information but also on its quality, delivery, timing and the trustworthiness of the source. Organisations must therefore consider both the message substance and its context when planning communication strategies during a pandemic.

Furthermore, Figure 2.6 highlights the importance of eliminating pandemic infodemics, which refers to an excessive amount of information relating to a problem. Such information is typically unreliable, spreads fast, and makes a solution more difficult to achieve (Su et al., 2022). In the interest of eliminating infodemics, it is important to involve all key stakeholders (Wu et al., 2020:825). Public health campaigns that are aimed at addressing the dangers of pandemic infodemics require organisations and governments to develop information that makes individuals aware of how to avoid being a channel of disinformation or misinformation (Li et al., 2020). Considering that a significant proportion of the public do not have the health literacy required to tell the difference between credible information and misinformation, organisations and governments should establish educational programmes that aim at minimising infodemics during the pandemic and in future (Tasnim et al., 2020).

Additionally, Figure 2.6 indicates the need for a fact-based and people-centred pandemic crisis communication strategy. A pandemic affects people of different demographics (Su et al., 2021). It is difficult not to form an opinion about an enduring pandemic that continues to pose a threat to the lives and livelihoods of people. However, considering the economic and personal consequences that arise from biased and misleading or blatantly false and malicious information, it is imperative for organisations, government officials, health experts, and media professionals to crisis communication strategy that is based on facts and is centred on the people (Liu et al., 2020). Roth and Pickles (2020) define a fact-based and people-centred crisis communication strategy as “communication endeavours that deliver facts that matter to the people without framing the numbers or statistics based on personal views or ulterior motives such as political gains or

economic interests”. Through this strategy, well-mentioned information can be effectively delivered to the public without unintended consequences.

2.9 Barriers to effective crisis communication

Effective crisis communication during a pandemic is not only shaped by the strategies organisations adopt but is also constrained by a range of barriers that can undermine even well-planned communication efforts. Hapsari and Ananda (2024) broadly define communication barriers in crisis management as any conditions, structural, technological, or social, that impede the timely and accurate flow of information between an organisation and its stakeholders during a crisis. The barriers identified in the literature and relevant to this study are discussed below under three categories: organisational barriers, technological barriers, and social barriers.

2.9.1 Organisational barriers

Organisational barriers refer to internal structural and cultural factors that hinder the flow of crisis-related information within and from an organisation. One of the most widely documented organisational barriers is the centralisation of decision-making. Claeys and Coombs (2020) argue that hierarchical and centralised organisational structures create bottlenecks in crisis communication because decisions and messages must pass through multiple approval layers before reaching stakeholders. In government agencies in particular, the need to obtain authorisation from senior officials and coordinating departments often delays the release of timely and relevant information to the public (Kim & Liu, 2020). Hapsari and Ananda (2024) echo this view, noting that rigid interoperability challenges within governmental structures frequently impede coordinated communication during major incidents. There is therefore a broad consensus in the literature that a shift from centralised to more decentralised communication structures is necessary to enhance crisis communication agility (Barclay & Thor, 2022).

Organisational culture also constitutes a significant internal barrier. Claeys and Coombs (2020) highlight that organisations lacking a culture of information-sharing struggle to achieve the rapid and transparent communication required during crises. In such environments, employees may withhold information due to fear of criticism, distrust of colleagues, or competition for expertise, all of which slow down the organisation’s crisis response (Akturan, 2025). Citrawijaya et al.(2024)

further identify fragmented organisational networks, where different units or departments operate in silos, as a structural barrier to effective multi-agency crisis communication. The absence of pre-established communication protocols and information-sharing norms compounds these challenges (Aydın & İnce, 2024). These organisational barriers are particularly salient for government agencies, where bureaucratic culture and inter-departmental boundaries can obstruct the free flow of crisis-critical information.

2.9.2 Technological barriers

While digital technology and social media have expanded the reach and speed of crisis communication, they have simultaneously introduced a new set of technological barriers. The most prominent of these is the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation through social media platforms (Yu, 2020). According to Hong and Kim (2020:), social media platforms can intensify crisis impact by spreading rumours and unverified information at speeds that far outpace an organisation's ability to issue corrections. During health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this phenomenon was particularly acute, as platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp became conduits for conspiracy theories and false health guidance, which competed directly with organisations' official communications (Jin et al., 2021)

Hine and Bragias (2020) further highlight the challenge of emergency response information system interoperability, that is, the inability of different technological platforms used by different organisations and agencies to communicate seamlessly with each other during a crisis. This fragmentation means that critical information may exist in one system but fail to reach decision-makers in another in a timely manner. (Capano & Toth, 2025) add that inadequate digital infrastructure and uneven access to technology among stakeholders can create disparities in crisis information access, leaving some segments of the public or employee population uninformed. For organisations navigating a pandemic, these technological barriers demand proactive investment in digital monitoring tools, coordinated social media response protocols, and accessible multi-channel communication platforms.

2.9.3 Social barriers

Social barriers to crisis communication arise from the broader information environment and from the cognitive and behavioural responses of audiences. A prominent social barrier is information overload, the condition in which recipients are exposed to such a volume of crisis-related information that they are unable to effectively process, evaluate, or act on it. Hong and Kim (2020) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the sheer volume of available information about the virus led to avoidance behaviours, where individuals deliberately disengaged from consuming further updates as a coping mechanism. Mohammed et al. (2022) document how the relentless circulation of conspiracy theories, false remedies, and contradictory guidance during COVID-19 significantly diminished the effectiveness of official public health communication. Poonia and Rajasekaran (2020) similarly argue that when audiences cannot distinguish credible information from rumour, the impact of official messaging is substantially weakened.

Related to information overload is the challenge of inconsistent information from multiple sources. Sauer et al. (2021) observe that in a media environment characterised by widespread instant messaging and social networking, mal-information, misinformation, and disinformation have become endemic features of pandemic communication. When scientific findings evolve rapidly — as occurred during COVID-19 with guidance on transmission, treatment, and vaccination — organisations face the additional challenge of issuing corrections or updated statements without further eroding public trust (Akturan, 2025). Avery et al. (2021) and Hine and Bragias (2020) also identify the inadequacy of information as a social barrier, noting that incomplete or insufficiently contextualised messages can create confusion and fear among stakeholders, particularly when communities lack the prior knowledge to interpret technical health information. Addressing social barriers therefore requires organisations to carefully calibrate the frequency, format, and complexity of their crisis communications to the needs and capacities of their audiences.

2.10 Variables tested in this study

The study collected data using an interview guide with open-ended questions. The research instrument was considered appropriate for the study as it sought to obtain in-depth insights into the perceptions of research participants on crisis communication. Other studies that used semi-structured interviews to collect data on crisis communication include Aydın and İnce (2024) and

Payton (2021). This study adopted semi-structured interviews for collecting primary data. The choice of semi-structured interviews was motivated by the need to obtain a deeper understanding of the research problem from the views and experiences of research participants. The instrument covered the following variables:

- Perceptions of effectiveness of crisis communication: credibility of message (Hong & Kim, 2020), ability to generate trust (Akturan, 2025), ability to protect corporate reputation (Capano & Toth, 2025), speed of crisis communication, communication style (centralised vs decentralised), and stakeholder involvement (Hine & Bragias, 2020).
- Crisis communication strategies adopted: defensive (denial, blaming and justification), accommodative strategies (apology, sympathy, compensation) (Hapsari & Ananda, 2024; Mizrak, 2024).
- Barriers to effective crisis communication: Technological barriers (such as lack of effective management of social media) (Aydın & İnce, 2024; Citrawijaya et al., 2024; Hong & Kim, 2020; Yu, 2020); organisational barriers (such as organisational culture, organisational structure, organisational networks) (Kim et al., 2021; Bowen et al, 2021; Barclay & Thor, 2022); social barriers (such as information that does not meet the requirements of the situation, incorrect information, insufficient information) (Mohammed et al., 2022; Fuller & LaSala, 2021; Claeys & Coombs, 2020; Colfer, 2020; Poonia & Rajasekaran, 2020; Sauer et al., 2021).

2.11 Theoretical framework

Crisis communication theories mainly focus on image, reputation repair, and restoration. This study obtained some insights from the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and the image restoration theory (IRT).

2.11.1 Situational crisis communication theory

The SCCT is an audience-centred theory that is based on evidence. It utilises empirical methods in a bid to understand the best selection of strategies for responding to crises (Coombs, 2007). According to the SCCT, crisis responses are influenced by the situation. Factors around the situation determine the strategies that will be more effective in protecting the organisation and its assets.

The SCCT posits that it is important for managers to first determine the threat posed to the reputation of the organisation (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). The theory uses the attribution theory to develop a connection between the type of crisis and the required responses. According to the attribution theory, people attempt to establish the causes of negative events and select the causal attribution that is most satisfying to them. Crises trigger attributions and such attributions are based on little evidence (Ham & Kim, 2019). Crises' managers therefore choose appropriate strategies for maximising reputational protection by anticipating how people make attributions.

Lee and Li (2024) classified crisis response strategies into two categories which are primary and secondary response strategies. The three primary response strategies are: deny, diminish, and rebuild while the secondary response strategy is bolstering. The deny strategy encompasses behaviours such as scapegoating, denial, and attacking the accuser. With the diminish strategy, there are excuses, for example, the crisis is beyond the control of the organisation; and justification to minimise the perceived damage. The rebuild strategy encompasses apologising and compensating. Thus, the organisation takes responsibility and compensates the victims. The bolstering strategy, which is a secondary strategy, includes aspects such as reminders, ingratiation, and victimage. Reminders involve informing stakeholders and others about the good work that the organisation has previously done while ingratiation involves praising stakeholders (Coombs, 2007:173).

Ham and Kim (2019) applied the SCCT in a study that sought to establish the role of CSR in crises. The study found that in two circumstances; when a crisis is unplanned and when a company's CSR history is brief, consumer inferences from a company's CSR-based crisis communications significantly increase consumer behavioural intentions. Othman and Yusoff (2020) sought to provide insights of crisis management strategies applied by Malaysian airlines in times of crisis. The study used the SCCT as a framework in the analysis. The study found that the airline was somehow succeeded in handling the relatives of victims in some way but failed to communicate crisis messages since it both followed and disregarded SCCT guidelines. For example, although numerous statements were being made since it lost contact with the aircraft, the airline received criticism from the world's leading experts as they were assessed because many of the media

releases focused on dispelling rumours and myths that were circulating at the time rather than providing valuable information. For this study, the SCCT provides important insights on how managers can choose crisis communication strategies based on the extent of the threat to the organisation's reputation.

2.11.2 Image restoration theory

To strengthen the theoretical framework through triangulation, this study also draws on Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Theory (IRT). The IRT holds that when an organisation's reputation is threatened, communication serves as the primary vehicle for restoring its image. Benoit (1997:178) identifies five broad categories of image restoration strategies: denial (simple denial and shifting the blame); evading responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions); reducing offensiveness of the event (bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation); corrective action; and mortification (full apology). In the corporate context, Benoit (2024) explains that organisations engage in purposive image repair communication to protect and restore reputation when it is threatened.

The IRT complements the SCCT in several important ways. While the SCCT focuses on matching crisis response strategies to crisis type based on attributions of responsibility, the IRT foregrounds the rhetorical dimension of crisis communication, specifically how language and messaging choices shape public perceptions of organisational culpability. Niu and Ma (2023) demonstrated that image restoration strategies have a significant impact on perceptions of corporate social responsibility and source credibility during crises. Applied to the present study, the IRT provides a lens through which to evaluate the communication choices made by the government agency's managers during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the extent to which accommodative strategies such as mortification and corrective action were employed to rebuild trust with stakeholders. By combining the SCCT and IRT, this study employs theoretical triangulation to offer a more comprehensive analysis of crisis communication effectiveness than either theory would provide alone.

2.12 Chapter Summary

Literature that relates to crisis communication was reviewed in this chapter. This enabled the research to be informed by the views and findings of different authors and researchers on the problem. The chapter provided the definition and overview of crisis and crisis communication further discussed the various crisis communication strategies that can be used by organisations. Furthermore, the chapter discussed the characteristics of effective crisis communication in general and effective crisis communication during a pandemic. The chapter concluded with the theoretical foundation of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided an examination of literature relating to crisis communication in organisations. The goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of the study's research methods. The focus is on the research design, research approach, population of the study, sampling methods and size of the sample as well as the techniques used in collecting and analysing data. Furthermore, the chapter highlights and explains the strategies that were used in ensuring the trustworthiness of the study and observance of ethical principles throughout the research process.

3.2 Research design

A research design is described by Burns and Grove (2005:68) as the set of precisely defined frameworks that the investigation is carried out under. The research design guides decisions relating to the choice of research approach since it outlines the ways in which relevant information for the study will be gathered. Babbie (2018:29) classifies research designs into three categories, exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saunders et al., 2020).

The study followed the exploratory research design. Bryman (2016:148); Creswell & Poth (2024) defines exploratory research as research in an area in which the problem needs to be defined more precisely and to gain additional insights before an approach can be developed. Exploratory research focuses on collecting either primary or secondary data using an unstructured format and utilises qualitative data collection techniques such as interviews projection techniques, and focus group discussions (Saunders et al., 2020:122; Creswell & Poth, 2024). The exploratory research design was found appropriate for this study as it sought to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication in the government agency. This involved obtaining the views and perceptions of managers in the organisation, which was possible using unstructured methods of data collection that were associated with exploratory research. Through exploratory research new insights into the research problem were obtained. The study adopted a cross-sectional research design, which involved collecting data from research participants at a single point in time (Bhattacharjee, 2012:52; Saunders et al., 2020). The time allocated to the research and the available resources did not permit the use of a longitudinal research design.

3.3 Research philosophy and approach

Research philosophy is defined by Saunders et al. (2020) as the researcher's beliefs on how the knowledge of a phenomenon exists and the ways in which such knowledge can be obtained, analysed, and utilised. Some of the commonly used research philosophies in social science research are positivism, pragmatism, and interpretivism. Positivism is founded on the assumption that reality is constant and can be objectively observed and described, that is, without interfering with the situation under study (Burns & Grove, 2005:58). Thus, to obtain knowledge, researchers can use objective observations and measurements. Answers to research questions can be obtained by careful measurement and analysis of numerical data. Pragmatism adopts a more flexible and practical approach to research, with a focus on the applicability and usefulness of research findings (Bryman, 2016:66). The researcher can therefore deal with research objectives that cross philosophical boundaries, utilising different perspectives for different aspects of the investigation.

The study was underpinned by the interpretivism philosophy which, according to Saunders et al. (2020), seeks to understand a phenomenon from the views and experiences of the research subjects. In line with the interpretivism philosophy, the study adopted a qualitative approach. According to Saunders et al. (2020), qualitative research entails gathering and evaluating non-numerical data to obtain a better understanding of experiences, opinions, or concepts. It can be utilised to uncover intricate details about a situation or to spark fresh study concepts. Using the qualitative approach, the study gained a unique understanding of the reality of the participants' experiences with crisis communication in the organisation because of the method's ability to provide depth and richness. The qualitative research approach places emphasis on the active, complete, and individual components of people's experiences and tries to encapsulate such experiences fully, within the environment of the individuals experiencing them (Polit & Beck, 2018:98).

Through the qualitative approach, it was possible to interact and deeply engage with managers of the government agency using semi-structured interviews. The study therefore generated rich data on the experiences of the managers with crisis communication during a pandemic. According to Babbie (2018:38), the qualitative approach assists in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the

research problem. Thus, in this study, it was possible to obtain in-depth insights into the crisis communication strategy in the organisation, as well as the challenges that hinder the effectiveness of crisis communication. Such an in-depth understanding made it possible to make meaningful and practical recommendations for enhancing crisis communication in the organisation.

3.4 Population and sampling

3.4.1 Target population

Willie (2023) defines a target population as the entire group that a researcher is interested in basing findings on. For the proposed study, the target population was made up of all employees of the government agency that was studied.

3.4.2 Accessible population

Babbie (2018) defines accessible population as the part of the target population that the researcher is able to reach. The accessible population for the proposed study was made up of managers at all levels in the government agency. The choice of this population was motivated by the fact that managers in an organisation are the ones responsible for strategic issues such as crisis communication plans and their implementation. Thus, these were the people who were able to provide valuable insights into the research problem (Saunders et al., 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.4.3 Sampling method and sample size

Sampling techniques are categorised into two groups: probability and non-probability sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In probability sampling, each and every component of the population has a known or equal chance of being picked up for the sample. On the other hand, non-probability sampling techniques are based on the researcher's judgement and there is no known chance of selection for population elements (Bhattacharjee, 2012) (Saunders et al., 2020).

Purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling technique was used to select the sample participants. Purposive sampling makes use of the researcher's judgment to select sample elements that meet the data requirements for the study (Saunders et al., 2020:244; Creswell & Poth, 2024). The reasons for preferring purposive sampling were that it allowed for the selection

of research participants with relevant and adequate knowledge about the research problem. The sample was made up of 15 junior- and mid-level managers, as well as senior managers in the agency. One third of the sample participants (5) were selected from the Public Relations and Communications Department since it is the department that has the greatest responsibility in the development of communication strategies. The sample size is supported by Konstantina et al. (2018:36), who propose a sample size of between 15 and 30 for qualitative studies. For this study, a sample size of 15 participants allowed for prolonged engagement with participants to get a clearer understanding of the research problem.

3.4.4 Unit of analysis

In this study, managers in a government agency were used as the unit of analysis. Data was collected from a sample of managers in the government agency. This provided a better appreciation of how effective crisis communication is in the organisation.

3.5 Data collection techniques

The study collected both primary and secondary data. Secondary data, which refers to data that is already in existence and has been collected and analysed for other purposes than the research problem at hand (Saunders et al., 2020; Bhattacharjee, 2012), was collected through a review of literature relating to crisis communication. Such data provided a clear understanding of crisis communication from the work of other authors and researchers. Secondary data also covered the gaps that needed to be filled by the proposed research.

Primary data refers to data that is collected for the first time and is directed at dealing with the research problem at hand (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Saunders et al., 2020). For the proposed study, primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are one of the qualitative data collection techniques. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by flexibility in both the designing and refining the interview guides as well as the actual conducting of the interviews. Such flexibility allowed the cover of several aspects of the research problem that were not anticipated. Another advantage of semi-structured interview is that they use open-ended questions, which are useful for obtaining detailed explanations of the research problem from research participants (Denscombe, 2017:188). Participants in this study therefore had an

opportunity to explain their thoughts freely and provide details of their experiences with crisis communication in the organisation. Such detailed explanations assisted in gaining an in-depth understanding of crisis communication in the organisation. In addition, semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for probing participants for more information (Bhattacharjee, 2012:218), which contributed to understanding the research problem better. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to observe non-verbal communication, which also contributed to understanding how the participants really felt about this issue.

The interview questions were prepared based on the objectives of the study. In addition, the variables of the study were adapted from other studies on crisis communication as indicated in Section 2.8. Efforts were made to ensure that there are enough questions to cover each of the objectives. The questions were also informed by the findings from literature on crisis communication. To ensure that the questions were fully understood by all participants simple English and unambiguous words were used. Furthermore, to minimise the possibility of causing psychological and emotional harm to participant, gender- and ethnic-neutral language was used.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of managers selected from the government agency under study. Each interview lasted for 30 to 35 minutes and permission to audio-record was sought from the participants. Notes were also taken on important issues that related to the research problem. The Zoom online platform was used for the interviews. However, face-to-face interviews were also conducted for those who were comfortable with being interviewed on Zoom.

The interview guide was pilot tested to establish if it is suitable for collecting relevant information to answer the research questions. The pilot testing was done with three participants from the accessible population. These were made up of a junior manager, middle manager, and senior manager. Interviews were held with these participants and the researcher assessed if the questions were understood and whether they were generating relevant information in line with the research objectives. The data was analysed and if there was any need, the research instrument was revised.

3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006:96) define thematic analysis as the process of searching for themes or patterns within a data set. More recent methodological literature further elaborates on thematic analysis as a flexible and rigorous approach to qualitative data analysis when applied systematically and reflexively (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2021). This data analysis technique was selected because it was flexible and could be used to analyse qualitative data. The process of data analysis commenced by transcription of audio-recorded data so that it became easy to use. Transcription was done using online transcription software. After transcription came familiarisation with the interview responses. This involved repeatedly going through the interview responses with the aim of understanding the issues raised by participants. During the familiarisation process, the researcher was taking note of important points that related to the research problem (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2024). This was followed by coding, which involved the identification of phrases or portions of data that spoke to the same issue and assigning codes to such text. The codes made it easy to identify themes within the interview responses. The coded data was then analysed again, this time in search of themes or patterns that related to the research problem. Portions of text that share the same meaning were summarised by a theme. After all themes have been identified, another exercise of refining the identified themes was carried out. This involved assessing whether the themes appropriately summarised the ideas in the text (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Guest et al., 2014). Some themes were expanded while others were collapsed. The final stage was to write the study report, discussing the interview responses under the identified themes and integrating the findings with literature on crisis communication. (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.7 Trustworthiness

The degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods employed to assure the quality of a study is referred to as the study's trustworthiness or rigor (Polit & Beck, 2018:116). Researchers are expected to specify the protocols and practices required in each study for it to be regarded as worthy by readers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four ways of evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria remain widely used as quality benchmarks in qualitative research

and are supported in more recent methodological guidance (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Ahmed, 2024; Noble & Smith, 2025).

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility, which is the qualitative researcher's equivalent concept for internal validity in quantitative research, deals with the question of how congruent the research findings are with reality. According to Polit and Beck (2018:116), one of the strategies for ensuring credibility is adopting research methods that are well-established in qualitative research. This study adopted semi-structured interviews which are widely used in qualitative research. The study followed the established protocols for conducting interviews to ensure credible findings are provided. In addition, prolonged engagement with participants assisted in obtaining a clear understanding of their views and perceptions. Credibility was further strengthened through a transparent analytic process, including systematic coding and theme development (Nowell et al., 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). (Noble & Smith, 2025).

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the research results are beneficial to researchers in other settings. This category differs from the other trustworthiness aspects in that it is the reader who determines the applicability of the findings to other settings. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985:59), transferability can be enhanced when the researcher provides adequate contextual information relating to the fieldwork. In this study, the context of the study was described in detail and the steps taken in the data collection process were outlined clearly so that other researchers can make transferability inferences. The sample was clearly defined, and the data collection method was specified. Providing sufficient contextual detail is consistently emphasised as essential for readers to judge transferability in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). (Noble & Smith, 2025).

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability is defined as the data's consistency throughout time and under different study conditions (Polit & Beck, 2018:116). It is comparable to reliability in quantitative research, but

with the awareness that the study's type will determine how stable the settings are. To ensure dependability in this study, the research design, research process and the reasons for selecting such a design were provided in detail. Dependability was further supported by maintaining clear documentation of data collection and analysis steps, enabling the research process to be logically traceable (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). (Noble & Smith, 2025).

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which findings may be reproduced and are neutral. According to Polit and Beck (2018:119), this is comparable to objectivity in quantitative research. In this study, confirmability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail. All the notes that were compiled in the field were maintained and the steps taken during the data analysis process were recorded. In addition, the research report was presented to a peer together with the raw data and an opinion was sought on the extent to which the interpretations in the report represent the views and perceptions of the participants. Establishing an auditable decision trail and transparent documentation of analytic decisions strengthens confirmability in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). (Noble & Smith, 2025).

3.8 Ethical considerations

According to Bhattacharjee (2012:58), researchers are required to adhere to the general agreements that are shared concerning the proper ways of conducting scientific research. The following ethical principles were adhered to in this study: Ethical considerations apply throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation (Saunders et al., 2020; Morina, 2021; Newman et al., 2021; Taquette & Souza, 2022).

- Participants were not coerced to take part in the research. They did so at their own will and were provided with adequate information regarding what the study is about, how they were expected to be involved, as well as the risks, if any that were involved. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalties or consequences. Participants were asked to sign consent forms to show that they had voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. (Saunders et al., 2020; Morina, 2021; Newman et al., 2021).

- The anonymity and confidentiality of participants was guaranteed. The identities of participants were not disclosed in any of the research documents. The responses of each participant were identified by pseudonyms. In addition, the information obtained was not shared with any other parties except the reviewers of this research project on request. Hard copies of information obtained from participants were safely locked up in cabinets while electronic information was protected by passwords (that were not shared with anyone). All the information gathered will be disposed after a minimum of five years. (Saunders et al., 2020; Morina, 2021; Newman et al., 2021).
- The researcher also ensured that the participants did not incur any harm because of participating in the research. The research process did not have any prospects for physical harm to the participants. To guard against emotional and psychological harm, the interview schedule did not include sensitive questions such as gender- and ethnic-sensitive questions and those that required participants' private information (Saunders et al., 2020; Morina, 2021; Newman et al., 2021).
- Permission to collect data from the government agency was sought from management and data collection was only conducted after receiving written permission.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter an overview of the study's research methods was provided. The chapter focused on the research design, research approach, population of the study sampling methods and size of the sample, and techniques used in collecting and analysing data. Furthermore, the chapter highlighted the strategies that were used in ensuring the trustworthiness of the study and observance of ethical principles throughout the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the presentation, discussion, and interpretation of results from the study that sought to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a national government agency based on managers' perspectives. The results are based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with managers at different levels in the government agency. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data and during this process, several themes and sub-themes relating to the research problem were identified. The discussion and interpretation of results is therefore guided by the themes and sub-themes identified during the thematic analysis process. The themes and sub-themes are supported by selected verbatim quotes from the interview participants. Furthermore, literature on crisis communication is integrated in the discussion and interpretation of results. The chapter is structured into two sections: the first presents demographic profiles of the participants, and the second presents a discussion of the identified themes and sub-themes. The discussion and interpretation sought to answer the following research questions:

- How is crisis communication practised within the government agency during a pandemic?
- What are the barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in the government agency?
- How do managers perceive the effectiveness of crisis communication of the government agency during a pandemic?

4.2 Demographic results

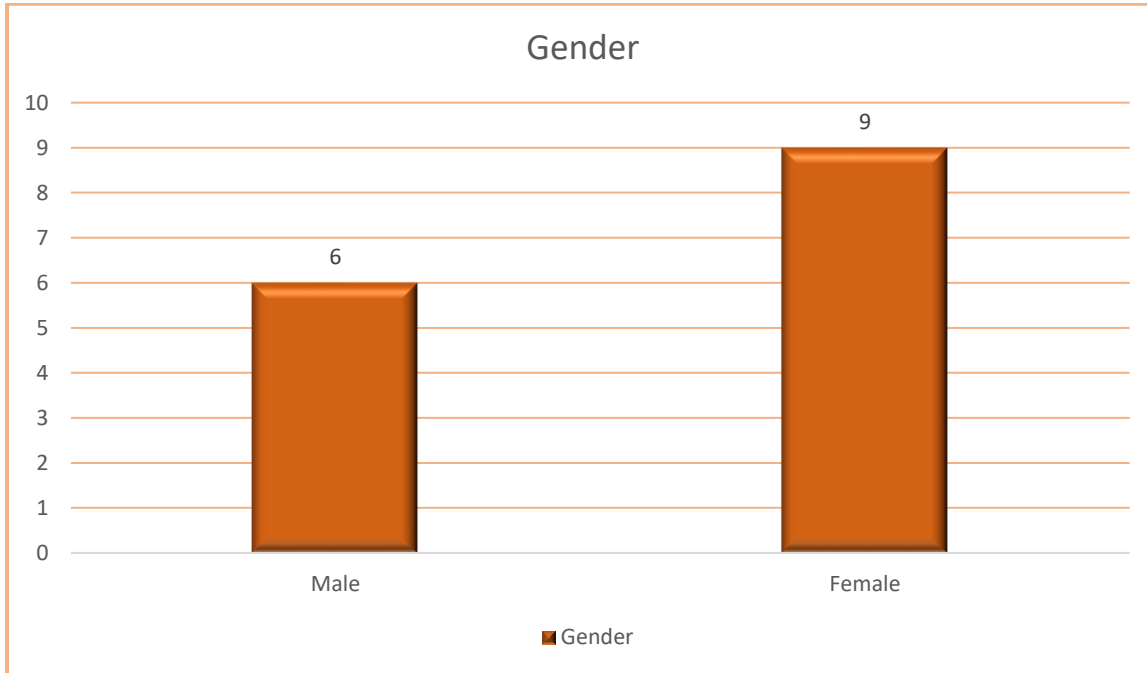
In this section, the results relating to the demographic characteristics of the participants are presented and discussed. The following demographic variables were considered in this study: gender, position in the organisation, and length of service in the organisation.

4.2.1 Gender of participants

The gender of participants was considered an important demographic variable for this study on the assumption that views of participants may be influenced by their gender. The study therefore

sought to capture the views and perceptions of both male and female participants. The results of participants distribution based on gender are summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Participants' gender



The results in Figure 4.1 indicate that the interview participants were made up of six male and nine female managers. Thus, the number of female managers was greater than that of male managers by three. However, despite having more female than male participants, the views of both genders were well represented in the findings of the study. It can therefore be concluded that the views in this study were balanced in terms of gender. As indicated in Section 3.4.3 in Chapter Three, the study sought to interview 15 participants, and this target sample was achieved in the interviews.

4.2.2 Position in held in the organisation

Since this study sought to obtain the perceptions of managers on the effectiveness of crisis communication in the organisation, it was important to include managers from all levels in the hierarchy of the organisation. The results in Figure 4.2 summarise the distribution of participants according to the positions held in the organisation.

Figure 4.2: Participants' Positions in the Organisation

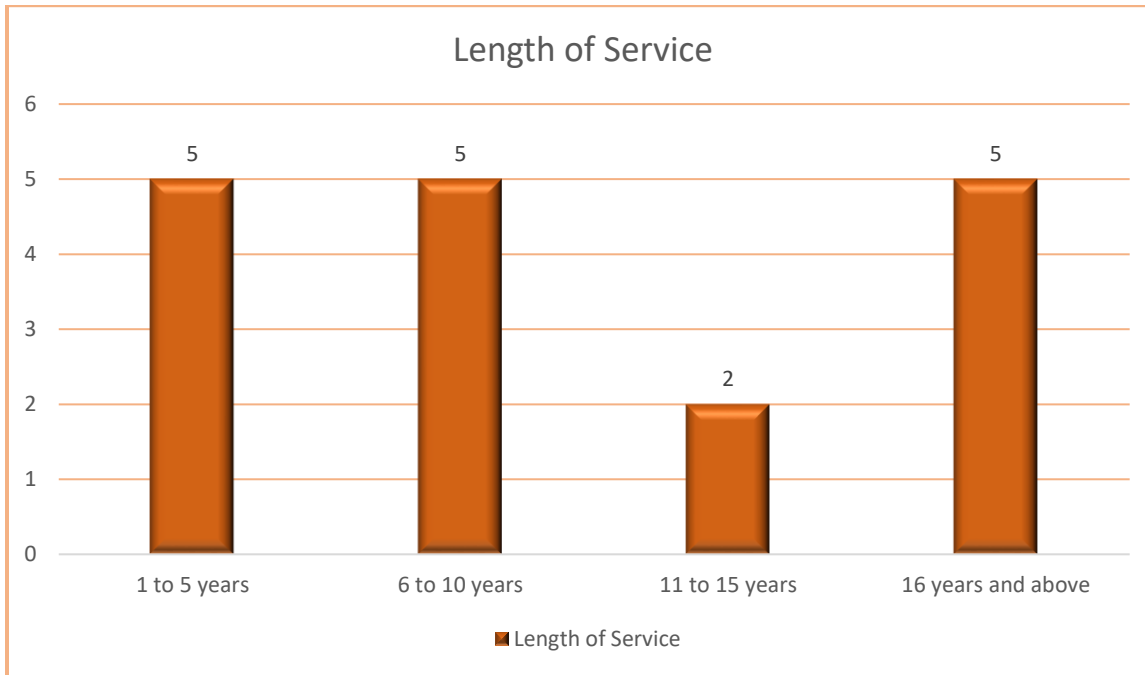


According to the results in Figure 4.2, the interview participants were made up of four senior managers, five middle managers, and six junior managers. All the managerial levels in the hierarchy of the organisation were therefore represented in this study.

4.2.3 Length of service in the organisation

The period that the participants had been working for the organisation was considered an important demographic variable in this study. The assumption was that the longer the participants were part of the organisation, the more knowledgeable they would be regarding crisis communication within. The results relating to the length of service of the participants are summarised in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: Participants' length of service in the organisation



As shown in Figure 4.3, five participants had been with the organisation for between one and five years while the six to ten years category also had five participants. Two participants had worked for the organisation for between six and ten years and the remaining five participants had been in the organisation for 16 years and above. The results show that most participants had above five years' experience in the organisation. It was therefore highly likely that they had in-depth knowledge of crisis communication within.

4.2.4 Participants' profiles

To contextualise the findings and enable the reader to better appreciate the perspectives expressed in the interview responses, Table 4.1 presents a composite profile of all 15 participants. Participants are identified by pseudonyms (Participant 1 through Participant 15) to preserve anonymity. The profiles are drawn from the demographic information collected during the interviews and reflect the three variables captured: gender, management level, and length of service in the organisation.

Table 4.1: Participants' profiles

Participant	Gender	Management Level	Length of Service
Participant 1	Female	Junior Manager	1–5 years
Participant 2	Male	Middle Manager	6–10 years
Participant 3	Female	Senior Manager	16 years and above
Participant 4	Female	Junior Manager	6–10 years
Participant 5	Male	Middle Manager	1–5 years
Participant 6	Female	Junior Manager	11–15 years
Participant 7	Male	Junior Manager	6–10 years
Participant 8	Female	Middle Manager	16 years and above
Participant 9	Female	Senior Manager	16 years and above
Participant 10	Female	Middle Manager	6–10 years
Participant 11	Male	Junior Manager	1–5 years
Participant 12	Female	Middle Manager	1–5 years
Participant 13	Male	Senior Manager	6–10 years
Participant 14	Female	Junior Manager	1–5 years
Participant 15	Male	Senior Manager	11–15 years

Table 4.1 shows that the 15 participants were drawn from all three levels of management, with junior managers forming the largest group (n=6), followed by middle managers (n=5) and senior managers (n=4). Female participants (n=9) slightly outnumbered male participants (n=6). Regarding experience, the majority of participants had more than five years of service in the organisation, suggesting a well-established familiarity with the organisation's communication practices and culture. These profiles provide important context for interpreting participant responses throughout Chapter Four, as differences in management level and experience may account for varying perspectives on crisis communication effectiveness.

4.3 Discussion and interpretation of themes

The discussion in this section focuses on the themes and sub-themes identified during the thematic analysis process. For each objective of the study, several themes and sub-themes were identified, and these form the basis for discussing and interpreting the interview responses. Most of the

participants' responses on crisis communication during a pandemic are based on the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3.1 Perceptions on effectiveness of crisis communication in the organisation

The first objective sought to establish the effectiveness of crisis communication in the government agency under study and sought to answer the following research question: How do managers perceive the effectiveness of crisis communication of the government agency during a pandemic? The following themes were identified under this objective: availability of a comprehensive crisis communication plan, the information shared, and the degree of empathy and support.

4.3.1.1 Availability of a comprehensive crisis communication plan

All the participants concurred with the view that effectiveness of crisis communication is mainly determined by the availability of a crisis communication plan, which reveals the organisation's preparedness to deal with pandemic situations. According to the participants, the organisation has a crisis communication plan in place. This means that the organisation has prepared itself to provide effective communication during a pandemic and other crises. However, the participants had different views on the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the plan. Six participants were of the view that the government agency's crisis communication plan was adequate for ensuring effective communication during a pandemic. According to these participants, the crisis communication plan managed to facilitate the organisation's ability to communicate effectively during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 1 stated:

“The organisation has a thorough strategy in place for communicating during challenging periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This strategy facilitates the sharing of information and ensures efficient coordination of communication efforts.”

Participant 8 stated:

“Yes, our organisation has a crisis management plan in place, and it serves as a guiding framework during times of crisis. I can attest that the plan proved effective during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was diligently followed, leading to smooth communication throughout the period.”

The remaining nine participants, however, had reservations on the effectiveness of the crisis communication plan. According to these participants, the crisis communication plan needs some improvements for the organisation's crisis communication to be more effective. Participants 4, 6, 7, 11, and 13 felt that the crisis communication plan available in the organisation was not adequate for pandemics with a high magnitude such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to these participants, the COVID-19 pandemic took much longer than anticipated and had more severe impacts than any previous pandemic. The organisation's crisis communication plan was therefore not adequate as it had been prepared with less severe pandemics in consideration. Participant 11 stated:

“Yes, the plan is there, but planners never anticipated a pandemic with the magnitude of COVID-19. Here we are talking about a pandemic that affected the whole world and persisted for several months. The extent of illness and deaths was also huge. This means that there was a need for higher levels of empathy and support which includes counselling and stress management workshops for a large number of employees. These were not covered in the crisis communication plan”.

From the above responses, it can be noted that the availability of a comprehensive crisis communication plan is critical for achieving effective crisis communication. However, there were mixed feelings among participants on the effectiveness of the crisis communication plan in the organisation. Most of the reservations about the plan's effectiveness were expressed by staff outside the communications department.

In literature, a crisis communication plan is cited as one of the main determinants of the success of communication during a crisis. Aydın and İnce (2024), the ability of an organisation to survive depends on how effectively it has prepared for a crisis, thus management must establish a crisis communication plan. Ham and Kim (2020) regard a clear CCP as one of the cornerstones of an effective crisis communication strategy. Such a plan serves as a blueprint for the organisation during crises and enables management to provide an immediate response. Barclay and Thor (2022) state that a crisis communication plan assists management to avoid prolonging the crisis by holding unnecessary press conferences or engaging in other activities that can keep the crisis in the news. It is therefore critical for the government agency to revisit its crisis communication plan and

identify areas of improvement to ensure that the organisation can effectively handle crisis communication during a pandemic.

4.3.1.2 Information shared during the crisis

The quality, accuracy, and timeliness of information shared during the pandemic were cited by the participants as some of the important determinants of the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic. According to all the participants, the organisation strives to share quality and accurate information in a timely manner. Participant 3 stated:

“I would say that the organisation shares accurate information because, before sharing information in a crisis, we check it carefully to make sure it's reliable for everyone. The information is checked at different levels and then approved before it is communicated”.

Participant 10 stated:

“During times of crisis, the information we receive is both precise and dependable. All communication relies on verified data and specialists vetting before it is communicated to the organisation”.

However, according to some participants, the COVID-19 pandemic posed some unique challenges that made it difficult to maintain effectiveness in information sharing. This presented significant challenges to the effectiveness of the government agency's information sharing during the pandemic. Participants 1, 5, 7, and 12 were of the view that there were too many conflicting sources of information relating to the pandemic and this made it difficult for employees and the public to believe some of the information provided by the government agency. Participant 7 stated:

“As much as our organisation strives to provide accurate and quality information in a timely manner, such a task was made difficult by some issues that surrounded the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, there were so many conflicting sources of information regarding vaccinations and so many conflicting theories were advanced. At times, employees and members of the public chose to believe negative information about vaccines, which made the vaccination programme difficult. Some employees even refused to be vaccinated”.

Participant 13 was of the view that the organisation lacked the ability to counter false rumours in real time and maintain the accuracy of the information shared. The participant stated:

“Accurate and quality information is critical for effective crisis communication during a pandemic. Our organisation communicated well during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it failed in the area of quashing false rumours in time. There were too many sources of false information, particularly on how the virus spreads and some of its effects. Since there was remote working, employees were working from home and with false rumours, their performance was greatly affected. The organisation could have done well by quickly dispelling rumours about the pandemic”.

The above responses show that the government agency makes concerted efforts to enhance the effectiveness of crisis communication by providing quality and accurate information. However, the complications that characterise some pandemics such as the COVID-19 pandemic make it difficult for the organisation to achieve information efficiency and effectiveness. As a result, the organisation faces challenges in dealing with some aspects of the pandemic because of information-related problems.

Literature also emphasises the importance of providing quality and accurate information during crises such as pandemics. To deliver effective crisis communication during a pandemic, organisations and governments should communicate credible and reliable information relating to the pandemic (Li et al., 2020). Su et al. (2021) underscored the need to effectively share public health updates with society and organisational members in a reasonable and honest manner. According to Colfer (2020:212), crisis communication during a pandemic should be able to dispel the fear and uncertainty of people regarding the pandemic as well as improve their compliance with health and safety procedures relating to the pandemic, such as lockdowns and face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the CERC framework highlights the importance of the speed with which information is disseminated to all stakeholders (Hine & Bragias, 2020). When an organisation takes long to communicate after a crisis, stakeholders may develop the perception that the organisation is either withholding information or is not interested. Speedy communication implies that an organisation has policies and procedures in place for crisis

communication and has the situation under control, whereas, the absence of speed in communication suggests denial of the crisis (Roth & Pickles, 2020).

4.3.1.3 Empathy and openness

There were mixed views among the participants on the extent to which the crisis communication in the organisation exhibited empathy and openness during a pandemic. Four participants were of the view that the organisation's crisis communication displays a high level of empathy and support.

Participant 1 stated:

“During a crisis, our organisation strives to communicate with empathy and openness, acknowledging the impact on individuals and communities and providing support where possible”.

Participant 3 stated:

“My organisation values openness and empathy in crisis communication. We strive to be transparent about the challenges we face and show empathy towards those affected by the pandemic”.

However, eleven participants felt that there is a lot more that the organisation can do to ensure crisis communication exhibits high levels of empathy. Participants 5, 8, 9, 12, 14, and 15 highlighted the need for empathetic leadership. Although most of the organisational leaders showed empathy to employees during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, many of them struggled to put themselves in the shoes of employees. According to Participant 9, the reason for some leaders to struggle with empathy was the fact that they were also caught unaware by the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic and were also struggling to adjust to the new situation. Participant 9 stated:

“Our crisis communication during the recent COVID-19 pandemic could have been more effective with higher levels of empathetic leadership. We cannot say our leaders were completely not empathetic. The COVID-19 situation was very overwhelming, and all managers were caught unaware. No one expected the magnitude of the impact. We have actually learnt lessons for the future”.

Participants 2, 6, 9, 10, 12, and 13 were of the view that the organisation did not offer enough in terms of mental health resources and support during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. According to Participant 6, such resources were provided during a much later stage, meaning that there was a gap. Participant 6 stated:

“Crisis communication is effective when employees are provided with mental health resources and support such as counselling services or stress management workshops. In our organisation, these were not provided in time. During the initial stages of the pandemic, management was mostly busy with organising how employees could work effectively in a remote working environment. I think next time the organisation will do better in terms of prioritising mental health resources and support”.

The above responses emphasise the importance of empathy and support in enhancing the effectiveness of crisis communication in the organisation. Most participants felt that there is more that needs to be done to achieve empathetic crisis communication in the organisation. In literature, empathy and support are also cited as important elements of effective crisis communication. According to Erdogan (2023), empathy is considered an essential component of the first response to any crisis, regardless of the approach taken to address it. Claeys and Coombs (2020) highlight the need for leaders to be human and remain calm and professional during a crisis. Organisations can benefit by acting empathetically at any point during a crisis, and it is even their social and ethical duty to act empathetically toward stakeholders (Liu et al., 2022). For the crisis message to be truly meaningful, the organisation must convey both affective empathy, which focuses more on the organisation's display of genuine compassion and concern for the victims, and cognitive empathy, which means the organization listens to understand the needs and concerns the stakeholders (Erdogan, 2023). This also entails expressing empathy for any financial, psychological, or physical harm the company may have caused, as well as respecting the needs and feelings of the stakeholders. Consequently, in pursuance of achieving an effective crisis.

4.3.2 Crisis communication strategies during a pandemic in the organisation

The second objective sought to establish the way in which crisis communication during a pandemic is practised in the government agency. All the participants stated that the organisation adopts the accommodative strategy during pandemics. According to the participants, a pandemic poses

threats on the health and lives of employees and clients and the denial strategy does not work. People need sympathy and empathy during such a crisis. Participant 9 stated:

“The organisation adopts the accommodative strategy during pandemics. The aim is to ensure that our employees and clients are safe. We therefore take an empathetic approach and tailor our communication to address the critical areas that ensure the safety of employees. It does not make sense to be defensive or to deny the pandemic because people’s lives will be at risk”.

According to participants, the first step taken by the organisation after learning about the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was to consider the health and safety of employees. Management therefore actively sought for information on the safety measures that should be taken by employees and members of the public. Participant 3 stated:

“A pandemic threatens the health and lives of our employees and clients and the first step in our crisis communication is to gather as much information as possible on the ways in which people can keep themselves away from danger. This is exactly what we did at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was meant to ensure that we disseminate accurate and vital information to our audiences”.

Participants also highlighted that the organisation emphasises the need to adhere to rules and procedures set out by the government in relation to the pandemic. So, when lockdown and social distancing measures were announced, the organisation quickly communicated this information to employees to ensure their safety. Participant 1 stated:

“Throughout all our communications during the COVID-19 pandemic, the predominant strategy was empathy. The organisation consistently demonstrated sympathy and understanding towards all stakeholders”.

According to the participants, the organisation uses the apologising strategy during pandemics whenever a shortcoming has been noted in managing the situation. Participant 2 stated:

“During pandemics, we have used strategies such as apologising and showing sympathy to address any shortcomings or grievances. These approaches demonstrate our accountability and commitment to ethical communication practices”.

The above responses show that the organisation adopts the accommodative strategy during pandemics. This includes sympathising and empathising with the victims and apologising for shortcomings. The findings of a study conducted by Gasana (2024) cite empathy, apologising, and sympathy as crisis communication strategies that are effective in influencing the perceptions of stakeholders about the organisation taking responsibility for the crisis. According to (Jong, 2025), the use of an accommodative strategy can result in positive outcomes for an organisation, and the crisis, although not forgotten, will not have a huge impact on the image of the organisation. When organisations genuinely adopt an accommodative strategy during crisis communication, the aim should be to provide a platform for a two-way communication, mainly through social media such as Twitter (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2025). According to Tasnim et al. (2020), crises such as pandemics require the accommodative strategy, which shows that the organisation is sympathising with the public.

4.3.3 Barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic

The last objective sought to identify the barriers that hamper effective crisis communication during a pandemic in the government agency. The following themes were identified under this objective: organisational barriers, technological barriers, and social barriers.

4.3.3.1 Organisational barriers

The participants cited some organisational factors that act as barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic. These include the structure of the organisation and organisational culture.

Nine of the participants pointed out that the structure of the government agency poses some significant limitations to the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic. Although the organisation has flexible internal structures that can facilitate the smooth flow of crisis information, it is not completely autonomous as it is government owned. Participant 9 stated:

“During crises such as pandemics, our organisation, as a government agency, may experience delays in releasing information due to the fact that it is not completely independent. It is important to consult with higher government offices before disseminating information that we think is critical in addressing the problem. The consultation and

approval process may therefore result in delays in communication, which affects the effectiveness of crisis communication”.

The issue of centralisation implies that government agencies face additional challenges when it comes to synchronising communication efforts with different government entities. Because of the need to synchronise with several entities can result in sluggish strategic efforts, a certain shortcoming in a crisis.

Organisational culture was also cited by some participants as one of the barriers to effective crisis communication. Participants particularly cited information sharing among members of the organisation as an important determinant crisis communication effectiveness. When an organisation lacks a culture of information-sharing, crisis communication is negatively affected because the organisation will not achieve a smooth flow of information as well as wide coverage of the audience.

The participants, however, had mixed views on whether the organisation has a culture of information sharing or not. Five participants were of the view that the organisation actively promotes a culture of information-sharing among its members. Participant 4, for instance, stated:

“The organisation has a very strong culture of information sharing that facilitates timely and transparent communication, however, it can sometimes be challenging to manage the flow of information to prevent overload. So, we end up overcommunicating”.

The other ten participants however felt that the organisation still needs to build a stronger information-sharing culture. According to Participant 6, there are several individuals and departments that are not willing to share information for fear of giving away their expertise and ideas and this inhibits the free flow of ideas and knowledge in the organisation. Participant 6 stated:

“We definitely have a large number of employees who think that when they share information, they lose, or they make others better than them. This mentality is not healthy for crisis communication because people can hold on to important information and not pass it on to others so that the crisis is overcome. I have not yet seen deliberate efforts to motivate employees to share information in this organisation”.

Participant 14 stated:

“Although there is some degree of information sharing in the organisation, it needs to be strengthened. This can be done through recognising employees who participate actively in knowledge sharing as well as providing training to equip employees with knowledge sharing capabilities. For our crisis communication to be more effective, we need all members of the organisation to have the willingness to share information”.

The responses highlight the existence of centralised organisational structures as one of the factors reducing the effectiveness of crisis communication in the organisation. Centralised organisational structures are also cited in literature as potential barriers to effective crisis communication. To achieve effective communication, Barclay and Thor (2022) proposed that there should be decentralised communication flow. There is a common view in literature that there is need for a shift from traditional centralised models of decision-making to more decentralised models (Tao & Shi, 2025; Malecki, Keating et al., 2020).

In addition, the responses present the lack of information sharing as a significant barrier to crisis communication in the government agency. This calls for the organisation to make proactive efforts towards creating and nurturing a culture of information sharing among employees. Shirk (2022) regard a strong culture of information and knowledge sharing as one of the important facilitators of effective crisis communication. In an information sharing environment, there is free exchange of experiences, ideas, and information among organisational members. According to Akturan (2025), a culture of information-sharing during a pandemic is crucial as it enables a smooth and quick flow of information and ideas on how to stay safe and other issues relating to the pandemic. Flanja (2021) argue that those organisations without an information-sharing culture usually find it difficult to achieve effective communication during a pandemic.

4.3.3.2 Technological barriers

The participants also highlighted some technological factors that negatively affect the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic. The participants emphasised the need for the organisation to have an effective strategy for the use of emerging technologies in crisis communication. Generally, the participants were of the view that the organisation makes good use

of technology in crisis communication during pandemics. However, there are external factors that affect the use of technology, and these are sometimes difficult to deal with and these can result in ineffective crisis communication.

Participants 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and 14 were concerned about the complications involved in the use of social media by different sources of communication during a pandemic. According to the participants, all forms of information including contradictory messages and false information are shared through social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and WhatsApp and this may overshadow the accurate and credible information shared by the organisation on the same platforms. Participant 11 stated:

“Technology, particularly social media, is proving to be a huge barrier to effective communication during pandemics. As we saw during the recent COVID-19 pandemic social media was always awash with all sorts of information, both accurate and false as well as contradictory. Even when our organisation disseminates accurate and credible information through social media platforms, the public may not believe it because of other theories on the same issue”.

Participant 13 stated:

“Social media was one of our biggest barriers in crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, communication on the issue of vaccination was countered by several controversial and false theories about vaccines, which gave us a difficult time in convincing our employees to be vaccinated”.

The above responses underscore the significant barriers that can be caused by technological factors such as the use of social media in crisis communication. According to Graham et al. (2015), although social media is increasingly becoming an essential mechanism for organisations to communicate during a crisis, it has some risks that need to be carefully managed. According to Yu (2020), the major risk for using social media for crisis communication is that it can intensify the negative impact of a crisis, if not properly managed. Compared to traditional media, social media can spread criticism, rumours, and misinformation faster and this can damage the credibility and reputation of an organisation (Hong & Kim, 2020). Considering these risks, it is crucial for the

government agency to closely manage and monitor social media and be ready to respond speedily and effectively to any negative feedback.

4.3.3.3 Social barriers

The last theme that emerged under the barriers to effective crisis communication relates to social barriers. The participants raised several social problems that hamper the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic. The social barriers are grouped into two sub-themes which are information overload and inconsistent information from different sources. These are discussed below.

4.3.3.3.1 Information overload

All the participants were of the view that a pandemic is generally accompanied by the emergency of too much information that can result in confusion among employees and members of the public. For instance, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, employees of the government agency as well as the public were bombarded with huge volumes of information relating to the pandemic. This was worsened by the increasing use of social media as a channel of communication. Through social media platforms such as X, WhatsApp, and Facebook, information about the pandemic was being shared from different sources and employees and the public had huge volumes of information to process.

Participants 2,3,4,9, 12, 14, and 15 complained about information overload and highlighted that the organisation was now faced with situations in which some of the important information shared with employees and members of the public was now being ignored because people no longer had the energy to read through and process such information. Participant 14 stated:

“Although our organisation strived to inform employees and the public as much as possible about the pandemic, these efforts were weakened by the problem of information overload. With online channels dishing out COVI-19 information, people were faced with too much information to the extent that very few continued to pay attention to COVID-19-related information. This means that not all the information that was communicated by our organisation was processed by the target audients”.

Participant 15 stated:

“I would say, information overload was one of the major challenges in our crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to come up with ways of how we can still share the important information but in bite sizes so that our audiences are still able to take it all in and process it for the benefit of their health and that of the organisation”.

The above responses underscore information overload as a significant barrier to crisis communication in the organisation. In crisis communication literature, information overload is highlighted as one of the impediments to the effectiveness of crisis communication. With so much information available about a pandemic, it might be challenging to distinguish between rumour and purposeful misrepresentation (Poonia & Rajasekaran, 2020). It could be difficult for people to concurrently comprehend and use reliable information from multiple sources. According to Mohammed et al. (2022), the effectiveness of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was seriously hampered by the relentless flooding of information which included conspiracy theories, false news, and magical cures transmitted to the public at an alarming rate. This results in increased stress and anxiety levels and is associated with devastating consequences. For the purpose to lessen the cognitive strain and/or uncomfortable emotional states that come with information overload, such as tension and bewilderment, people avoid knowledge (Hong & Kim, 2020). In its crisis communication plan, the government agency should therefore design strategies for effectively dealing with information overload.

4.3.3.3.2 Inconsistent data from multiple sources

Another social barrier raised by the participants relates to the emergence of inconsistent data from multiple sources. With a pandemic, the government agency is not the only one that is affected, and its crisis communication is affected by other communications from various sources. According to the participants, the organisation may possess a well-prepared plan as well as accurate and quality information, but such information may be rejected in favour of other sources. Participant 8 stated:

“I can say that our organisation has tried its best to provide accurate and credible information during a pandemic. However, these efforts are sometimes challenged by the availability of information from several sources. For example, during the recent COVID-19 pandemic information on the virus came from different sources throughout the world and

this brought confusion to people about which information was correct and credible. Some of our information was even questioned”.

Participant 10 stated:

“It was not easy to provide consistent information during the recent COVID-19 pandemic because there were lots of uncertainties about the COVID-19 virus. This posed challenges to our crisis communication as we sometimes had to change statements after the emergence of new evidence from different sources”.

The above responses highlight the role played by inconsistent and multiple sources on information of a pandemic in hampering the effectiveness of crisis communication. According to Sauer et al. (2021), the fact that people are now exposed to a much wider variety of information sources has made mal-information, misinformation, and disinformation prevalent. Due to the widespread use of instant messaging and social networking sites, conspiracy theories and other types of information can spread quickly (Poonia & Rajasekaran, 2020). More frequently, media users are exposed to inconsistent information. Inconsistent messages from scientific and political leadership can seriously erode public confidence and spread false information. Efforts made by organisations to disseminate accurate and credible information during pandemics become very difficult due to the level of contradictory messages received from multiple sources.

4.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the results of the study that sought to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a national government agency based on managers’ perspectives were presented, discussed, and interpreted. The discussion and interpretation of results was guided by the themes and sub-themes identified during the thematic analysis process. The themes and sub-themes were supported by selected verbatim quotes from the interview participants. Furthermore, literature on crisis communication was integrated in the discussion and interpretation of results.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws conclusions from and provides recommendations on the study that sought to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a national government agency based on managers' perspectives. The study was guided by the objectives as outlined in Chapter 1, which is to explore managerial perceptions of crisis communication effectiveness, describe its practice within the agency, and identify barriers to it during a pandemic. Chapter 1 also introduces the study by providing the background, defining the research problem, and outlining the aims, objectives, and research questions. The chapter also presents the study's significance, limitations, and delimitations.

The literature review is presented in Chapter 2, where the conceptual and theoretical frameworks are discussed, and the views and findings of previous researchers on effective crisis communication are summarized. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, where the research design, philosophy, approach, sampling, data collection, and analysis methods are outlined. Ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study are also addressed. Chapter 4 presents, discusses, and interprets the research findings. This analysis integrates managers' perspectives with insights from the literature.

Building on these, this chapter commences with the conclusions drawn from such findings. In closing, the chapter outlines the recommendations to management on the strategies for enhancing crisis communication in the government agency.

5.2 Conclusions

For each objective of the study, the following conclusions were drawn from the findings:

5.2.1 Perceptions on effectiveness of crisis communication in the organisation

The study concludes that even though the national government agency has taken initial steps toward effective crisis communication, such as having a crisis communication plan and attempting to disseminate timely and accurate information, there are notable shortcomings. Most significantly, the current crisis communication plan is not robust enough to handle prolonged, high-impact crises

like the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, while there is some evidence of empathetic communication, it is not consistent or sufficiently embedded within the agency's crisis communication practices. The findings indicate a necessity to improve crisis preparedness, especially in terms of anticipating the scale and emotional toll of future pandemics and institutionalizing increased empathetic and employee-centred communication.

5.2.2 Crisis communication strategies during a pandemic in the organisation

The study concludes that the government agency primarily employs an accommodative crisis communication strategy, emphasising empathy, credibility, and responsibility. This strategy aligns well with literature and is appropriate for health-related crises where denial is both ineffective and damaging. The agency's use of empathy and credible information sharing helped reduce fear and maintain public trust to some extent. However, while this strategic orientation is commendable, the actual execution still requires strengthening, particularly in sustaining consistency and responsiveness across all levels of communication during prolonged crises. Future crises may require the organisation to refine and institutionalize this accommodative strategy further.

5.2.3 Barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic

The study concludes that organisational, technological, and social barriers significantly hinder the effectiveness of crisis communication in the government agency. Bureaucratic delays due to government control and an underdeveloped culture of internal information-sharing weaken timely and coordinated crisis communication responses. Leadership and structure need to support faster, decentralised communication in times of crisis. Furthermore, although the agency leverages digital tools for communication, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, particularly via social media, dilutes the agency's messaging. There is a critical need for stronger digital media monitoring and counter-messaging capabilities. In addition, information overload, inconsistent data from multiple sources, and public fatigue during pandemics reduce the effectiveness of even high-quality communication. The agency must therefore prioritize clarity, frequency control, and trust-building in future communication strategies.

Overall, the conclusions suggest that while the agency's intent and strategy for crisis communication are broadly aligned with best practices, significant work remains in execution—

especially in enhancing agility, empathy, and public trust in the face of uncertainty and misinformation.

5.3 Recommendations on strategies for enhancing crisis communication during a pandemic

5.3.1 Improve crisis communication plan

The study recommends that the organisation should consider improving its crisis communication plan. The findings of the study indicate that, although the government agency has a crisis communication plan established, it was not adequate to address the challenges of a huge pandemic such as COVID-19. Considering the impact of COVID-19, it is crucial for the organisation to revisit its crisis communication plan to incorporate some features of a pandemic that were witnessed during COVID-19. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the deaths of so many people, including several people per family. Thus, the organisation's crisis communication plan needs to include strategies for dealing with several bereaved families such as counselling and emotional and mental health support.

5.3.2 Information-sharing culture

The government agency is also advised to take proactive steps to develop and nurture a culture of information-sharing among employees. The study found effective information-sharing as a critical success factor for crisis communication. Management should therefore create an environment that encourages open communication; and where information and knowledge are shared vertically between management and employees and horizontally between team members. Employees should be encouraged to provide feedback to management and question some of the decisions made by management. In addition, knowledge should flow among different departments within the organisation and with other players in the industry. The government agency should take advantage of emerging technology that cause the collaboration and exchange of information among people uncomplicated. By so doing, employees will be encouraged to share knowledge, making the flow of communication within the organisation smooth. The government agency should also establish an open-door policy where employees feel they can approach anyone in the organisation to clarify issues. Lastly, knowledge-sharing platforms are also essential for building a culture of information sharing.

5.3.3 Prompt responses to inaccurate information

It is also important for the government agency to respond swiftly to misinformation or inaccurate information. The study noted that a pandemic is associated with multiple sources of information, some of which provide inaccurate information or half-truths. In the interest of ensuring the acceptance of its credible and true information about the pandemic, the organisation should set up a team that is always on the look-out for misinformation in the media and be quick to counter it with correct information. For instance, contrary information for preventive steps such as a vaccination should be immediately countered by providing scientific evidence and case studies. The longer it takes for the government agency to counter incorrect information, the less effective its crisis communication will be.

5.3.4 Enhance data collection and analysis capabilities

Dealing with communication during a pandemic also requires the government agency to improve data collection capabilities. Some pandemics, such as COVID-19, will be a new phenomenon and it is crucial to collect as much quality and accurate information as possible to ensure the safety of employees and the public. It is therefore important for the organisation to build superior data collection and analysis capabilities to identify sources of credible and accurate information and analyse such data to emerge with effective crisis communication. The organisation should also leverage emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence that can facilitate the collection of timely and accurate data.

5.4 Summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations

Table 5.1: Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Research Objective	Findings	Conclusions	Recommendations
To explore the perceptions of managers on the effectiveness of crisis communication of the government agency during a pandemic?	-Mixed perceptions on effectiveness -Crisis communication plan exists but not adequate for COVID-19	-The communication plan is not robust enough for crises of a high magnitude -Inconsistent application of empathy	-Crisis communication plan needs to be improved to better address high-impact pandemics Need to include emotional and mental health support

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Challenges in sharing credible and timely information due to misinformation; -Limited empathy by leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Need for improvement in preparedness and employee-centred communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strategies for bereaved employees and families
<p>To describe how crisis communication is practised in a government agency during a pandemic;</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Predominantly uses the accommodation strategy (empathy, credibility, responsibility; -Strategy aligns with best practice but execution varies in quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accommodative strategy is appropriate for pandemics; Execution requires more consistency and responsiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Institutionalise and standardise accommodative strategies across all levels; -Provide training for empathetic and responsible communication
<p>To determine the barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in the government agency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organisational (bureaucratic delays, poor information-sharing culture) -Technological (misinformation on social media) -Social (Information overload, inconsistent data) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organisational structure and culture inhibit timely communication -Misinformation reduces credibility; -Information overload undermines public engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Promote a culture of information-sharing within and across departments; -Establish an open-door policy and use knowledge-sharing platforms; -Create a rapid-response team to counter misinformation; -Improve data collection and analysis using AI and emerging technologies

5.5 Limitations of the study

The study faced several limitations which have an impact on the findings. Due to budget and time constraints, it only focused on managers in the organisation. It is common that the views of managers are usually different from those of employees. The views of employees are therefore not represented in this study. The findings may therefore not be representative of the entire situation in the organisation. It should be noted, however, that the qualitative nature of this study does not seek statistical representativeness or generalisability; rather, it aims to generate in-depth insights from participants with direct experience of the phenomenon. Given the study's qualitative design and its focus on managerial perspectives, the 15 participants were sufficient to achieve data saturation and adequately address the research objectives. The participants were however assured that they would remain anonymous, and their responses would not be traced back to individual participants.

5.6 Areas for further research

This study focused on assessing the effectiveness of crisis communication in a government agency in South Africa. Further research can be conducted on crisis communication during a pandemic at a government level. This research will identify the areas of weakness in government crisis communication and develop a framework for improving such communication in order to enhance the safety of citizens during a pandemic.

5.7 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to draw conclusions from and provide recommendations on the study that sought to explore the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a national government agency based on managers' perspectives. The chapter commenced with a synopsis of the main findings obtained from primary and secondary research and went on to the conclusions drawn from such findings. In closing, the chapter outlined the recommendations to management on the strategies for enhancing crisis communication in the government agency.

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ADDENDUM

Addendum A: One on one interview questionnaire

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Please state your gender

Male	
Female	

2. Please indicate your position in the organisation

Senior manager	
Middle manager	
Junior manager	

3. Please state the number of years that you have worked for the organisation

Less than 1 year	
1 to 5 years	
6 to 10 years	
11 to 15 years	
16 years and above	

Section B: Interview Questions

4. Does your organisation have a crisis communication plan for a pandemic? If yes, please provide your view on the effectiveness of the plan.
5. How accurate is the information provided by your organisation during a crisis?
6. Please comment on the speed with which your organisation communicates to employees and other stakeholders during a pandemic?
7. What are your views on the degree of openness and empathy that are displayed in your organisation's crisis communication during a pandemic?

8. Please comment on the ability of the organisation's communication to protect the reputation of the organisation during pandemics.
9. To what extent do you think your organisation has succeeded in gaining credibility and trust from stakeholders through its crisis communication during a pandemic?
10. What is the level of involvement of stakeholders such as the media and the public in crisis communication during a pandemic?
11. What is the overall effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?
12. Please highlight and explain the situations in which the following strategies have been used during pandemics:
Denial, blaming, and justification.
Apologising, being sympathetic, and compensating victims.
13. Do you think the organisation is effectively using technology such as social media platforms during pandemics? Please explain.
14. Does the organisation have a culture of information sharing? How does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?
15. How flexible is the structure of your organisation and how does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?
How accurate and sufficient is the information provided by your organisation during a pandemic?
16. Please highlight and explain any other barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?

Addendum B: Interview transcripts

Interview with a Junior Manager:

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Please state your gender

Male	
Female	X

2. Please indicate your position in the organisation

Senior manager	
Middle manager	
Junior manager	X

3. Please state the number of years that you have worked for the organisation

Less than 1 year	
1 to 5 years	X
6 to 10 years	
11 to 15 years	
16 years and above	

Section B: Interview Questions

4. Does your organisation have a crisis communication plan for a pandemic? If yes, please provide your view on the effectiveness of the plan.

No, the organisation has a crisis plan but it is not specific to a pandemic.

5. How accurate is the information provided by your organisation during a crisis?

During times of crisis, the information we receive is both precise and dependable. All communication relies on verified data and specialists vetting before it is communicated to the organisation.

6. Please comment on the speed with which your organisation communicates to employees and other stakeholders during a pandemic?

There is no set frame, but a flash notification is sent out within 24hrs of a declared crisis.

7. What are your views on the degree of openness and empathy that are displayed in your organisation's crisis communication during a pandemic?

Based on the COVID-19 Pandemic, I would say the organisation displayed transparency, especially since it was declared a national state of disaster and information cascaded down from the South African Government

8. Please comment on the ability of the organisation's communication to protect the reputation of the organisation during pandemics.

Communication in the organisation proactively address potential issues, maintain transparent and honest communication. It also engages with all our stakeholders, and continuously monitor and adapt to evolving circumstances – we saw this happening during COVID 19

9. To what extent do you think your organisation has succeeded in gaining credibility and trust from stakeholders through its crisis communication during a pandemic?

Based on the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation-maintained stakeholder trust, communication was handled well, and employees were well informed of all developments that affect them within the context of the business

10. What is the level of involvement of stakeholders such as the media and the public in crisis communication during a pandemic?

In the organisation we work together with both the media and the public. There's information that we send direct to taxpayers as they are expected to come to our branches etc. So, if there's a crisis, we communicate direct and through the media.

11. What is the overall effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?

The overall effectiveness has been impactful; all involved stakeholders were continuously informed.

12. Please highlight and explain the situations in which the following strategies have been used during pandemics:

- a) Denial, blaming, and justification.
- b) Apologising, being sympathetic, and compensating victims.

The organisation-implemented strategies of Justification to ensure all employees are on board with changes implemented during pandemic and apologizing/being sympathetic to those who were affected.

13. Do you think the organisation is effectively using technology such as social media platforms during pandemics? Please explain.

Yes, I would say we are using social media and technology effectively because during COVID-19, we relied much on social media to communicate operations updates with our stakeholders.

14. Does the organisation have a culture of information sharing? How does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?

Our organisation has a strong culture of information sharing, which facilitates communication during pandemics. This openness encourages collaboration, feedback, and dialogue that are essential for effective crisis communication.

15. How flexible is the structure of your organisation and how does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?

The flexible structure of our organisation facilitates communication during pandemics by enabling quick decision-making, adapting to changing circumstances, and ensuring coordination across different departments.

16. How accurate and sufficient is the information provided by your organisation during a pandemic?

The information provided by our organisation during a pandemic is accurate, sufficient, and regularly updated. We prioritize clarity and ensure that stakeholders have access to all necessary information to make informed decisions.

17. Please highlight and explain any other barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?

None.

Interviewer: So, does this mean communication is effective in your organisation?

Interviewee: Yes, it is very effective.

Interview with a Middle Manager:

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Please state your gender

Male	X
Female	

2. Please indicate your position in the organisation

Senior manager	
Middle manager	X
Junior manager	

3. Please state the number of years that you have worked for the organisation

Less than 1 year	
1 to 5 years	
6 to 10 years	6
11 to 15 years	
16 years and above	

Section B: Interview Questions

4. Does your organisation have a crisis communication plan for a pandemic? If yes, please provide your view on the effectiveness of the plan.

The organisation has implemented a crisis management strategy that proved effective during the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Communication procedures remained consistently smooth and reliable throughout the crisis period.

5. How accurate is the information provided by your organisation during a crisis?

The communication department ensures that all information is checked and approved by relevant individuals before it is shared with everyone in the organisation and external stakeholders.

Interviewer: So, are you saying that the information is accurate?

Interviewee: Yes. Correct.

6. Please comment on the speed with which your organisation communicates to employees and other stakeholders during a pandemic?

Throughout the pandemic, we allocated significant resources towards enhancing the speed and efficiency of our internal and external communication processes. Within the organisation, we implemented frequent updates through various channels to ensure our team members stayed informed and engaged. Externally, we prioritized prompt

responses to inquiries and utilized various platforms to maintain transparent communication with our stakeholders. Our continued dedication to improving our communication strategies has been vital in navigating these challenging circumstances successfully.

7. What are your views on the degree of openness and empathy that are displayed in your organisation's crisis communication during a pandemic?

I think our organisation has done an excellent job in being open and empathetic in our crisis communication during the pandemic. Our leaders have consistently made transparent and understanding communication a priority to keep all stakeholders informed and supported during these difficult times. We've aimed to be truthful about the situation, show empathy towards the concerns of our employees and customers, and offer support whenever we can.

8. Please comment on the ability of the organisation's communication to protect the reputation of the organisation during pandemics.

I believe that our communication strategies have played a crucial role in protecting the reputation of the organisation during the pandemic. We ensured that we were transparent in our messages and made sure that we show sympathy to all our stakeholders. These strategies contributed to building a trusted relationship with all stakeholders.

9. To what extent do you think your organisation has succeeded in gaining credibility and trust from stakeholders through its crisis communication during a pandemic?

During a pandemic, the involvement of partners such as the media and the general public in crisis communication is essential. Our organisation acknowledges the importance of engaging with the media to ensure accurate and timely information dissemination. Additionally, we actively promote transparency and open communication with the public to address concerns and build trust during challenging times.

10. What is the level of involvement of stakeholders such as the media and the public in crisis communication during a pandemic?

During a pandemic, the involvement of stakeholders such as the media and the public in crisis communication is crucial. Our organisation recognizes the importance of engaging with the media to ensure accurate and timely information dissemination. Additionally,

we actively encourage transparency and open communication with the public to address concerns and build trust during challenging times.

11. What is the overall effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?

The overall effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic in our organisation has been commendable. We have prioritized clear, timely, and transparent communication with all stakeholders to ensure everyone is well-informed and can make informed decisions. Our communication strategies have helped maintain trust, manage expectations, and navigate challenges effectively during this unprecedented time.

12. Please highlight and explain the situations in which the following strategies have been used during pandemics:

- a) Denial, blaming, and justification.
- b) Apologising, being sympathetic, and compensating victims.

Displaying empathy and sympathy towards individuals affected by the pandemic was a consistent approach to convey understanding and support during COVID-19.

13. Do you think the organisation is effectively using technology such as social media platforms during pandemics? Please explain.

I am confident that our organisation is effectively leveraging technology, including social media platforms, during pandemics to enhance communication and outreach. Through the utilization of social media, we have swiftly disseminated important updates, shared relevant information, engaged with stakeholders, and addressed concerns in real-time. This proactive approach has enabled us to maintain transparency, connect with our audience, and adapt to the evolving situation efficiently.

14. Does the organisation have a culture of information sharing? How does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?

Our organisation fosters a robust culture of information sharing, which greatly facilitates communication during pandemics. This culture promotes transparency, collaboration, and the swift dissemination of relevant information to all stakeholders. It ensures that everyone remains informed, aligned, and unified towards a common goal during

challenging times. This open communication culture builds trust and enables swift decision-making, ultimately enhancing our ability to respond effectively to crises.

15. How flexible is the structure of your organisation and how does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?

The structure of the organisation is very flexible, and this has helped a lot during challenges times. We were able to make quick adjustments in our strategy when circumstances changes, for example when the lockdown levels were too tight, majority of employees had to work from home and branches had to be closed. We had to focus our plans on digital migration for taxpayers.

16. How accurate and sufficient is the information provided by your organisation during a pandemic?

During a pandemic, the information provided by our organisation is accurate, comprehensive, and regularly updated. We prioritize clarity, ensuring that stakeholders have access to all necessary information to make informed decisions.

17. Please highlight and explain any other barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the sheer volume of information circulating posed challenges in managing and disseminating accurate and relevant information effectively.

Interviewer: How so?

Interviewee: We encountered a challenge with the volume of information we needed to disseminate, which proved overwhelming for our employees to absorb. As a result, some of the most critical information went unread.

Interview with a Senior Manager:

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Please state your gender

Male	
Female	X

2. Please indicate your position in the organisation

Senior manager	X
Middle manager	
Junior manager	

3. Please state the number of years that you have worked for the organisation

Less than 1 year	
1 to 5 years	
6 to 10 years	
11 to 15 years	
16 years and above	X

Section B: Interview Questions

4. Does your organisation have a crisis communication plan for a pandemic? If yes, please provide your view on the effectiveness of the plan.

Yes, we do have an effective plan that is set to guide us on what to do during a crisis.

5. How accurate is the information provided by your organisation during a crisis?

Communication messages go through different levels of approvals before it can be communicated, so, I would say it is very accurate information.

6. Please comment on the speed with which your organisation communicates to employees and other stakeholders during a pandemic?

We had regular updates that were going out via social media for our external audiences, Internally, at first the communication was not regular, but employees complained, and it changed. I think the organisation was overwhelmed or maybe they were on panic mode and focused more on external stakeholders when COVID started.

7. What are your views on the degree of openness and empathy that are displayed in your organisation's crisis communication during a pandemic?

The organisation showed empathy towards employees and taxpayers, and support was provided. I commend them for it, they did well.

8. Please comment on the ability of the organisation's communication to protect the reputation of the organisation during pandemics.

Communication can make or break the organisation and its reputation. It is important that an organisation communicates openly and accurately especially during challenging times. Imagine if our communication sent out misleading and in accurate information to taxpayers during Covid 19? Our stakeholders would lose their trust in us.

9. To what extent do you think your organisation has succeeded in gaining credibility and trust from stakeholders through its crisis communication during a pandemic?

The organisation has managed to build trust with all its stakeholders. I think this is mainly because of the kind of information and support the organisation usually shows during the times of need.

10. What is the overall effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?

Again, if I can make an example of COVID-19, I think it was very effective. Communication ensured that accurate updates are always sent.

11. Please highlight and explain the situations in which the following strategies have been used during pandemics:

- a) Denial, blaming, and justification.
- b) Apologising, being sympathetic, and compensating victims.

The strategy that was used the most during COVID-19 is being sympathetic. Communication from the organisation always sympathised with the staff and all the other stakeholders.

12. Do you think the organisation is effectively using technology such as social media platforms during pandemics? Please explain.

Yes, this also assisted the organisation with migrating most of its services to online during COVID-19. Even the announcements for example during the opening of Filing Season, it was done virtually with the media joining online. The event/announcement was at the same time communicated on social media.

13. Does the organisation have a culture of information sharing? How does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?

Yes, there's a culture of information sharing, and during pandemics like the recent COVID-19, different divisions collaborated and ensured that the relevant and accurate information is distributed.

14. How flexible is the structure of your organisation and how does this facilitate or hinder communication during pandemics?

The flexible structure of our organisation facilitates communication during pandemics by enabling quick decision-making, adapting to changing circumstances, and ensuring coordination across different departments.

15. How accurate and sufficient is the information provided by your organisation during a pandemic?

The information that communication provides is very accurate and it also goes through many levels for reviewing and approval before it is published.

Interviewer: Is it sufficient though?

Interviewee: I would say, yes because the organisation communicated when there was a need or when there was a new update to share.

16. Please highlight and explain any other barriers to effective crisis communication during a pandemic in your organisation?

I can't think of any barriers right now. So, I will say, NO.

Addendum C: Permission letter to conduct research

Enterprise Research and
Knowledge Management

Enquiries
Nozuko Twala
Dr Rebone Gcabo

Telephone
012 4227374

E-mail
_SecretariatRC@sars.gov.za

Reference
Request to use SARS data

Date
28 June 2024

Samkelisiwe Ntuli



Pretoria Head Office
299 Bronkhorst Street,
Nieuw Muckleneuk, 0181
Private Bag X923,
Pretoria, 0001

APPROVAL FROM SARS RESEARCH COMMITTEE

Dear Samkelisiwe Ntuli

REQUEST FOR ACCESS AND UTILISATION OF SARS DATA FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH PURPOSES

Thank you for submitting your request for access and utilization of SARS data for purposes of conducting academic research.

Your application was submitted to the SARS Research Committee for topic consideration and has been approved. The approval has been made on the condition that a second submission for data requirements completes the approval process.

Research Topic/Title: An analysis of the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a national government agency.

Data requirements: Structured interviews with SARS staff.

Data handling and security management: As the researcher, you will be responsible for ensuring that the research process is handled appropriately. All research data files will be stored securely in secure university systems to ensure that there is no unauthorized access to the research data.

Furthermore, the following are additional requirements aligned to your request:

- Your immediate (line) manager to be informed of the required endorsement of the project aligned to your Personal Development Plan (PDP);
- In case of a survey (and in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act 2013) for purposes of ensuring confidentiality, no personal information will be collected without informed consent from participants;

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- The organisation and its participants will not be identified in the research report and the data will be analysed and only reported in aggregated format;
 - Compliance with the provisions of the Copyright Act, 1978 (Act No. 98 of 1978) and all laws relating to intellectual property (IP) has to be strictly enforced and facilitating through the relevant learning institutions for SARS to gain access and use any research output;
 - The researcher undertakes to comply and process personal information of data subjects in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Protection of Personal Information Act, Act No. 4 of 2013; and
 - Your attention is also drawn specifically to compliance to SARS Governance processes and other internal governance procedures to research. The researcher to further comply with the following:
 - ❖ To read and familiarise him/herself with the Oath of Secrecy that all SARS employees have signed as part of their employment process;
 - ❖ To read and familiarise him/herself with the applicable secrecy and confidentiality provisions of Chapter 6 of the Tax Administrative Act, 2011, specifically sections 68 and 69 applicable provisions in the Customs and Excise Act (section 4(2));
 - ❖ Keep the name of the organization, employees, and taxpayers confidential during the research process including the dissemination phase; and
 - ❖ To ensure that the final report is shared with SARS through the Enterprise Research & Knowledge Management (ERKM) Committee (EnterpriseResearch@sars.gov.za).

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the secretariat on
EnterpriseResearch@sars.gov.za

Sincerely

Approved

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leolo', is written over a vertical line. The signature is cursive and stylized.

Mamiky Leolo

SARS Research Committee

Date: 28 June 2024

Addendum D: Ethical Clearance



College of Human Sciences_CREC

Date: 23/06/2025

Dear: Ms Samkelsiwe Faith Ntuli

Decision: Ethics Approval from 23 June 2025 to 22 June 2026

NHREC Registration # : (Rec-2409816-052)
Ref #: 3969
Name: Ms Samkelsiwe Faith Ntuli
Student #: 41355857

Researcher: Ms Samkelsiwe Faith Ntuli

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Supervisor: Dr Mutambuli James Hadji hadjimj@unisa.ac.za

An analysis of the effectiveness of crisis communication during a pandemic at a national government agency: a case of South African Revenue Services (SARS) Department of Communications

Qualification: MA: Communication

Thank you for the application for research ethics approval by the College of Human Sciences_CREC for the above-mentioned research study. Ethics approval is granted for **one year**.

The **low-risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Human Sciences_CREC on **23 June 2025** in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising during the undertaking of the research study that may affect the ethical integrity of the study, including those involving research participants, third parties, or juristic persons, must be reported in writing to the College of Human Sciences_CREC without delay.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that may affect study-related risks to research participants, juristic or third persons, must be reported in writing to the College of Human Sciences_CREC, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research study complies with all applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines, and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Where applicable, adherence to the following South African legislation is essential: the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013), the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005), and the National Health Act (No. 61 of 2003)
6. Future use of this research data is permitted only in de-identified form and only for secondary research with objectives similar to those of the original study. Any secondary use involving identifiable human data will require additional ethics clearance.
7. No fieldwork activities may continue beyond the stated expiry date (**22 June 2026**). A completed Research Ethics Progress Report must be submitted as an application for renewal and is subject to approval by the Research Ethics Committee. A Close-Out Report must be submitted upon completion of the research study.
8. The College of Human Sciences_CREC may require the submission of regular progress reports on a [**annual**] basis, in alignment with Section 7.2 of the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2024).

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from the research participants and Unisa.
2. Research data must be stored in compliance with the university's research data management policy for a period of up to 15 years.
3. When publishing the results, the researcher must take appropriate precautions to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of the research participants, juristic persons, third parties, and the university, in accordance with institutional policies and ethical standards.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication Practices, specifically Principle 7 on Social Awareness, must be ensured. This principle states: 'Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups, or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible.' The University of South Africa (Unisa) accepts no liability for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

The reference number 3969 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof K J Malesa
Chair of College of Human Sciences_CREC
E-mail: maleskj@unisa.ac.za



Professor Omwoyo Bosire Onyancha
Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of College of Human Sciences_CREC
E-mail: onyanob@unisa.ac.za