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CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND BRAND REPUTATION:
HOW RESPONSE STRATEGIES SHAPE LONG-TERM PUBLIC PERCEPTION

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Abstract

This thesis explores how crisis communication strategies affect long-term reputation restoration. The research analyses five case studies: BP, Volkswagen, Samsung, Slack, and KFC, to evaluate the effectiveness of different communication strategies. Using models such as SCCT, Image Repair Theory, Stealing Thunder, and the Contingency Theory of Accommodation, the research underlines that flexible, context-sensitive strategies are more effective than rigid frameworks. Finally, the study proposes a crisis communication plan structured for pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. The research provides theoretical and practical recommendations for organisations that aim to protect and rebuild their reputation during a crisis.

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Introduction

In today's hyperconnected and unpredictable global environment, corporate crises are no longer isolated disruptions; they are an ongoing strategic concern for organisations. Major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing wars (e.g., in Ukraine and the Middle East), escalating climate emergencies, and intensifying political and regulatory uncertainty have raised public expectations of brands.[1] Organisations are now evaluated not only for their products and services but also for their ethical positioning, social responsiveness, and ability to lead through disruption.[2] In this context, crisis communication has evolved from a reactive response to a core component of brand strategy and corporate accountability.

At the same time, consumer expectations have changed a lot. Today's stakeholders require more than just technical skills. Their companies need to be open, aware of different cultures, empathetic, and genuinely involved.[3] If these expectations are not met, the damage to the company's reputation can be much worse than the costs of dealing with a crisis.[4] As trust diminishes, communication goes beyond crisis management; it is essential for maintaining long-term credibility and stakeholder loyalty.

The growth of digital and social media has made crises develop faster, reach more people, and have a bigger impact. Platforms like X, TikTok, and Instagram make it easy for the public to see issues quickly, start viral backlash, and turn small problems into threats to someone's reputation. Before the internet was fully saturated, early social media sites and online news cycles were already changing how people talked about crises. The British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 is a key example. It was mostly an environmental disaster, but it also showed how bad crisis communication can be. BP's slow, technical, and defensive messages, which were widely shared through the media, hurt the company's reputation and investors' trust in the long run.

Other brands have also had trouble keeping a good reputation when things get tough. For example, during the Dieselgate scandal, Volkswagen first denied being responsible for emissions fraud, which made people trust the company less and hurt its reputation around the world. Recent years have shown that even mistakes made by accident or bad marketing can make people angry. Another example, when the batteries in Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 phones failed, the company

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[1] **W. T. Coombs**, *Crisis Communication*, 5th edn (London: SAGE Publications, 2022).

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] **W. T. Coombs, '**The Value of Communication During a Crisis' (2015) 58(2) *Business Horizons*, pp. 141–148;
A. Mendy, M. L. Stewart and K. VanAkin, *A Leader's Guide: Communicating with Teams, Stakeholders, and Communities During COVID-19*, McKinsey & Company (April 2020), https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/a-leaders-guide-communicating-with-teams-stakeholders-and-communities-during-covid-19.

[4] W. T. Coombs, *Crisis Communication*.

quickly recalled them. However, the company's credibility was hurt by the fact that the explanations were not always clear.[5] Slack is a cloud-based messaging tool that helps people work together and talk to each other at work. During a major service outage, however, it showed that it could handle a crisis well by being open and understanding, which built trust among users.[6] KFC, a fast-food chain that specialises in fried chicken, dealt with a supply chain problem in the UK that temporarily left restaurants without chicken. The company was praised for its humour and humility, as shown by the now-famous "FCK" print campaign.[7]

Increasingly, crises are caused by social and cultural mistakes, not just technical or operational ones. A lot of people were unhappy with how Facebook (owned by Meta) handled user data and false information.[8] Google employees protested against military AI contracts within the company.[9] Apple has been scrutinised for working conditions in its global supply chain.[10] After two tragic accidents of the 737 MAX, the public pointed out that Boeing prioritised profits above safety. The perception got worse by evasive and unsympathetic corporate communication.[11]

Diversity and inclusion are also very important when it comes to reputational risk. Dove's 2017 ad, which showed a Black woman turning into a white woman, was called racist.[12] The public was angry with H&M in 2018 for putting a Black child in a hoodie that said "coolest monkey in the jungle."[13] These examples reveal the degree to which public tolerance for exclusionary or insensitive messages, and how quickly a brand's reputation can fall apart if it does not predict how people will react to cultural differences.

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[5] **M. Farrer** and agencies, "Samsung Recalls Galaxy Note 7 Phones After Battery Fires," *The Guardian*, 2 September 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/sep/03/samsung-recalls-galaxy-note-7-phones-after-battery-fires.

[6] **L. Nolan**, with contributions from G. D. Sanford, J. Scheinblum, and C. Sullivan, "Slack's Incident on 2-22-22," *Engineering at Slack*, 26 April 2022, https://slack.engineering/slacks-incident-on-2-22-22/.

[7] BBC Newsbeat, "KFC's Cheeky Apology for Chicken Crisis," *BBC News*, 23 February 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-43169625.

[8] **J. C. Wong**, "Facebook to Be Fined $5bn for Cambridge Analytica Privacy Violations – Reports," *The Guardian*, 12 July 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jul/12/facebook-fine-ftc-privacy-violations.

[9] K. Conger, "Google Plans Not to Renew Its Contract for Project Maven, a Controversial Pentagon Drone AI Imaging Program," *Gizmodo*, 1 June 2018, https://gizmodo.com/google-plans-not-to-renew-its-contract-for-project-mave-1826488620.

[10] **J. O'Toole**, "Apple Supplier Faces Scrutiny Over Labor Conditions in China," *CNN Money*, 4 September 2014, https://money.cnn.com/2014/09/04/technology/apple-china/index.html.

[11] The Economic Times, "Boeing 737 Max: The Troubled History of Fatal Crashes and 346 Deaths in 7 Years," *The Economic Times*, originally published 4 September 2023 (reprinted 11 June 2025), https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/boeing-737-max-the-troubled-history-of-fatal-crashes-and-346-deaths-in-7-years/articleshow/111566888.cms.

[12] **N. Slawson**, "Dove apologises for ad showing black woman turning into white one," *The Guardian*, 8 October 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/08/dove-apologises-for-ad-showing-black-woman-turning-into-white-one.

[13] **S. Stampler**, "H&M Apologizes for Showing Black Child Wearing 'Coolest Monkey in the Jungle' Sweatshirt," *The New York Times*, 8 January 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/business/hm-monkey.html.

In the current cancel culture, one wrong message or a late response can start boycotts all over the world and hurt businesses for a long time. Customers don't just judge brands on how well they work anymore; they also look at how well they follow social, ethical, and human rights standards. Now, communication serves as a moral and managerial responsibility. The speed at which technology is changing makes things more complicated. More people are using artificial intelligence (AI) to make content, keep an eye on crises, and figure out how people feel about things. This gives us both powerful tools and new risks. AI can help businesses respond faster and more accurately, but it can also make reputational risks worse without meaning to. In this case, businesses should stop using fixed crisis plans and start using flexible, real-time strategies that consider how digital conversations can change and be hard to predict. The strength of an organisation now comes from being able to see reputational risk before it gets worse. Iris from Brandwatch is an example of these developments. It is a mix of human and AI that uses its own AI and language models to help with making content automatically, doing social research, and identifying trends. Talkwalker's Blue Silk™ AI, on the other hand, can track sentiment and make predictions in many languages and types of media. On the other hand, Signal AI helps executives build their reputation by filtering millions of global sources and showing them useful information. These technologies are important for managing your reputation because 61% of brands now use social media listening to find out how their brand is doing and to act on early warning signs.[14]

This thesis applies a qualitative case study methodology to analyse these dynamics. It examines various real-world crises involving multinational brands and compares their communication strategies across different crisis categories. The study seeks to identify typical patterns, highlight variations in effectiveness, and examine the impact of communication choices on long-term stakeholder perceptions through comparative case analysis. This comparative analysis offers an examination of both effective and ineffective techniques, including their primary justifications. This study also examines the influence of crisis communication strategies on long-lasting public perception. This review of cases like BP, Volkswagen, Samsung, Slack, and KFC shows how businesses can get better at dealing with the reputation problems that come with a world that changes quickly. Good communication can help businesses get back on track, while bad communication can make stakeholders lose trust.

Chapter 1 defines crisis and crisis communication. It talks about the strategic and emotional sides of crises, gives examples of various types of crises (operational crises, paracrises; known and unknown risks). Also in the chapter, there is information about the importance of managing and

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[14] **Influencer Marketing Hub**, "Social media listening report 2024: What 300+ brands told us," *Influencer Marketing Hub*, 2024, https://influencermarketinghub.com/social-media-listening-report/

lowering risk. The chapter additionally discusses how important a brand's reputation is during a crisis and how good communication during a crisis can help businesses keep their stakeholders' trust and legitimacy.

Chapter 2 outlines the development of crisis communication as an academic field and presents the main theoretical frameworks: Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, the Theory of Persuasive Attack, Stealing Thunder, and the Contingency Theory of Accommodation. In the chapter, there is a brief comparative analysis to see their advantages and disadvantages. As well, the chapter talks about Enterprise Risk Management, the crisis-risk cycle, and points out gaps in the literature related to restoring a company's reputation over the long run and suggests a research question on how different crisis response strategies may impact long-term reputation restoration.

Chapter 3 offers a multiple case study analysis to understand the responses of different organisations to crises and the impact of their strategies on public perception and long-term reputation impact. The selected cases: BP Deepwater Horizon, Volkswagen Dieselgate, Samsung Galaxy Note 7, Slack's 2022 outage, and KFC's "FCK" campaign, cover several sectors and crisis categories. There is an analysis of a communication strategy, stakeholder participation, reputational outcomes, and effectiveness that is used in each case. The chapter ends by putting together what was learnt from all the cases.

Chapter 4 highlights the importance of having a crisis communication plan. It proposes a model strategy consisting of three primary steps: preparation for the crisis, a rapid response, and post-disaster recovery. The chapter talks about why some solutions don't work for everyone, gives examples of how to build trust over time, and gives a flexible strategy template that can be used to protect the organisation's reputation and make it stronger.

Chapter 1

1.1 Research Purpose and Relevance

Crisis communication has become an essential strategic discipline for managing reputational risks and stakeholder expectations in more complex scenarios. Crisis communication used to be seen as a way to react to problems, but now it's an important tool that lets companies show leadership, responsiveness, and honesty when they are being watched closely. In today's fast-paced world full of news, the most important question is not whether a crisis will happen, but how well an organisation will handle it when it does.

Any business can have to deal with a crisis, and many don't do it properly. When communication is unclear, late, or defensive during a crisis, it not only hurts stakeholder trust, but it can also hurt the company's reputation and finances in the long run.[15]

Even the biggest companies have had crises in the past that needed quick, strategic communication. Volkswagen, KFC, and Samsung all show that when a company sends a message, how it is framed, and how consistent it is are all important factors in whether people will trust it or not. The idea of a crisis response strategy is at the heart of this, a key idea in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). W. Timothy Coombs developed SCCT in the early 2000s to help businesses deal with crises based on how stakeholders see them. The Handbook of Crisis Communication offers a plan of what should be done and gives evidence-based solutions that are based on the type of crisis, and the reasons people think it happened.[16] The main idea behind SCCT is that a crisis can damage an organisation's reputation and the level of trust that stakeholders have in it. The theory provides various responses based on the perception of the situation as preventable, accidental, or victim, from denial to apology. Coombs argues that the most effective strategy depends on the level of responsibility attributed to the organisation.[17] When the public holds a company responsible, as in preventable crises, actions like apologies or corrective action generally work best. On the other hand, when responsibility is low, like in victim

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[15] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn, ed. by W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), pp. 526–530.

[16] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay** (eds), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[17] **W. T. Coombs**, "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Corporate Reputation Review* 10, no. 3 (2007): 163–176.

crises, defensive strategies like denial or shifting the blame might work.[18] Some scholars argue that when a reputational threat is low, only providing timely and objective data may be enough.[19] However, many businesses are afraid to apologise or admit they were wrong because they might get investigated.[20] This problem shows the strategic tension between legal risk and damage to reputation, which is a common problem in crisis management. Finding the right balance is often difficult because of organisational structures and cultural resistance to admitting fault.

In addition to what is communicated, when it is communicated has emerged as equally critical. Research on crisis timing strategies introduced the concept of "Stealing Thunder," which refers to the early disclosure of a crisis by an organisation before external parties share the news.[21] Extensive research in the fields of psychology and communication theory shows that audiences tend to react positively when an organisation openly shares a negative event, as this behaviour is viewed as a demonstration of honesty and transparency.[22] Regardless of these advantages, organisations frequently delay disclosure to avoid any possible legal consequences or damage to their reputation. Covering a truth can lead to increased investigation and negative reactions when the information eventually comes to light.[23] Digital platforms and stakeholder activism reinforced this reality, where consumers, employees, and civil society shape crisis narratives. Coombs characterises such crisis communication as a multi-vocal situation, when the organisation is no longer the exclusive storyteller.[24] This dynamic shifts the focus from message control to message engagement, where responsiveness and authenticity become key performance indicators.

Brand reputation, which was once established mostly through advertising and public relations, is now formed and dismantled instantaneously. It is shaped by how an organisation behaves under pressure and, importantly, how it communicates. Comyns and Franklin-Johnson argue that reputational harm is frequently intensified not by the crisis itself, but by the perceived insincerity or ineffectiveness of the response.[25] In moral harm crises, such as those related to social injustice

[18] **W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay**, "Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Management Communication Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2002): 165–186.

[19] **W. T. Coombs**, "Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Journal of Business Communication* 41, no. 3 (2004): 265–289.

[20] **Coombs and Holladay**, "*Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets.*"

[21] **M. J. Arpan and D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen,** "Stealing Thunder: An Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information," *Public Relations Review* 31, no. 3 (2005): 425–433.

[22] **M. Dolnik, W. Case, and M. Williams,** "Risk Communication Failures: A Risk Assessment Model for Public Health Crises," *Journal of Health Communication* 8, no. S1 (2003): 29–44;

W. T. Coombs, "The Value of Communication During a Crisis," *Business Horizons* 58, no. 2 (2015): 141–148.

[23] M. J. Palenchar and R. L. Heath, "Strategic Risk Communication: Adding Value to Society," *Public Relations Review* 33, no. 2 (2007): 120–122.

[24] **W. T. Coombs**, "Scholarly Exchange," *Journal of Public Relations Research* (Centre for Crisis & Risk Communications, Calgary, Canada, 2025): 1–11.

[25] **B. Comyns** and **E. Franklin-Johnson**, "Corporate Reputation and Collective Crises: A Theoretical Development Using the Case of Rana Plaza," *Journal of Business Ethics* 150, no. 1 (2018): 159–183.

or discrimination, poorly created statements may not only fail to calm the public but may even provoke anger.[26]

The practical application of these ideas in crisis leadership further highlights their relevance. Recent studies in corporate communication point out the importance of the message sender.[27] In cases of technical crisis, it may be more credible for a domain expert to assume the role of communicator instead of the CEO. In certain instances, the public anticipates direct communication from the highest authority within the organisation. It is crucial to maintain consistency in messaging, tone, and timing across all channels. Leaders must have support through coherent talking points that effectively balance reassurance with realism.

The rhetorical nature of crisis communication is also important. Ihlen and Heath state that organisations are essentially rhetorical entities that generate meaning, legitimacy, and action through language.[28] The careful selection of narratives, metaphors, and emotional framing significantly influences how messages are received and understood. Crisis communication includes not only the distribution of information but also incorporates aspects of persuasion, social identity, and collective memory.

Finally, the urgency of strengthening crisis readiness is echoed in recent regulatory frameworks. Article 14 of the Digital Operational Resilience Act (DORA) requires financial institutions in the European Union to establish structured crisis communication protocols to ensure operational continuity and stakeholder confidence.[29] While targeted at financial entities, the logic behind DORA reflects a growing trend: organisations in all sectors must anticipate and manage crises as systemic risks, not isolated events.

1.2 Definition of Crisis Communication

Crisis communication has changed in the past few decades, both as a subject of study and as a practical management tool. At its base, it is the strategic and timely sharing of information that is meant to control how people see and react to a crisis. In order to understand the value and role of crisis communication, it is key to first define what a crisis is. Among scholars and practitioners,

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[26] **S. Lee, L. Atkinson and Y. Sung**, "Online Bandwagon Effects: Quantitative vs. Qualitative Cues in Online Comments Sections," *New Media & Society* 24, no. 3 (2020): 580–599.

[27] A. Mendy, M. L. Stewart and K. VanAkin, *A Leader's Guide: Communicating with Teams, Stakeholders, and Communities During COVID-19*, McKinsey & Company (April 2020), https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/a-leaders-guide-communicating-with-teams-stakeholders-and-communities-during-covid-19.

[28] **Ø. Ihlen and R. L. Heath**, *The Handbook of Organizational Rhetoric and Communication* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020).

[29] Digital Operational Resilience Act, *Article 14: ICT-related Incident Reporting*, Digital Operational Resilience Act, https://www.digital-operational-resilience-act.com/Article_14.html.

there is no universally accepted definition of crisis. According to Coombs, "Crisis is by definition an event where an organisation disappoints its stakeholders, so we can say that stakeholders' expectations about the organisation are violated."[30] This emphasis on stakeholder perception is shared by earlier definitions: Coombs defined crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes."[31] Likewise, Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer describe a crisis as "a specific, unexpected, and non-routine organisationally based event or series of events which create(s) high levels of uncertainty and threat, or perceived threat, to an organisation's high-priority goals."[32] These definitions capture the unpredictability, urgency, and reputational impact of crises, whether reputational, operational, social, or environmental.

Expanding from an organisational to a community-level perspective, Boin et al. argue that crises are situations in which "core values or life-sustaining systems of a community are under threat."[33] Such events generate urgency and uncertainty about their consequences. Ulmer points out that framing crises as threats has historically led to a focus on defensive or blame-reducing strategies.[34] However, this point of view is changing. A growing number of studies now show that crises can be perceived as opportunities for learning, trust growth, and reputation promotion.[35]

The phrase that John F. Kennedy said at the 1959 Convocation of the United Negro College Fund, "When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters: one represents danger and the other represents opportunity," sums up the concept of duality.[36] Every crisis includes both risks and transforming opportunities. This dual character highlights the necessity for crisis communication to be proactive and integrated within a comprehensive strategy framework. There are several approaches to describe crisis communication, and they all come from different practical and theoretical traditions. The Handbook of Crisis Communication describes it as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis."[37] In contrast, Schwarz and Löffelholz present a broader view, defining it as "a social negotiation process in which observers attribute the status of a crisis to certain events."[38] Crisis communication is a process that

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[30] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2022), p. 527.

[31] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 3rd edn (Sage, 2007), pp. 2–3.

[32] **M. W. Seeger, T. L. Sellnow** and **R. R. Ulmer**, 'Communication, Organisation, and Crisis', *Communication Yearbook*, 26, no. 3 (1998), p. 233.

[33] **A. Boin, P. 't Hart, E. Stern** and **B. Sundelius**, *The Politics of Crisis Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 2–3.

[34] **R. R. Ulmer**, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity* (5th edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2020).

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] **J. F. Kennedy**, 'Remarks at the Convocation of the United Negro College Fund' (Indianapolis, 12 April 1959) https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/indianapolis-in-19590412.

[37] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 474.

[38] **A. Schwarz and M. Löffelholz, in A. Schwarz, M. Seeger** and **C. Auer** (eds), *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

involves multiple actors, organisations, the media, and stakeholders, who shape meaning together through interaction.

More recent definitions integrate the emotional and psychological dimensions of crisis communication. According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, communication during a crisis must "reduce uncertainty, provide stakeholders with self-help information, and facilitate learning and trust after a crisis."[39] This approach stresses the human cost of crisis, not just reputational loss or operational disruption, but also emotional distress, grief, or public outrage.

Indeed, emotion has become central to the study of crisis communication. Uysal and Schroeder talk about the importance of moral emotions, especially anger, which play a role in shaping how communications are received, shared, and amplified on digital platforms.[40] Emotional resonance, together with credibility, is now recognised as a key element in the effectiveness of crisis communications.

This emotional aspect is related to key tactical elements like timing, tone, and transparency. This emotional aspect is related to key tactical elements like timing, tone, and transparency. Coombs, Arpan, and Roskos-Ewoldsen highlight the important role of "Stealing Thunder," an approach that involves proactively revealing negative information before it is discovered by others, to preserve trust and handle the narrative.[41] On the other hand, delays in responses usually make people more suspicious, less trusting, and escalate media attention. In the digital age, these concepts become harder by the speed at which information spreads, the rise of numerous opinions and different communication environments. Coombs says that crisis communication is now a "multi-vocal phenomenon," which means that stories are shaped not only by the organisation but also by stakeholders, consumers, employees, and even competitors.[42] Messages are scrutinised, shared, and reinterpreted across social media platforms, making message control less feasible and message engagement more vital.

Peter Anthonissen points out, senior leaders must recognise that "no company or organisation is immune to the threat of a possible crisis" and that "everything is expected to be visible."[43] In an age of transparency, silence or evasiveness can be more damaging than acknowledging uncertainty. Buama stresses the necessity of proactive exposure, pointing out that an appropriate tone, a reliable

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[39] **R. R. Ulmer, T. L. Sellnow** and **M. W. Seeger**, *Effective Crisis Communication* (5th edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2020).

[40] **N. Uysal** and **R. Schroeder**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorising Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research* (2023).

[41] **L. M. Arpan and D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: An Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure' (2005) 15(4) *Public Relations Review*, p. 425; **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis' (2015) 58(2) *Business Horizons*, pp. 141–148.

[42] **W. T. Coombs**, *Media and Crisis Communication* (Routledge, 2025), pp. 143–144.

[43] **P. Anthonissen**, *Crisis Communication: Practical PR Strategies for Reputation Management* (London: Kogan Page, 2008).

source, and focused communication are vital for engaging affected populations and reinstating trust.[44] Strategic crisis communication must act as both a defensive mechanism and as an integrative instrument that integrates operational, ethical, and reputational objectives. The goal is not just to protect the image, but also to show responsibility and build long-term trust.

1.3 Types of Crises

In crisis communication, it is important to classify crises to choose the right strategic response. Not all crises are the same; the reasons for them, how much blame the organisation gets, and how the public sees them can all be very different. To protect their reputation, rebuild trust, and minimise uncertainty, communicative responses must be customised to these criteria. Situational Crisis Communication Theory proposes that an organisation's response strategy should align with the type of crisis it faces and the degree of responsibility it is perceived to hold for that crisis.[45] It classifies crises into three primary categories: victim, accidental, and preventable.

Victim crises refer to situations where the organisation is perceived as a victim of the event rather than being responsible for it. The crises include natural disasters, acts of sabotage, the spread of rumours, and incidents of workplace violence. Because public attribution of responsibility is low, the reputational threat is minimal. As Coombs explains, in these cases, organisations may not need to engage in extensive image repair but should still express concern, provide information, and demonstrate empathy.[46]

An example of a victim crisis can be seen in the case of the Galaxy Note 7 battery explosion, which was first seen as a technical malfunction. Samsung's first reaction was focused on providing reassurance to the public. The early framing influenced the initial perceptions of stakeholders, even as the crisis later transitioned into an accidental category. Another case is the KFC chicken shortage in the United Kingdom, caused by a disruption in the supply chain. The organisation provided a humorous but sincere apology, accepting the problems it caused to the public while highlighting the external factors contributing to the issue. The campaign, with the "FCK" bucket advertisement, became a popular case of effective crisis communication in a context of minimal accountability.[47]

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[44] **C. A. C. Buama**, *Crisis Communication and Crisis Management*, 1st edn (Oxford Academic Publishing, 2021), p. 106.
[45] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), pp. 135–138.
[46] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2022), p. 527.
[47] **M. Ritson**, *Colonel Ritson: KFC's Marketers Turned a Chicken Crisis into a Brand Triumph*, *Marketing Week*, 27 February 2018, https://www.marketingweek.com/colonel-ritson-kfcs-marketers-turned-chicken-crisis-brand-triumph/.

Accidental crises are characterised by unintentional but foreseeable errors, such as technical failures or equipment malfunctions. The organisation may not have deliberately caused the crisis, but is still seen as partially responsible. This category of crisis needs a more proactive approach to communication compared to victim crises and may be enhanced by employing strategies such as apologies, corrective actions, and thorough explanations.[48]

One such crisis happened with Slack, which faced unexpected downtime during business hours, leading to widespread frustration among users around the world. The organisation quickly recognised the problem by providing clear updates on social media and interacting directly with users in real-time. Its strategy, blending humour, sincerity, and openness, helped reduce reputational damage.[49]

Preventable crises are those in which the organisation knowingly placed people at risk, violated laws or regulations or acted irresponsibly. These types of crises include ethical misconduct, fraud, or gross negligence. In such cases, stakeholders assign high levels of responsibility to the organisation, resulting in significant reputational harm. According to SCCT, preventable crises demand strong accommodative strategies, including apology, compensation, and transparency.[50]

Volkswagen's diesel emissions scandal is an example in which the company intentionally altered emissions testing procedures. The collapse of public trust was met by a strong backlash from the community. The response from VW, with its initial tardiness and defensiveness, faced criticism, which increased the duration of reputational harm.[51] In contrast, BP's response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill included public apologies, the creation of a dedicated response website, and initiatives for compensation. Nevertheless, considering these efforts, the delay and the perceived lack of sincerity undermined public trust.[52]

The Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal is another example of a preventable crisis, a digital privacy breach that undermined user trust and provoked regulatory attention due to the absence of quick and honest acknowledgement, causing public frustration.[53]

It is important to note that Coombs first developed SCCT to explore how stakeholders perceive crisis responsibility and react to organisational responses. Based on Kelley's attribution model,

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[48] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory' (2002) 16(2) *Management Communication Quarterly* 165–186.

[49] Slack, 'Outage Response Timeline' (2020) *Slack News*, https://slack.com/blog/news/outage-response-timeline.

[50] **W. T. Coombs,** *Media and Crisis Communication* (Routledge 2025), pp. 102–106.

[51] **A. Schwarz, M. W. Seeger and C. Auer** (eds), *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (Wiley, 2016), pp. 208–212.

[52] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 3rd edn (Sage, 2007), p. 143.

[53] **P. Anthonissen**, *Crisis Communication: Practical PR Strategies for Reputation Management* (Kogan Page, 2008), pp. 89–92.

Coombs included elements like historical crisis experiences and the strength of past stakeholder relationships, which influence public perception in times of crisis.[54]

Following the initial analysis, some adjustments were made to remove attribution variables like external control, which had minimal explanatory value. On the other hand, personal control was recognised as interconnected with the concept of responsibility attribution.[55] The modifications contributed to the consolidation of SCCT, resulting in a more logical and predictive framework.[56] Recognising the nature of the crisis and the extent of accountability is essential; however, the effective application of SCCT requires a knowledge of relational dynamics, including stakeholder trust, historical experiences, and reputational anticipations.[57]

1.3.1 Crisis Communication

Effective crisis communication requires a strategic framework designed to manage and mitigate the impact of unforeseen or adverse events on an organisation's reputation, operations, and stakeholders.[58] The development of crisis communication shows transformations in technology, media environments, societal anticipations, and organisational methodologies throughout history.[59]

Crisis communication has transitioned from being reactive and localised to embracing proactive, real-time, and digitally driven strategies.[60] The transition from traditional media to social media and AI-driven tools has heightened the speed, complexity, and requirements for effectively managing crises.[61] At the moment, organisations are obliged to engage with a global, informed, and

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[54] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organisation Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory' (2007) *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163–176.

[55] **W. T. Coombs**, 'An Analytic Framework for Crisis Situations: Better Responses from a Better Understanding of the Situation' (1998) *Journal of Public Relations Research*, **10**(3), 177–191.

[56] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory' (2002) *Management Communication Quarterly*, **16**(2), 165–186.

[57] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell 2010) 38.

[58] **J. Pierpoint**, 'Headline Risk: Forging a Crisis Communication Keystone' (2024) 32(1) *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* e12559; R. T. Spradley, 'Crisis Communication in Organizations' in C. R. Scott and L. Lewis (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication* (Wiley, Hoboken 2017).

[59] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Future of Crisis Communication', in **A. Thießen** (ed), *Handbuch Krisenmanagement* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013).
A. Gonzalez-Herrero and **S. Smith**, 'Crisis Communications Management on the Web: How Internet-Based Technologies Are Changing the Way Public Relations Professionals Handle Business Crises' (2008) 16(3) *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 143–153.
J. Tække, 'Crisis Communication and Social Media: A Systems- and Medium-Theoretical Perspective' (2017) 34(2) *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 182–194.

[60] **S. Upadhyay** and **N. Upadhyay**, 'Mapping Crisis Communication in the Communication Research: What We Know and What We Don't Know' (2023) 10 *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 632.

[61] **Y. Cheng, J. Lee,** and **J. Qiao**, *Crisis Communication in the Age of AI: Navigating Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Horizons*, in W. T. Coombs (ed), *Media and Crisis Communication* (London: Routledge, 2024);
M. Eriksson, 'Lessons for Crisis Communication on Social Media: A Systematic Review of What Research Tells the Practice' (2018) 12(5) *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 526–551;

interconnected audience in the realm of crisis communication. This engagement must be conducted with a commitment to transparency, empathy, compassion, and responsibility.[62]

The development of a successful crisis communication strategy relies on the precise integration of strategic insight and operational readiness. Coleman delineates an important difference between a crisis communication strategy and a crisis communication plan. The former presents a comprehensive, organisation-wide strategy that takes into account communication channels, reputational risk, and policies, whereas the latter serves as a tactical guide designed to direct actions as the crisis progresses.[63] Anthonissen enhances this distinction by emphasising the essential priorities of a crisis plan: to convey the appropriate message to the correct audience at the optimal time. The author posits that a well-prepared, proactive strategy enables organisations to take charge in times of crisis, safeguarding their reputation through the maintenance of consistency, promptness, and clear internal communication.[64] Both authors emphasise that the effectiveness of communication relies not solely on the content but also on the organisation, timing, and credibility of the individuals conveying the message.

While Coleman emphasises the significance of organisational readiness through the establishment of 'war rooms,' clearly defined roles, and preparation for various risk scenarios, Anthonissen advocates for the creation of a compact, agile crisis team endowed with complete authority, willing to confront even senior executives when necessary. It is important to highlight that both emphasise the central role of communicators in crisis operations. Coleman presents a model in which communication is not merely an addition to the operational response but is instead fully embedded within the decision-making frameworks. Simultaneously, Anthonissen cautions against the risks associated with omitting communicators from the initial planning phases, especially when legal advisors take control of last-minute messaging, which could lead to the organisation being muted at a pivotal time.[65]

Buama asserts that credibility, transparency, and empathy are of utmost importance, particularly in the face of uncertainty. His focus on transparency matches Coleman's advocacy for clarity and

K. Fearn-Banks, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, 5th edn (London: Routledge, 2016); **Q. Hu** and **Y. Liu**, 'Crisis Management and National Responses to COVID-19: Global Perspectives' (2022) 45(4) *Public Performance & Management Review*, 737–750.

[62] **R. S. Littlefield, D. D. Sellnow,** and **T. L. Sellnow**, *Integrated Marketing Communications in Risk and Crisis Contexts: A Culture-Centered Approach* (Washington: Lexington Books, 2021); M. Mann, S.-E. Byun, and W. B. Ginder, 'Corps' Social Media Communications During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Through the Lens of the Triple Bottom Line' (2021) 13 *Sustainability*, 9634.

[63] **A. Coleman**, *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations* (London: Kogan Page, 2020), pp. 43–45.

[64] **P. Anthonissen**, Crisis Communication: Practical PR Strategies for Reputation Management and Company Survival (London: Kogan Page, 2008), pp. 76–78.

[65] *Ibid.*, pp. 84–86.

understanding among stakeholders.[66] Moreover, Buama highlights the psychological consequences of crises, arguing that effective communication must function not only to convey information but also to provide reassurance and validate the experiences of those impacted. This idea is further supported by Coleman, who asserts that communication serves as a moral duty rooted in the management of outcomes and the recovery process.[67] These authors collectively assert that the strategy offers a framework for values-driven action, while the plan facilitates agile and credible responses that honour both operational realities and human impact. The insights presented underscore the critical importance of preparatory planning, interdepartmental alignment, and communication rooted in empathy as vital instruments for effectively managing modern crises, especially in a time characterised by the immediacy and severity of misinformation, social scrutiny, and stakeholder expectations.

In recent years, academics have introduced the concept of paracrisis, a digital-age phenomenon where an issue has the appearance and intensity of a crisis but lacks the tangible threat or consequence of a traditional crisis.[68] In contrast to traditional crises, paracrises frequently arise from online outrage, social media mistakes, or debates rooted in morals.

For example, the response to KFC's chicken shortage initially approached a paracrisis, as humorous memes and online outrage quickly grew before the actual consequences were completely grasped. Similarly, Slack's response to the criticism regarding its use of user data may be characterised as a paracrisis, requiring prompt clarification and digital engagement to prevent the escalation of the problem.[69]

Paracrises present serious threats due to their speed and emotional intensity. Uysal and Schroeder highlight that emotions like moral outrage frequently drive viral engagement and amplify reputational risk.[70] Effective management of paracrises necessitates that organisations take the initiative to "steal thunder" by proactively addressing concerns before their escalation.

1.3.2 Image Repair Theory

Image Repair (or Restoration) Theory was first proposed by William Benoit in 1995 to examine organisational responses to crises. Benoit's theory provides a framework for managing corporate

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[66] **C. A. C. Buama**, *Crisis Communication and Crisis Management* (Quezon City: Wiseman's Books Trading, 2023), p. 106.
[67] A. **Coleman**, *Crisis Communication Strategies*, pp. 88–90.
[68] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Paracrises: The Challenges Created by Publicly Managing Crisis Prevention' (2012) 38 *Public Relations Review* 408–415.
[69] *'Slack Case Study'*, *Medium* (2021), https://medium.com/empathy-for-change/slack-case-study-5833a57289d2.
[70] **N. Uysal** and **R. Schroeder,** 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorising Moral Outrage' (2023) *Journal of Public Relations Research*.

reputation in times of crisis. The theory begins with the premise that reputational threats arise when an organisation is perceived by a relevant audience to be responsible for an action that is considered offensive.[71] Importantly, Benoit stresses that perception matters more than objective truth; what counts is whether the public believes the act occurred and that the organisation is to blame. To counter such threats, Benoit identifies five overarching categories of image restoration strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Each strategy includes a variety of subtypes. For example, denial can involve either a simple rejection of the accusation or an attempt to shift the blame. The evasion of responsibility recognises the action taken while attempting to downplay the organisation's accountability. This is often achieved through justifications that include provocation, lack of control (defeasibility), accidents, or the presence of good intentions. Reducing offensiveness aims to reframe the act in a less damaging light and includes six techniques: bolstering the organisation's positive attributes, minimising the perceived harm, differentiating the act from more severe misconduct, invoking transcendence to place the act in a broader moral context, attacking the accuser's credibility, and offering compensation to those affected.[72] Corrective action, by contrast, focuses on taking tangible steps to fix the problem and prevent its recurrence. Mortification, the most ethically weighty strategy, involves openly admitting guilt and asking for forgiveness. Still, this could present legal risks and is consequently approached with caution. Benoit emphasises the importance of tailoring crisis responses to the specific needs of stakeholder groups, including investors, regulators, customers, and the public. Effective image repair requires not only strategic messaging but also consistent delivery, credible spokespersons, and timely response. Benoit's theory equips communicators with a broad rhetorical toolkit and a strategic framework, enabling organisations to effectively manage the reputational challenges that arise after a crisis.[73]

1.3.3 Theory of Persuasive Attack

William L. Benoit's Theory of Persuasive Attack provides a rhetorical framework for understanding how accusations are constructed to damage an individual's or organisation's reputation. In contrast to Image Repair Theory, which highlights strategies for responding to crises and rebuilding public image, the Theory of Persuasive Attack directs focus towards the mechanisms through which reputational harm is initially caused. Benoit suggests that a persuasive attack achieves effectiveness when it meets two criteria: first, it must convince the audience that

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[71] W. L. Benoit, 'Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication' (1997) 23(2) *Public Relations Review*, pp. 177–186.
[72] *Ibid.*
[73] *Ibid.*

the target is responsible for an undesirable act; and second, it must persuade them that the act itself is offensive or morally objectionable.[74] The foundation of a successful reputational attack is established by these two pillars: responsibility and offensiveness. In the absence of either condition, the likelihood of the attack's failure or its diminished persuasive impact increases significantly. This theory helps explain why some crises cause deeper reputational damage than others. The Volkswagen emissions scandal shows a situation where both criteria were met: the company knowingly installed defeat devices (responsibility), and the deception was linked to environmental harm and regulatory violations (offensiveness).[75] Similarly, BP faced criticism for its safety mistakes during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the resulting environmental consequences rendered the incident ethically indefensible.[76] The 2017 overbooking incident at United Airlines highlighted a case where the physical removal of a passenger was perceived as authorised by the organisation, yet ethically questionable.[77] These examples illustrate how persuasive attacks gain traction when public discourse links perceived wrongdoing to broader social values. The theory gives an understanding of the evolution of reputational narratives and explains the reasons behind the strong resonance of specific accusations among stakeholders.

1.3.4 Crisis communication functions

Crisis communication can generally serve three functions:

- instructive information, which tells people how to react to protect themselves
- adjustive information, which helps people cope with uncertainty
- internalising information, which helps protect an organisation's reputation.[78]

However, the literature has historically focused on the third function, internalising information, given the roots of crisis communication in rhetorical defence or apologia.[79]

Benoit's Image Repair Theory fits into this tradition, focusing on rhetorical strategies such as denial, shifting blame, bolstering, corrective action, and mortification to defend the organisation's

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[74] *Ibid.*

[75] **E.-K. Olsson**, 'Crisis Communication in Public Organizations: Dimensions Revisited' (2014) 22(2) *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, pp. 113–125.

[76] **R. R. Ulmer, T. L. Sellnow and M. W. Seeger**, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*, 5th edn (SAGE, Los Angeles 2022), pp. 43–45.

[77] **A. Coleman**, *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations* (Kogan Page, London 2020), pp. 71–73.

[78] **E.-K. Olsson**, 'Dimensions of Crisis Communication Revisited' (2014) 22(2) *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 114–125; **D. L. Sturges**, Communicating through Crisis: A Strategy for Organizational Survival (1994) 7(3) *Management Communication Quarterly*, pp. 297–316.

[79] **K. M. Hearit**, *Crisis Management by Apology* (Erlbaum, 2006); S. J. Holladay, in W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay (eds), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

image.[80] Coombs later adapted this into SCCT by matching communication strategies to stakeholder attribution of blame, thereby operationalising crisis type as a determinant of strategic messaging.[81]

Nonetheless, critics argue that this model reflects a sender-centric, top-down view of communication, where the organisation controls the narrative. Scholars as Heath, Frandsen & Johansen advocate a more participatory, dialogic approach, especially in complex, multi-agency crisis environments such as public health emergencies or environmental disasters.[82] This broadened understanding also links crisis communication to emergency management studies, where the focus is on information systems, inter-agency coordination, and real-time communication in multi-stakeholder settings.[83]

As digital technology progresses, scholars have observed the increasing significance of social media in both actual and paracrisis situations. Platforms such as X and Facebook serve a dual purpose: amplifying misinformation while also offering tools for transparency, dialogue, and community resilience when employed responsibly.[84]

The crisis types of classification go beyond theoretical considerations. It sets the foundation for the selection of effective communication strategies. Coombs states that stakeholders respond not only to the company's message but also to the perceived appropriateness of the message about the specific crisis.[85] A misalignment, such as using humour during a preventable disaster or showing denial in a high-responsibility situation, might cause reputational harm.

Moreover, the rise of participatory media has made the distinctions between different sorts of crises even less clear. A paracrisis can turn into a reputational danger when the public sees private problems as public scandals. Tone, timing, and being honest are even more important in a world with lots of opinions.

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[80] **W. L. Benoit**, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies* (SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 178–185.

[81] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, 3rd edn (Sage, 2007), pp. 135–140.

[82] R. L. Heath, 'Organizational Rhetoric and the Public Sphere', in Ø. Ihlen and R. L. Heath (eds), *Organizational Rhetoric* (Routledge, 2020); F. Frandsen and W. Johansen, 'Apologizing in a Globalizing World: Crisis Communication and Apologetic Ethics' (2008) 36(3) *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, pp. 200–215.

[83] **J. L. Garnett** and **A. Kouzmin**, 'Communicating throughout Katrina: Competing and Complementary Conceptual Lenses on Crisis Communication' (2007) 67(1) *Public Administration Review*, pp. 171–188; **B. K. Richardson** and **L. Byers**, 'Communication Studies and Emergency Management: Common Ground, Contributions, and Future Research Opportunities for Two Emerging Disciplines' in **D. A. McEntire** (ed.), *Disciplines, Disasters and Emergency Management: The Convergence and Divergence of Concepts, Issues and Trends from the Research Literature* (Charles C. Thomas, 2007), pp. 131–143; **W. L. Waugh Jr.** and **G. Streib**, 'Collaboration and Leadership for Effective Emergency Management' (2006) 66(1) *Public Administration Review*, pp. 131–140.

[84] **D. Yates** and **S. Paquette**, 'Emergency Knowledge Management and Social Media Technologies: A Case Study of the 2010 Haitian Earthquake' (2011) 26 *International Journal of Information Management*, pp. 6–13;
W. Macias, K. Hilyard and **V. S. Freimuth**, 'Blog Functions as Risk and Crisis Communication During Hurricane Katrina' (2009) 4 *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, pp. 1–21;
C. H. Procopio and **S. T. Procopio**, 'Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans? Internet Communication, Geographic Community, and Social Capital in Crisis' (2007) 35(1) *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, pp. 67–87.

[85] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2nd edn, Routledge 2022) 472–475.

1.4 Brand and Reputation Concepts

Understanding the notions of brand and reputation is crucial for evaluating the enduring impacts of crisis communication. In marketing literature, a brand is characterised as a collection of perceptions that stay in the minds of consumers. This includes various elements such as the name, logo, identity, values, and the promise it communicates. Aaker suggests that a brand functions as "a multidimensional assortment of functional, emotional, relational, and self-expressive benefits that collectively generate value for the customer."[86] According to Keller, brand equity is the unique influence that brand awareness has on how customers respond to advertising campaigns.[87] The value of a brand goes beyond products or services; it lies in the trust and significance that consumers attach to the brand.

Reputation, while related to brand, is a broader and more dynamic construct. It reflects the cumulative assessments made by stakeholders over time, grounded in aspects of organisational behaviour, communication, and performance. Fombrun defines reputation as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals."[88] The formation of this perspective is affected by a mix of firsthand experiences and various forms of indirect communication, such as media reports, online discussions, and suggestions from peers.

The connection between public perception, brand, and reputation is shaped by real-time feedback mechanisms, particularly in the context of the digital era. Social media, review platforms, and online communities allow consumers to express opinions publicly and 24/7. A negative incident can go viral, intensifying reputational risk and eroding trust in hours. Anthonissen notes the organisations operate in a "glasshouse" with a transparent and networked environment where no mistake goes unnoticed and every misstep is amplified.[89] The speed of judgement underscores the vulnerability of reputation during times of crisis. According to Coombs and Holladay, the damage to reputation frequently results not from the crisis itself, but rather from the way it is managed.[90] Stakeholders evaluate the appropriateness, sincerity, and emotional resonance of crisis responses. Differences between the brand's perceived values and its actual conduct during crises can result in loss of trust.

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[86] **D. A. Aaker**, *Building Strong Brands* (Free Press, New York 1996).

[87] **K. L. Keller**, *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*, 4th edn (Pearson Education, Harlow 2013).

[88] **C. J. Fombrun**, *Reputation: Realizing Value from the Corporate Image* (Harvard Business School Press, Boston 1996).

[89] **P. Anthonissen**, *Crisis Communication: Practical PR Strategies for Reputation Management and Company Survival* (Kogan Page, London 2008).

[90] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory' (2002) 16(2) *Management Communication Quarterly* 165–186.

The connection between brand promise and crisis response is essential. A brand that connects itself with principles of safety, innovation, or social justice must ensure that its crisis communication reflects and maintains these core values. Not doing so may lead to cognitive dissonance among stakeholders, as seen by the Volkswagen emissions scandal and Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 recall. In both cases, public disappointment grew due to the perceived discrepancy between the brand's identity and its response to the crisis. Crisis communication must, therefore, be in alignment with brand positioning, stakeholder expectations, and organisational values. The approach must strengthen the brand's fundamental identity, all the while addressing concerns with transparency and empathy. In this context, crises function as practical evaluations of brand integrity and present a chance to either enhance or undermine reputation based on the management of communication. is handled.

1.4.1 Branding in the Digital Era

Digital platforms have changed brand management frameworks, requiring a reevaluation of the processes involved in building, maintaining, and confronting a brand, particularly in times of crisis. In a world where engagement, speed, and transparency are vital, traditional methods of brand communication that rely on one-way mass media strategies are becoming insufficient. According to Keller and Swaminathan, the dynamics of consumer-brand relationships have transformed due to digitalisation, social media, mobile apps, and online communities.[91] An ongoing conversation between businesses and their audiences is what defines the context of digital branding. Consumers in modern marketplaces have changed from being passive recipients of brand messages to actively influencing the meaning of brands through evaluations, content production, and in-the-moment interactions.[92] Brand image becomes flexible and more vulnerable as a result of this contact. Digital platforms give brands the chance to show their individuality and mission, but they also run the risk of amplifying criticism or damaging a brand's reputation, particularly in times of crisis. Building brand positioning demands the use of social media platforms: for sharing stories, promoting projects, and creating a sense of collective identity. Influencer marketing has proven to be quite successful in providing social evidence and boosting brand reputation among particular target audiences.[93] In order to avoid any conflict between the influencer's actions and the core principles of the business, brands must handle the connections carefully, especially during periods of reputational crisis.

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[91] **K. L. Keller** and **V. Swaminathan**, *Strategic Brand Management*, 5th edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2020), ch. 7.
[92] *Ibid.*
[93] **D. Brown** and **N. Hayes**, Influencer Marketing: Who Really Influences Your Customers? (Oxford: Elsevier, 2009).

Mobile marketing greatly increases brand immediacy and visibility, enabling companies to target customers with location-based messages and context-sensitive offers. Scholars highlight that using mobile data has advantages for marketing but also has ethical obligations regarding user privacy and consent.[94] A brand's reputation, particularly during emergencies, is dependent on how effectively relevant data is managed. Digital branding evaluated consumers' mood, messaging effectiveness, and engagement patterns. But Keller and Swaminathan state that a focus on short-term indicators like clicks and shares shouldn't take priority over the long-term objective of building brand equity.[95] In contexts of crisis, the perceived authenticity and efficacy of communication are more important indicators of digital success than reach or speed alone. Branding in the digital sphere is an important part of the overall strategy and should not be seen as a singular activity. Each interaction, post, and digital statement plays a significant role in shaping stakeholder perceptions. Understanding the strategic importance of digital branding, its potential and limitations, lets organisations see crises as chances for reputational evaluation that should be handled consistently, responsibly, and carefully rather than as barriers to be overcome.

1.4.2 Importance of Corporate Reputation

Reputation is a summary of how stakeholders judge an organisation based on what it has done in the past and what they think it will do in the future. In the context of crises, these ratings don't stay the same; they change quickly based on how the company chooses to communicate. Good crisis communication does more than just protect a company's reputation in the short term; it also builds trust for long-term partnerships with stakeholders. So, the messages need to be clear, consistent, and in line with both the principles of the business and the needs of its stakeholders. A reputation based on clear moral principles and regular communication is a type of reputational capital that can help protect against the negative impacts of a crisis.[96] A few things that can affect how stakeholders view a company during a crisis: strategic preparation, clear plans and well-prepared spokespeople, and a quick, understandable response. Communication should do more than just share information; it should also show empathy, responsibility, and a willingness to take action to fix things. Stakeholders want to hear the truth and right away, and if the company doesn't do that, it could hurt its reputation in ways that are much worse than the crisis itself. As the situation changes, social listening and real-time feedback analysis can help organisations change

[94] **X. Luo, M. Andrews, Z. Fang,** and **C. W. Phang**, 'Mobile Targeting' (2013) 60(7) *Management Science* 1738–1756.
[95] **K. L. Keller** and **V. Swaminathan**, *Strategic Brand Management*, 5th edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2020), ch. 7.
[96] **K. Nuortimo**, **J. Harkonen**, and **K. Breznik**, 'Exploring Corporate Reputation and Crisis Communication' (2024) *Journal of Marketing Analytics*.

how to communicate. Furthermore, companies which support ongoing conversations with stakeholders before and after a crisis are better able to keep their legitimacy and recover more quickly. Communication, therefore, serves as a mechanism for sensemaking: to explain past events and simultaneously influence the subsequent perception of the organisation.[97] SCCT recommends matching the tone and content of crisis messages to the level of responsibility attributed to the organisation.[98] Besides this, strong companies invest in scenario planning and stakeholder engagement initiatives that build institutional readiness. A sensemaking method highlights the co-constructed character of reputational meaning, illustrating how communication influences both internal and external narratives regarding the significance of a crisis. Thus, reputation management is not only about protecting the brand; it's also about building trust and values through planned, honest, and open communication.[99]

Corporate reputation is a socially constructed and complex asset that reflects public perceptions of a company's identity, historical actions, and future intentions. People state that it is "a way of seeing a company's past actions and customers that shows how attractive the company is to all of its key stakeholders compared to other competitors."[100] Reputation is based on doing things consistently, communicating well, creating connections with stakeholders, and having symbolic features like brand identity and leadership tone. When it comes to crisis communication, reputation may protect you and hurt you at the same time. A good reputation before a crisis might help by making stakeholders more forgiving and less likely to blame the company.[101] However, the same reputation creates expectations: if the crisis response is different from the organisation's values, the backlash can be intensified. Research shows that reputation is highly sensitive to the process of crisis communication, not just the content. Timely, transparent, and empathetic communication is often the key determinant of whether stakeholders perceive the organisation as trustworthy or negligent.[102] Contemporary crisis communication theories recognise that stakeholders evaluate organisations not just based on outcomes but also on communicative conduct. This includes being clear, seeming honest, being consistent, and making sure that what you say and do match up.[103] During crises, communication has three main purposes: instructing (giving people knowledge that

[97] *Ibid.*
[98] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken 2022) 59–63.
[99] **K. Nuortimo**, **J. Harkonen**, and **K. Breznik**, 'Exploring Corporate Reputation and Crisis Communication' (2024) *Journal of Marketing Analytics*.
[100] C. J. Fombrun, *Reputation: Realizing Value from the Corporate Image* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996).
[101] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Unpacking the Halo Effect: Reputation and Crisis Management' (2006) 10(2) *Journal of Communication Management* 123–137.
[102] **P. Anthonissen**, *Crisis Communication: Practical PR Strategies for Reputation Management and Company Survival* (Kogan Page, 2008).
[103] **E.-K. Olsson**, 'Crisis Communication in Public Organisations: Dimensions of Crisis Communication Revisited' (2014) 22(2) *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 113–125.

could save their lives or keep them safe), adjusting (helping stakeholders deal with their emotions), and internalising (keeping or repairing the organisation's image).[104] Values like honesty, duty, quickness, and care are closely linked to these communication roles.[105] The digitalisation has also sped up and changed the way reputations work. In the past, press releases were used to control the news. Now, user-generated content, influencers, and news cycles that run all the time shape the news in real time. One wrong message might go viral and cause a storm in your reputation. The BP Deepwater Horizon disaster was not only bad for the environment; it also hurt the company's reputation since its response was slow, too technical, and not compassionate, and it was widely shared and criticised on emerging digital channels.[106] Reputation should be seen as a valuable asset for the organisation that may be built up over time but lost quickly in times of crisis. Thus, communication strategies must be planned considering stakeholder expectations and executed with precision and credibility.[107] Reputation management during a crisis is not just about what is said, but also how, when, and by whom it is said.[108]

1.4.3 Importance of Consistency between Brand Promise and Crisis Response

Maintaining trust, reputation, and brand equity requires consistency between a business's promise and its crisis reaction. Brand promises transmit an organisation's values, expectations, and experiences to stakeholders. Stakeholders evaluate whether the organisation follows its values and identity in times of crisis. Research reveals that how an organisation handles a crisis affects stakeholders more than the crisis itself. When a company's answer doesn't match its brand promise, it can disappoint customers, damage its reputation, and lose trust. An open corporation that hides essential facts during a crisis may be seen as hypocritical and suffer additional scrutiny and public outrage.[109] SCCT highlights the necessity to adjust tone, messaging, and timing based on the situation and the organisation's responsibility.[110] The theory underscores that effective crisis responses are those that are perceived as authentic and congruent with the brand's established image. Thus, consistency is not merely about using the right words; it requires alignment between

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[104] **D. L. Sturges**, 'Communicating through Crisis: A Strategy for Organizational Survival' (1994) 38(2) *Management Communication Quarterly* 297–316.

[105] **K. Nuortimo, J. Harkonen** and **K. Breznik**, 'Exploring Corporate Reputation and Crisis Communication' (2024) 32(1) *Journal of Marketing Communications* 1–18.

[106] **R. R. Ulmer, T. L. Sellnow** and **M. W. Seeger**, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity* (5th edn, Sage, 2022).

[107] **A. Coleman**, *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations* (Kogan Page, 2020).

[108] **C. A. C. Buama**, *Crisis Communication and Crisis Management* (Rex Book Store, 2021).

[109] P. Anthonissen, *Crisis Communication: Practical PR Strategies for Reputation Management and Company Survival* (London: Kogan Page, 2008), pp. 18–21.

[110] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), pp. 59–71.

communicative behaviour and organisational values.[111] Brand misalignment can worsen reputational crises, for example, Volkswagen's emissions scandal and United Airlines' passenger incident. Both organisations were criticised for the occurrences and for contradicting their corporate identities, Volkswagen's sustainability and innovation and United's customer service.[112] Stakeholders feel cheated when the brand promise is broken, worsening reputational and financial damage. Consistent brand-based responses may strengthen reputation even in difficult times. Empathetic and values-based brands are more likely to retain stakeholder loyalty, according to research.[113] This is important in the digital age because stakeholder evaluation is immediate and public. And crisis's reputational impact depends on the response's emotional tone and transparency.[114] Crisis communication should be seen as an extension of the brand's ethical and relational responsibilities, not a PR task. Consistency ensures stakeholders maintain brand identity throughout disruption. It builds trust, responsibility, and the moral contract between a firm and its public.[115] Finally, crises are not just threats but also reputational tests; organisations that respond with brand-aligned strategies can build trust and resilience.[116]

1.5 Crisis Response Strategies

Choosing the right crisis response strategy is a key part of crisis management. Beyond mitigating immediate harm, such strategies influence public perceptions, restore trust, and safeguard long-term reputational capital. Effective communication is not only essential for responding to the facts of a crisis but also for reflecting the organisation's values, the public's emotional state, and the specific nature of the crisis. Thus, strategic answers must include ethical, relational, operational, and legal factors. Researchers have classified crisis reaction tactics into five main categories: nonexistence, detachment, ingratiation, mortification, and pain. This classification, originally proposed by Coombs, provides a framework to align messaging with stakeholder expectations and

[111] **W. T. Coombs,** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory' (2002) 16(2) *Management Communication Quarterly*, pp. 165–186.

[112] A. Nuortimo et al., 'Exploring Corporate Reputation and Crisis Communication' (2024) *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (in press).

[113] **R. R. Ulmer, T. L. Sellnow,** and **M. W. Seeger,** *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*, 5th edn (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2022), pp. 74–77.

[114] **A. Coleman,** *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations* (London: Kogan Page, 2020), pp. 41–46.

[115] **C. J. Fombrun**, *Reputation: Realizing Value from the Corporate Image* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), pp. 72–76.

[116] **D. A. Aaker**, *Building Strong Brands* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 209–214.

situational demands.[117] The table below lists the categories and their main sub-strategies and shows how to apply crisis communication theory in diverse situations.

Strategy Category	Main Sub-Strategies	Application in Crisis Communication
1. Nonexistence	· Denial · Clarification · Attack · Intimidation	Used in victim crises where the organisation is falsely accused or uninvolved. Aims to reject or discredit the existence of a crisis.
2. Distance	· Excuse (e.g., denial of intent or volition) · Justification (e.g., minimising harm, blaming victim)	Applied in accidental crises. Acknowledges the event but minimises organisational responsibility or intent.
3. Ingratiation	· Bolstering · Transcendence · Praising others	Used to supplement other strategies. Aims to remind stakeholders of past good behaviour, values, or associations to build goodwill.
4. Mortification	· Remediation · Repentance · Rectification	Essential for preventable crises where the organisation is clearly at fault. Involves admitting fault and taking corrective action.
5. Suffering	· Declaring the organisation as a victim	May be used in victim crises to elicit sympathy (e.g., sabotage or natural disaster). Should not be used if the organisation is culpable.

Table 1: Typology of Crisis Response Strategies. Adapted from Corporate Reputation Review[118]

These strategy types vary in tone, content, and perceived authenticity. Nonexistence strategies, including denial and clarification, are typically reserved for victim crises where the organisation is not at fault. They aim to challenge the legitimacy of the crisis claim or redirect attention. However, when clear evidence of wrongdoing exists, denial can provoke backlash and intensify scrutiny.[119] In contrast, distance strategies acknowledge the crisis but attempt to minimise perceived organisational responsibility. This might include blaming external circumstances or arguing that the act was accidental or unintentional. These are often deployed in accidental crises, where stakeholders may still expect explanation and modest contrition.[120]

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[117] **Corporate Reputation Review**, 'Managing a Corporate Crisis: Dealing with the Issues' (2007) 10(3) *Corporate Reputation Review* 163–176.
[118] *Ibid.*
[119] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 144–150.
[120] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis Response Strategies' (1995) 8(4) *Management Communication Quarterly* 447–476.

Ingratiation strategies, including bolstering or praising external stakeholders, aim to develop goodwill and mitigate reputational damage. These reputationally conservative methods perform better with more substantive actions.[121] Mortification strategies, such as public apology, rectification, or compensation, are necessary in preventable crises, where the organisation is culpable. They signal moral accountability and are critical when trust has been significantly eroded.[122] The suffering strategy positions the organisation as a secondary victim, which may be appropriate in crises triggered by external sabotage, misinformation, or uncontrollable disasters.[123] Importantly, the effectiveness of these responses depends not only on choosing the appropriate type but also on the alignment with stakeholder expectations and the brand's pre-existing image. Research indicates that reactions viewed as misaligned with a company's values or insensitive to stakeholder sentiments can significantly exacerbate harm.[124] The case of United Airlines' overbooking incident clearly illustrated a disconnect between the company's defensive initial response and its professed dedication to customer care.[125] In contrast, KFC's witty and prompt reaction to its chicken shortage in the United Kingdom illustrated that genuine communication and consistency with brand identity can enhance reputation, even in the face of operational failures.[126] The usage of rhetorical techniques significantly influences the formation of perceptions. As organisations are increasingly perceived as moral entities, stakeholders evaluate not only the content of communication but also how it is conveyed. The emotional tone, the credibility of the spokesperson, and the level of transparency all contribute to the perceived legitimacy of the response.[127] Crisis response strategies should not be simplified to mere mechanical templates; rather, they ought to be understood as rhetorical and ethical decisions that are situated within wider social and digital contexts.

[121] **A. Coleman**, *Crisis Communication Strategies: Prepare, Respond and Recover Effectively in Unpredictable and Urgent Situations* (Kogan Page, 2020), pp. 69–73.
[122] **W. L. Benoit**, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies*, 2nd edn (SUNY Press, 2015), pp. 23–28.
[123] **C. A. C. Buama**, *Crisis Communication and Crisis Management* (Wisdom Words Publishing House, 2023), pp. 34–37.
[124] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 182.
[125] **R. R. Ulmer, T. L. Sellnow** and **M. W. Seeger**, *Effective Crisis Communication*, 5th edn (SAGE Publications, 2022), p. 45.
[126] **A. Coleman**, *Crisis Communication Strategies* (n 4), pp. 91–94.
[127] **C. A. C. Buama** (n 6), pp. 62–65.

Chapter 2

2.1 Evolution of Crisis Communication as a Discipline

The academic and practical development of crisis communication as a discipline has experienced a significant transformation over the past forty years, evolving from a reactive, operations-focused practice to a strategic, interdisciplinary, and ethically grounded function. Early studies treated crises primarily as disruptive anomalies that could be managed through structured planning and technical preparedness. Today, however, crisis communication is widely recognised as a strategic domain of organisational legitimacy, narrative framing, and stakeholder engagement.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to crisis theory came from Steven Fink, whose four-stage model of crisis, prodromal, acute, chronic, and resolution, provided a temporal structure for understanding crisis dynamics. Fink framed crises as living systems that could be monitored and potentially averted if warning signals (prodromes) were recognised early enough.[128] His work represented a shift from reactive measures in times of crisis to a more structured approach that emphasises anticipation and planning. This evolution led to the new understanding of crisis as a dynamic lifecycle, rather than merely a sudden or isolated occurrence.

Building on this concept, Ian Mitroff presented an ethical viewpoint, challenging organisations for their excessive dependence on technological solutions while overlooking human, cultural, and symbolic elements. In his seminal work Crisis Management, Mitroff categorised crises into five types: natural disasters, technological accidents, confrontational acts, malevolence, and organisational misdeeds, and asserted that most crises are internally generated through flawed systems, poor decision-making, or ethical lapses.[129] He advocated for integrated crisis readiness, emphasising that preparedness must include ethical introspection, organisational learning, and scenario-based planning.

As the field matured, crisis communication shifted from linear response models to interactive and interpretive frameworks, particularly with the rise of media-driven and stakeholder-centric crises. Scholars Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer advocated for this transformation, that crisis communication should be seen as a social and rhetorical process that generates meaning, trust, and legitimacy during periods of uncertainty.[130] Their work on narrative, legitimacy, and organisational renewal

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[128] **S. Fink**, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable* (New York: AMACOM, 1986).

[129] **I. I. Mitroff**, *Crisis Management: A Diagnostic Guide for Improving Your Organization's Crisis-Preparedness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

[130] **M. W. Seeger, T. L. Sellnow** and **R. R. Ulmer**, *Narrative, Crisis, and Legitimacy: Communication Strategies for Public Relations* (Westport: Praeger, 2005).

posited that how a crisis is communicated often matters more than what happened. In this view, storytelling, symbolic alignment, and audience engagement became central to effective crisis resolution. The concept of renewal proposed by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger stands out as a particularly influential development. The objective of defensive measures is to mitigate reputational harm. In contrast, renewal theories regard crises as chances for companies to demonstrate their values, restore trust, and potentially emerge more resilient than before the crisis.[131] This perspective reorients crisis communication away from mere damage control, instead positioning it as a transformative leadership function rooted in transparency, learning, and ethical consistency.

At the same time, other scholars expanded the field's theoretical foundations by drawing from systems theory, organisational communication, and risk perception research. Crises came to be understood not only as technical failures but also as failures of meaning, often shaped by gaps between public expectations and organisational behaviour. Seeger notices that "crisis communication involves the construction of shared meaning through symbolic processes".[132] As a result, successful crisis management relies not only on operational skills but also on the ability to communicate effectively, an understanding of cultural specifics, and emotional intelligence.

Digital media made this change happen faster by adding new factors like speed, visibility, and multiple voices. Ulmer et al. noted that the emergence of social platforms has transformed communication from a traditional top-down broadcasting model to a dynamic, real-time interaction involving highly empowered stakeholders.[133] This environment has rendered traditional public relations tools insufficient, necessitating new approaches that are immediate, authentic, and participatory.

Today, crisis communication, which stands at the intersection of risk, reputation, ethics, and technology, requires a balance between strategic messaging and moral responsibility, between protecting the organisation and honouring the needs of those affected. Foundational theorists such as Fink and Mitroff provided the structural basis for crisis thinking, while Seeger, Ulmer, and Sellnow reconceptualised the field in relational and communicative terms. Their collective work underscores that modern crisis communication is not simply about managing information but about navigating public perception, constructing trust, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the organisation itself.

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[131] **R. R. Ulmer, T. L. Sellnow** and **M. W. Seeger**, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*, 1st edn (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007).

[132] **M. W. Seeger**, 'Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process' (2006) 34(3) *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 232–244.

[133] **R. R. Ulmer, T. L. Sellnow** and **M. W. Seeger**, *Effective Crisis Communication* (n 4) 34.

In parallel with these theoretical developments, the digitalisation of crisis communication has introduced new models for interacting with affected publics. Chester Alexis C. Buama highlights the strategic role of the organisation's website in times of crisis, describing it as a multifunctional platform for real-time communication, emotional support, clarification, and transparency. His framework proposes that crisis websites should include dedicated segments for FAQs, corrections to misinformation, multilingual resources, and even expert-led responses to children's questions. This approach reflects a shift from one-way broadcasting to participatory support, wherein the digital interface becomes a site of engagement and care, not just information transfer.[134]

Buama further argues that web communication must be tailored to the needs of highly vulnerable users, such as families in mourning, people with disabilities, or non-native language speakers. Each content area, whether legal, psychological, or logistical, must be clear, current, and emotionally sensitive. The website must also be synchronised with other communication channels such as helplines, social media, and physical service centres, ensuring consistency of tone and facts across platforms. As Buama notes, effective crisis websites do not merely inform; they restore a sense of agency to people in shock, grief, or uncertainty.[135] His framework represents a fundamental connection between traditional theory and the digital practices demanded in today's complex media environment.

2.1.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Its Development

Coomb's Situational Crisis Communication Theory is one of the most comprehensive and widely adopted models in crisis communication scholarship. The theory aims to align crisis response strategies with stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility, thereby mitigating reputational harm and restoring organisational legitimacy. While earlier models tended to view crisis response as a standardised or reactive function, SCCT introduced a predictive and prescriptive framework that combined attribution theory with a taxonomy of response strategies.

In 1995, Coombs' foundational work introduced a set of guidelines for selecting the "appropriate" response strategy depending on situational variables such as crisis type, organisational reputation, and relationship history. In his early formulation, Coombs categorised crises into three clusters: victim (e.g., natural disasters), accidental (e.g., technical errors), and preventable (e.g.,

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[134] **C. A. C. Buama**, *Crisis Communication and Crisis Management* (Quezon City: Brilliant Creations Publishing, 2021), 136–142.

[135] *Ibid.*

organisational misdeeds), with each demanding a tailored communicative posture.[136] These clusters were later enriched with the notion of intensifying factors, notably past crisis history and unfavourable prior reputation, which exacerbate perceived responsibility and thus heighten the need for accommodative responses.[137]

SCCT has been widely validated, with Coomb's 2004 article demonstrating that crisis history and prior reputation moderate the relationship between crisis type and reputational threat. He showed that when an institution with a bad past goes through a crisis that isn't serious (like a technical fault), stakeholders nevertheless blame the organisation a lot, which means that a stronger strategic reaction is needed.[138] These observations led to the 2007 and 2010 editions of Coombs' Ongoing Crisis Communication and The Handbook of Crisis Communication, which included a wider range of psychological, managerial, and rhetorical factors to SCCT's framework.[139]

SCCT evolved to include the changing nature of digital communication in its most recent form. Social media sites make the voices of stakeholders louder and speed up the process of reputational damage. Coombs now emphasises not only strategy selection but also response timing, tone, and channel credibility. He also draws attention to the necessity of multi-platform coherence, as inconsistent narratives across channels can erode trust and increase blame attribution.[140] The taxonomy of response strategies has been refined to include denial, diminish, and rebuild approaches: each matched to crisis type, perceived responsibility, and emotional impact. Domschat et al. highlight the importance of matching communication strategy to crisis typology, especially in value-related crises, where denial is often less effective than emotional reinforcement or corrective action.[141]

SCCT and related research emphasise that communication should aim to reduce attribution by protecting stakeholders from reputational, psychological, social, and financial threats. In high-responsibility contexts such as preventable crises, ethical response strategies that combine transparency with concern for public safety, what Sturges termed "adjusting" and "instructing"

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[136] **W. T. Coombs,** *Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis Response Strategies* (*Management Communication Quarterly*, 8.4, 1995), pp. 447–476.

[137] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*, 5th edn (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2021).

[138] **W. T. Coombs**, Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Journal of Business Communication, 41.3, 2004), pp. 265–289.

[139] **W. T. Coombs (ed.),** *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 1st edn (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[140] **W. T. Coombs (ed.),** *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

[141] **L. Domschat, M. Stephens,** and **H. Saeed**, 'Communication to Protect Brand Image During a Terrorism Crisis: Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 31.2 (2023), 249–261.

information, have been shown to mitigate long-term damage.[142] Furthermore, Coombs and Holladay observe that sympathy and compensation can sometimes outperform outright apologies, especially in high-emotion scenarios where stakeholders seek reassurance and action more than verbal contrition.[143]

Nonetheless, SCCT has been critiqued for its cognitive orientation, particularly its reliance on attribution as the primary lens for understanding stakeholder judgment. Coombs and Tachkova expand SCCT's scope by integrating affective dimensions, especially moral outrage, as a third axis in the appraisal process. They argue that crises involving injustice, discrimination, or human rights violations provoke stakeholder reactions that are primarily emotional rather than attributional, requiring a different set of communicative strategies focused on empathy, structural reform, and long-term value alignment.[144]

This critique is consistent with a growing strand of literature that situates SCCT within the broader ecosystem of crisis theories. Bundy et al. characterise SCCT as reactive and tactical, in contrast to resilience-based models, which view crisis as a strategic learning opportunity. Where SCCT instructs on how to repair an image after a crisis, resilience frameworks encourage the anticipation of crisis as a systemic possibility embedded within culture, leadership, and stakeholder relationships.[145] Some researchers advocate for a combination of both approaches, contending for an integrated model that encompasses both real-time strategic guidance and long-term adaptive capacity. The digital dimension of SCCT has attracted considerable empirical interest. Coombs and Holladay stress that social media's interactivity and visibility disrupt traditional sender–receiver communication flows. Strategies like "stealing thunder," which means giving bad news before it happens, have been shown to work in Western settings to keep trust, but Zhou and Shin say that these strategies may not work in cultures that are more collectivist or high context.[146] So, transparency needs to be adjusted for each culture.

Claeys and Coombs provide further insights by analysing post-crisis engagement and recovery. They suggest that instead of focusing on short-term impression control, organisations should

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[142] **D. L. Sturges**, *Communicating Through Crisis: A Strategy for Organizational Survival (Management Communication Quarterly,* 7.3, 1994), pp. 297–316.

[143] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16.2 (2002), 165–186.
W. T. Coombs and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Comparing Apology to Equivalent Crisis Response Strategies: Clarifying Apology's Role and Value in Crisis Communication', *Public Relations Review*, 34.3 (2008), 252–257

[144] **W. T. Coombs and E. R. Tachkova,** *How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorizing Around Moral Outrage (Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36.1, 2024), pp. 6–22.

[145] **J. Bundy, M. D. Pfarrer, C. E. Short and W. T. Coombs**, *Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development (Journal of Management*, 43.6, 2017), pp. 1661–1692.

[146] **L. Zhou and J.-H. Shin**, *Does Stealing Thunder Always Work? A Content Analysis of Crisis Communication Practice Under Different Cultural Settings (Public Relations Review*, 43.6, 2017), pp. 1036–1047.

focus on long-term story restoration, including all stakeholders, and learning from mistakes. They believe that post-crisis stages should be seen not just as recovery but as strategic reinvention, where SCCT meets reputation management, brand congruence, and restoring legitimacy.[147]

Situational Crisis Communication Theory aims to minimise reputational harm and maintain stakeholder trust during and after a crisis. Beyond reputation management, the theory emphasises a core ethical obligation: the organisation must first protect crisis victims' physical and psychological well-being. Coombs specifies the first two communication layers that serve this ethical necessity. First, crisis managers are advised to deliver instructing information, which provides stakeholders with the knowledge they need to protect themselves from immediate physical harm. Safety warnings, evacuation advice, and product recalls are examples. Second, adjusting information must be issued to help affected parties cope emotionally, usually through empathetic statements, explanations of the crisis circumstances, or reassurances about forthcoming action.[148] Only after these needs are met should communicators begin to focus on the organisation's reputation. The SCCT framework guides this process through a structured, three-step approach, each stage grounded in attribution theory and refined through empirical validation.

The first step is to analyse the type of crisis the organisation is facing. SCCT divides crises into three clusters based on responsibility. Natural disasters, false rumours, and external sabotage target the organisation. Here, responsibility is low, and organisations are generally not expected to take the blame. The second group, the accidental cluster, involves unintentional failures such as technical problems, logistical issues, or human mistakes. Moderate organisational responsibility is attached to these situations. Finally, the preventable cluster includes crises caused by mismanagement, inattention, or unethical practices. In such cases, stakeholders often attribute high responsibility to the organisation and thus expect more substantive and reparative responses.[149]

The second stage of the process requires crisis managers to evaluate if intensifying factors are present. These include an organisation's crisis history and reputation, particularly if there is a perception of continuous mismanagement or public mistrust. When either variable is negative, stakeholders are more inclined to assign blame, even in low- or moderate-severity scenarios. A minor product fault could become a significant reputational crisis if the company has a history of

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[147] **A.-S. Claeys and W. T. Coombs**, *Organisational Crisis Communication: A Review and Research Agenda* (*Current Opinion in Psychology*, 36, 2020), pp. 31–35.

[148] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), 141–148.

[149] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10.3 (2007), 163–176.

safety infractions. Sometimes, crises are interpreted in the context of organisational behaviour, leading to increased stakeholder outrage and greater responses.[150]

Once the crisis type has been identified and the contextual factors evaluated, SCCT goes to its third step: the strategic selection of the most suitable response. The idea identifies three reaction categories based on responsibility. In victim cluster crises, denial techniques entail denying a crisis or shifting blame to an external agency, often when the organisation has been wrongly accused or assaulted. Diminish tactics, better for unintentional crises, diminish the organisation's responsibility or decrease harm by justifying or correcting. Finally, high-responsibility situations like preventable crises require rebuilding plans. Direct actions like public apologies, compensation, and structural reforms are used to restore trust.[151]

Practically, these strategic categories are not exclusive. Organisations can support their main strategy by bolstering techniques. These may involve thanking stakeholders, reminding the public of the company's good deeds, or harmonising with fundamental principles. When done authentically, such efforts boost the organisation's credibility and humanise its response.

2.1.2 Image Repair Theory

William L. Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), developed in the late 1990s, remains a cornerstone of rhetorical approaches to crisis communication. While SCCT offers a situational and attribution-based framework for choosing appropriate response strategies, IRT is concerned with the discursive and rhetorical mechanisms through which organisations and individuals attempt to restore damaged reputations. Rooted in classical rhetoric, sociological insights, and apologia studies, IRT proposes that crises are communicative challenges to an actor's character, credibility, and legitimacy, which must be countered through strategic message construction aimed at repairing image.[152]

IRT is grounded in two fundamental assumptions: first, that maintaining a favourable public image is a central goal of communication; and second, that a threat to that image arises when an organisation or individual is perceived as responsible for an offensive act.[153] Whereas normative models prescribe ideal behaviour, IRT focuses on message typology, symbolic strategy, and reputation management after the crisis events, making it highly practical for crisis communicators.

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[150] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41.3 (2004), 265–289.

[151] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 1st edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 39–42.

[152] **W. L. Benoit**, 'Image Repair in Crisis Communication', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2021.

[153] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

Benoit's framework outlines five categories of image repair strategies, each with specific sub-strategies:[154]

1. Denial

   - Simple denial: Asserting the act did not occur.

   - Shift the blame: Attributing responsibility to another party.

2. Evasion of Responsibility

   - Provocation: Claiming the act was a response to another's actions.

   - Defeasibility: Citing lack of information or control.

   - Accident: Claiming the event was unintended.

   - Good intentions: Emphasising benevolent motives.

3. Reducing Offensiveness

   - Bolstering: Highlighting positive aspects.

   - Minimisation: Downplaying the severity of the act.

   - Differentiation: Distinguishing the act from more serious offences.

   - Transcendence: Placing the act in a broader, favourable context.

   - Attacking the accuser: Undermining the credibility of critics.

   - Compensation: Offering restitution to victims.

4. Corrective Action

   - Promising to repair the harm or prevent its recurrence.

5. Mortification

   - Accepting responsibility and issuing a sincere apology.

These strategies may be used individually or in combination, but the sequencing and perceived sincerity of delivery are crucial to effectiveness.[155] Research warns against combining incompatible strategies, such as denial and mortification, which may appear insincere or manipulative.[156]

IRT has been extensively applied across sectors, including politics, sport, business, and entertainment. In a foundational study, Brinson and Benoit analysed Texaco's racial discrimination scandal and demonstrated that its initial reliance on denial and bolstering failed due to damning audio evidence. Reputation recovery began only after Texaco adopted mortification and corrective

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[154] **W. L. Benoit**, 'Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication', *Public Relations Review*, 23.2 (1997), 177–186.
[155] *Ibid.*
[156] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

action.[157] Similarly, Benoit and Pang examined Tiger Woods' crisis response following his personal scandal, concluding that although his verbal strategies were rhetorically appropriate, delayed delivery and excessive mediation weakened their impact.[158]

A well-documented corporate case is the Firestone tyre crisis. Bridgestone-Firestone's strategy relied on blame-shifting toward Ford, inconsistent use of corrective action, and reliance on celebrity endorsements. This combination proved ineffective and confused stakeholders, as rhetorical efforts lacked coherence and transparency.[159] Scholars concluded that the mix of bolstering, denial, and mortification diluted the message's credibility.[160]

Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 battery crisis offers another instructive case. Initial delays in acknowledging the issue led to public backlash. When the company finally embraced mortification and corrective action, through a global recall and independent investigation, it began regaining trust. This case demonstrates the importance of timing and consistency in the application of IRT strategies.[161]

Talking about the strengths of IRT, it lies in its structured yet flexible typology. The strategy categories are applicable across a wide range of crisis contexts, and their rhetorical foundation makes it especially useful for analysing how language, tone, and narrative framing affect stakeholder reactions.[162] It enables organisations to construct persuasive messages based on perceived audience expectations rather than relying on generic or formulaic templates.

Whereas SCCT focuses on determining the most appropriate strategy based on the nature of the crisis, IRT emphasises the actual delivery and form of the message. Sub-strategies like transcendence and differentiation, for example, allow crisis communicators to reframe ethical boundaries or shift the focus to shared values. This rhetorical richness allows for greater adaptability in complex or ambiguous crises.

Despite its versatility, IRT faces several critiques. First, it lacks the situational nuance and empirical grounding offered by SCCT. It does not explicitly incorporate contextual variables such as prior reputation, crisis history, or stakeholder vulnerability, reducing its predictive strength.[163] Second,

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[157] **S. Brinson** and **W. L. Benoit**, 'The Tarnished Star: Restoring Texaco's Damaged Public Image', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 12.4 (1999), 483–510.

[158] **W. L. Benoit** and **A. Pang**, 'Crisis Communication and Image Repair Discourse', in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, ed. by **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay** (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 244–261.

[159] **J. R. Blaney**, **W. L. Benoit** and **L. M. Brazeal**, 'Blowout!: Firestone's Image Restoration Campaign', *Public Relations Review*, 28.4 (2002), 379–392.

[160] *Ibid.*, p. 390.

[161] **M. Xia**, 'Consumer Response and Corporate Crisis Communication Strategies in Brand Crisis Events: A Case Study of Samsung Galaxy Note 7', *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 49 (2025), 33–34.

[162] **Benoit**, 'Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication', pp. 179–180.

[163] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41.3 (2004), 265–289.

IRT gives insufficient attention to the emotional and ethical dimensions of crisis communication. While mortification suggests remorse, it may be used as a tactical device rather than a sincere ethical stance. For example, Volkswagen's scripted apologies during the emissions scandal were rejected by stakeholders due to the mismatch between verbal contrition and corporate behaviour. Scholars like Brown, McDonald, and Tanner argue that mortification must be accompanied by genuine behavioural change to be effective.[164]

Furthermore, recent scholarship has demonstrated that traditional IRT categories may fall short in crises provoking moral outrage. Scholars argue that emotionally charged responses from stakeholders, such as anger or betrayal, require more than symbolic or rational defences. Their triadic appraisal model introduces moral outrage as a unique crisis variable, demanding authentic emotional engagement and ethical responsibility in repair messaging.[165]

Cultural context also plays a role. Proactive self-disclosure strategies such as "stealing thunder" are often effective in enhancing credibility.[166] However, in collectivist cultures such as those in East Asia, silence and restraint may be perceived as more appropriate responses. Zhou and Shin's comparative analysis revealed that IRT strategies must be culturally adjusted to maintain relevance and effectiveness across diverse settings.[167]

Lastly, inappropriate or inconsistent combinations of strategies can lead to confusion or scepticism. As seen in the Firestone case, blending apology with blame-shifting undermines credibility and diminishes stakeholder trust.[168]

To address these limitations, scholars have proposed integrating IRT with complementary frameworks such as SCCT or the Contingency Theory of Accommodation. SCCT offers a typology based on attribution of responsibility, victim, accidental, or preventable, while IRT contributes rhetorical and symbolic guidance on how the chosen strategy should be delivered.[169] For instance, SCCT might recommend an apology for a preventable crisis, while IRT advises how to construct that apology persuasively, emotionally, and ethically.[170]

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[164] **M. R. Brown**, **M. A. McDonald**, and **J. F. Tanner**, 'Repenting in the Spotlight: Strategic Apologies in Crisis Management', *Business Horizons*, 53.2 (2010), 113–121.

[165] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorizing Around Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36.1 (2024), 6–22.

[166] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31.3 (2005), 425–433.

[167] **L. Zhou** and **J. H. Shin**, 'Does Stealing Thunder Always Work? A Content Analysis of Crisis Communication Practice under Different Cultural Settings', *Public Relations Review*, 43.6 (2017), 1036–1047.

[168] **Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal**, 'Blowout!', pp. 388–390.

[169] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook** and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Public Relations Review*, 25.2 (1999), 171–197.

[170] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), 141–148.

2.1.3 Theory of Persuasive Attack

While Image Repair Theory emphasises the communicative tools accessible to individuals facing reputational threats, it is equally crucial to comprehend the mechanisms through which reputational harm is deliberately generated. William L. Benoit's Theory of Persuasive Attack provides a significant opposition to repair-oriented approaches by examining the reasons and methods through which persons or organisations become subjects of public criticism. The purpose of a persuasive attack is to hurt someone's reputation by blaming them for something bad they did and making that conduct seem even worse than it is.[171] The attacker changes the story in the public eye, putting the responsibility for responding on the person or organisation who was accused.

This notion has become more important in the digital age, since media figures, influencers, and the public have a lot of ability to start, shape, and spread reputational problems. In contrast to conventional top-down allegations like litigation or investigative journalism, contemporary persuasive attacks frequently manifest as networked and decentralised phenomena, arising from viral indignation, hashtag activism, and digitally mobilised campaigns. Coombs and Holladay emphasise that social media facilitates swift "meaning making" among diverse publics, frequently surpassing the crisis manager's capacity to formulate or regulate response narratives.[172] This dynamic makes crises less predictable and more fluid, as the attack itself changes with each sharing, post, or meme.

The mechanisms of persuasive attack increasingly depend on moral framing. Entman says that moral framing makes an event seem not only wrong but also ethically unacceptable.[173] In modern crisis contexts, the offensiveness of an act might not be rooted in its legality or objective harm, but in its symbolic meaning, especially when connected to broader systemic issues such as racism, inequality, environmental degradation, or abuse of power. When an organisation's actions or speech are seen as a moral transgression, it can cause "moral outrage-based crises," where the emotions of stakeholders cause the crisis to get worse faster than logical reasoning.[174]

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[171] **W. L. Benoit**, *Persuasive Messages: The Process of Influence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 181–197.

[172] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Crisis Communication in a Social Media World: Evolution of Reputation Threats and Response Strategies', in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn, ed. by **W. T. Coombs** (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), pp. 121–134.

[173] **R. M. Entman**, Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 5–12.

[174] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorizing Around Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36.1 (2024), pp. 6–22.

Such dynamics expose the limitations of both SCCT and IRT. SCCT provides strategic alignment between stakeholder attribution and response type; yet it frequently neglects the affective and symbolic power of a persuasive attack. Similarly, IRT offers a set of rhetorical responses but is reactive by design and lacks tools for anticipating or pre-empting morally charged escalation. These differences make what may be called a rhetorical imbalance, where attackers set the pace of the story and organisations try to respond quickly while staying within strict reputational limits.

There are many examples of persuasive attacks. When Dolce & Gabbana put out a controversial ad showing a Chinese model eating pizza with chopsticks, moral discourse about cultural insensitivity circulated quickly on Chinese social media.[175] The company's first defensive messages didn't work to offset the symbolic offensiveness, and they only tried to apologise after people throughout the world were angry.[176] Another important example is the 2017 United Airlines incident in which a passenger was removed. In this case, amateur video footage sparked outrage.[177] Though the airline initially relied on SCCT-style justification, the framing of the event as a violation of dignity and customer rights rendered strategic denial ineffective.

The logic of a persuasive attack meets the cancel culture, where stakeholders demand punishing and transformative results rather than explanations or apologies. In such situations, the public wants to morally punish the actor and demand institutional accountability, not "understand" the occurrence. Therefore, communicators don't deal with a crisis event alone but with a larger socio-symbolic struggle, often caught in identity politics, historical complaints, or community traumas. The rise of such value-driven and digitally distributed attack campaigns presents three significant challenges for crisis communication theory. First, it collapses the distinction between private and public actors; ordinary individuals, fan communities, or advocacy groups can now act as reputational gatekeepers. Second, it renders the timing and scope of response far more volatile; organisations may be forced to respond within hours or risk irreversible narrative loss. Third, it demands a shift from transactional reputation management to participatory legitimacy-building, wherein organisations actively engage the public in dialogue, restitution, and shared narrative construction.

To address these challenges, future integration of SCCT and IRT with the logic of persuasive attack may require a hybrid model, one that includes tools for early warning signals, symbolic

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[175] A. Cheng, 'Dolce & Gabbana Ad With Chopsticks Provokes Public Outrage In China', *NPR*, 1 December 2018 https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/12/01/671891818/dolce-gabbana-ad-with-chopsticks-provokes-public-outrage-in-china.

[176] **N. Zhou** and **J. Zhang**, 'Moral Framing and Corporate Crisis in the Digital Age: A Case Study of Dolce & Gabbana's Advertising Failure in China', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 14.4 (2020), pp. 287–304.

[177] BBC News, 'United Airlines Passenger Is Dragged from Overbooked Flight', *BBC News*, 11 April 2017 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39554421.

vulnerability audits, and the use of anticipatory messaging strategies. Such a model could enable organisations to shift from passive reaction to value-aligned preparedness, particularly in environments where emotion and meaning often outweigh attribution and fact.

2.1.4 Contingency Theory of Accommodation

The Contingency Theory of Accommodation (CTA) emerged in the late 1990s as a measured challenge to the prescriptive force of earlier public relations theories, most notably the two-way symmetrical model advanced by Grunig and Hunt.[178] This earlier model, built on the ideal of balanced, dialogic communication, presented symmetry as both the most ethical and most effective way to relate to publics, with organisations as willing to adapt as the publics they engage. Grunig argued that only the two-way symmetrical model represented a break from the prevailing view of public relations as a tool for manipulating publics.[179] Yet, as Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook noted, this vision, however attractive, was far too neat for the "messy" realities of organisational communication, where multiple publics, uneven power, and conflicting interests collide in fluid and unpredictable ways.[180]

The contingency theorists argued that the practice of public relations is "too complex, too fluid, and impinged by far too many variables" to fit neatly into fixed categories such as Grunig's four models.[181] Drawing inspiration from Hellweg's call for a continuum between asymmetry and symmetry[182] and Murphy's argument for a spectrum running from conflict to cooperation,[183] they proposed a dynamic advocacy–accommodation continuum. This rejects the notion of a single "best" approach, instead acknowledging that organisational stance must shift depending on the specific public, the timing, the stakes, and the ethical implications of action.[184]

At one extreme lies pure advocacy, in which the organisation defends its position without concession, an approach historically endorsed by early public relations thinkers such as Bernays[185] and Smith,[186] who likened the role of the practitioner to that of a legal advocate. At the other

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[178] **J. E. Grunig** and **T. Hunt**, *Managing Public Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984).

[179] *Ibid.*

[180] **A. E. Cancel**, **G. T. Cameron**, **L. M. Sallot**, and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), 31–63.

[181] *Ibid.*

[182] **S. A. Hellweg**, 'Symmetry as a Criterion for Public Relations Effectiveness', paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Conference, San Francisco, 1989.

[183] **P. Murphy**, 'Strategy, Ethical Reasoning and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model', *Public Relations Review*, 17.3 (1991), 117–133.

[184] **Cancel et al.**, *op. cit.*

[185] **E. Bernays**, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright, 1928).

[186] **G. Smith**, Public Relations: Communication and Persuasion (New York: Random House, 1972).

extreme lies pure accommodation, in which the organisation fully concedes to a public's demands, echoing the consensus-building ideals articulated by Cutlip, Center and Broom.[187] Between these poles lies a wide range of possible stances, including negotiation, selective concession, and collaborative problem-solving.[188]

CTA is as much about professional judgement as it is about stance. It assumes that practitioners can weigh legal, ethical, political, and reputational considerations to determine where on the continuum the organisation should be positioned at any given moment.[189] Rather than offering a prescriptive rulebook, the theory provides a logic for making informed, context-sensitive decisions in situations where the wrong communicative move could carry high costs.[190]

Empirical evidence supports this approach. In qualitative interviews with 18 senior practitioners, Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron found that none adhered rigidly to any one model or philosophical stance. Instead, their decisions were marked by case-by-case reasoning, influenced by the specific character of the public involved, the perceived legitimacy of demands, and the anticipated consequences of either resistance or accommodation.[191] This confirmed Pearson's earlier observation that the "seeming impossible mission" of representing both client and public interests simultaneously becomes navigable only when practitioners embrace situational judgement.[192]

Ethics are central to CTA's appeal. The theory questions the implicit moral high ground often claimed for symmetry. As Cancel et al. argued, it is neither ethical nor strategically wise to accommodate every public, particularly when demands are grounded in misinformation, moral repugnance, or objectives that threaten the broader public interest.[193] To compromise with such publics, far from embodying ethical openness, could constitute a form of moral relativism. In these situations, advocacy, a clear, principled defence of the organisation's values, may be the ethically superior path.[194] This reasoning aligns with Bivins' argument that advocacy can remain professional and ethical when grounded in clear priorities[195] and with L. Grunig's warning against uncritical embrace of accommodation without considering independence and responsibility.[196]

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[187] **S. M. Cutlip**, **A. H. Center**, and **G. M. Broom**, *Effective Public Relations*, 6th edn (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1985).

[188] **Cancel et al.,** *op. cit.*

[189] *Ibid.*

[190] *Ibid.*

[191] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook**, and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Public Relations Review*, 25.2 (1999), 171–197.

[192] **R. Pearson**, 'A Theory of Public Relations Ethics' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio University, 1989).

[193] **Cancel et al.**, 'It Depends', *op. cit.*

[194] *Ibid.*

[195] **T. H. Bivins**, 'Professional Advocacy in Public Relations', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 6.3 (1987), 195–200.

[196] **L. Grunig**, 'Advocacy in Public Relations: An Unsolved Problem', *Public Relations Review*, 18.1 (1992), 71–85.

The theory's reach extends beyond public relations into crisis communication. Cameron, Coombs and their colleagues have shown how the continuum can explain variation in organisational responses to crises, ranging from defensive postures such as denial or justification to accommodative strategies such as apology and corrective action.[197] Coombs links stance selection in crises to perceptions of reputational threat and attributions of responsibility, demonstrating how contingency thinking integrates naturally with Situational Crisis Communication Theory.[198]

One of CTA's clearest strengths is its realism. It reflects the complex, multi-public environments practitioners navigate, recognising that organisations often deal with conflicting demands simultaneously.[199] It also grants practitioners agency, positioning them as strategic decision-makers rather than mere technicians applying a fixed model.[200] Its ethical flexibility is another virtue: by rejecting accommodation as an inherent good, it offers a more nuanced moral framework, aligned with the realities of power and public responsibility.[201] Furthermore, its conceptual adaptability makes it a natural fit for conflict management and crisis communication, where the stance must evolve with changing conditions.[202] Finally, it resonates with continuum-based thinking from earlier scholarship, avoiding the either–or traps that plagued the four-model typology.[203]

However, CTA's flexibility also creates challenges. Its very openness can make it operationally vague, providing limited guidance on how to weigh competing pressures in real time.[204] Without clear prioritisation criteria, "it depends" risks becoming a post-hoc rationalisation for convenient choices.[205] Critics have warned that its situational ethic might slide into moral relativism if organisations fail to anchor decisions in non-negotiable values.[206] Measurement presents another difficulty: locating a stance precisely on the continuum can be subjective, complicating research and accountability.[207] Finally, its rejection of symmetry as an ideal has met resistance from proponents of the excellence model, who maintain that symmetry remains a necessary ethical compass despite its practical limitations.[208]

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[197] **G. T. Cameron**, **F. Cropp**, and **B. H. Reber**, 'Getting Past Platitudes: Factors Limiting Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Communication Management*, 6.3 (2002), 242–255.

[198] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2010).

[199] **Cancel et al.**, 'It Depends', *op. cit.*

[200] *Ibid.*

[201] *Ibid.*

[202] **Coombs**, *op. cit.*

[203] **Murphy**, *op. cit.*

[204] Cameron, Cropp and Reber, *op. cit.*

[205] **Cancel et al.**, 'It Depends', *op. cit.*

[206] *Ibid.*

[207] **C. Botan** and **M. Taylor**, *Public Relations Theory II* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[208] Grunig and Hunt, *op. cit.*

The Contingency Theory of Accommodation offers a mature, context-aware philosophy of practice that privileges strategic adaptability over doctrinal rigidity. It preserves the normative ambition of ethical communication while grounding it in the constraints and possibilities of real organisational life. For practitioners, it legitimises situational judgement as a professional skill; for scholars, it enriches theoretical discourse with a model as sensitive to context as it is to principle.

2.1.5 Stealing Thunder

Stealing Thunder represents a strategic approach to crisis communication in which an organisation takes the initiative to release negative information about itself before its exposure by external entities, including the media, whistleblowers, or competitors. Initially developed within the realm of courtroom strategies, it has transformed into a powerful method of persuasive communication applicable in corporate, political, and reputational crises. The psychological foundation of this strategy lies in the premise that the early revelation of negative information disrupts audience expectations, consequently enhancing perceptions of honesty and transparency. This change in perspective modifies the interpretive framework utilised by stakeholders to assess the crisis, frequently diminishing the perceived seriousness of the situation and bolstering organisational credibility.[209]

The concept received initial research support for legal frameworks, showing that defendants who voluntarily disclosed self-incriminating information tended to obtain more favourable outcomes compared to those whose unfavourable characteristics were exposed by the opposing counsel.[210] The phenomenon known as "change of meaning" indicates that when an organisation takes control of the narrative, audiences tend to interpret the information with less severity and attribute lower levels of blame.[211] This tactic has subsequently been applied to political communication and corporate public relations, yielding comparable results across various areas, including jury deliberations and consumer product recalls.[212]

Stealing Thunder is founded on three interconnected principles:

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[209] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31.3 (2005), 425–433.

[210] **L. Dolnik**, **T. I. Case**, and **K. D. Williams**, 'Stealing Thunder as a Courtroom Tactic Revisited: Processes and Boundaries', *Law and Human Behavior*, 27.3 (2003), 267–287.

[211] *Ibid.*

[212] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. Pompper**, 'Stormy Weather: Testing Stealing Thunder as a Crisis Communication Strategy to Improve Communication Flow Between Organisations and Journalists', *Public Relations Review*, 29.3 (2003), 291–308.

1. Message Timing: The strategy is implemented before any external announcement. This precedence enables the organisation to shape the narrative and establish the agenda of public discourse.[213]

2. Credibility Enhancement: Early self-disclosure builds a perception of openness and moral responsibility, consequently bolstering ethical evaluations and reducing stakeholder cynicism.[214]

3. Frame Control and Meaning Shift: By proactively delivering bad news, the organisation can alleviate the negative impact of the content through rhetorical framing techniques such as accepting responsibility, expressing remorse, or emphasising mitigation efforts.[215]

The effectiveness of Stealing Thunder is significantly shaped by the transparency of the organisation and the implementation of follow-up actions. Research indicates that mere disclosure is insufficient; it should be combined with significant corrective actions to enhance reputational advantages and foster stakeholder trust.[216]

Numerous studies demonstrated that when organisations proactively disclose negative information, they are consistently evaluated more favourably than when they allow external parties, such as journalists or whistleblowers, to control the message. Audiences tend to perceive these organisations as more credible, sincere, and ethically accountable, even in the face of wrongdoing.[217] This early admission, particularly when paired with corrective action or expressions of remorse, signals a degree of honesty that contrasts sharply with the perceived evasiveness often associated with delayed disclosures or outright denials.

Beyond credibility, proactive self-disclosure has been shown to positively influence consumer behaviour. In experimental settings, participants who were exposed to a company's early disclosure of product flaws or service failures reported higher levels of purchase intent and a greater willingness to continue supporting the brand.[218] This effect is especially notable in industries where trust is paramount, such as food safety, pharmaceuticals, and consumer electronics, demonstrating the strategy's power to reinforce brand loyalty in the face of crisis.

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[213] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), 141–148.

[214] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximise the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-Up Actions and Transparent Communication', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 27.3 (2022), 425–440.

[215] Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, *op. cit.*

[216] **Kim and Lee**, *op. cit.*

[217] Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, *op. cit.*

[218] **A. Claeys**, **V. Cauberghe**, and **J. Leysen**, 'Implications of Stealing Thunder for Crisis Communication', *Public Relations Review*, 39.5 (2013), pp. 449–456.

Media coverage also tends to be more favourable when the organisation initiates the communication. Journalists are less inclined to pursue aggressive investigative stories when the primary facts have already been disclosed, leading to shorter coverage cycles, more balanced reporting, and fewer sensational headlines.[219] In this sense, Stealing Thunder acts as a buffer, reducing the newsworthiness and emotional charge of the story by removing its element of surprise. It becomes a strategic form of 'deflation', taking the wind out of a crisis before it gathers momentum.

In practice, Stealing Thunder has been employed across a diverse array of scenarios. In the corporate sphere, companies have used the strategy to manage product recalls, data breaches, executive misconduct, and regulatory violations. For example, in some high-profile cases, firms issued public apologies and detailed disclosures on their websites or social media platforms before investigative journalists could break the story. These pre-emptive disclosures not only allowed companies to present their version of events but also signalled to stakeholders a commitment to transparency and reform. Similarly, in political communication, candidates have disclosed past infractions or controversies early in a campaign to avoid media scandals closer to election dates, often with the effect of reducing voter backlash.[220]

However, Stealing Thunder is not a universally effective solution. Its reception is highly sensitive to cultural, situational, and relational dynamics. Cultural values can mediate the perceived appropriateness and sincerity of the tactic. In collectivist societies where face-saving and indirect communication are prized, self-disclosure may be viewed with suspicion or interpreted as a loss of dignity.

Furthermore, not all stakeholders interpret early disclosure as a moral act. In highly sceptical publics, particularly those shaped by previous experiences of corporate greenwashing, cover-ups, or strategic manipulation, proactive admissions may be dismissed as calculated public relations moves rather than genuine ethical gestures.[221] This is especially true if the disclosure is not accompanied by tangible corrective measures, internal accountability, or an authentic change in behaviour. When stakeholders perceive a disconnect between words and actions, the very strategy designed to build trust can instead amplify distrust.

There is also the risk that revealing the information could make people pay more attention to the bad news. Instead of making the news less shocking, revealing it too soon may have the opposite effect and bring more attention to the situation than it would have been otherwise. This tendency,

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[219] **S. Wigley**, 'Stealing Thunder in the Digital Age: The Use of Proactive Communication Strategies in Social Media Contexts', *Public Relations Review*, 37.1 (2011), pp. 86–88.

[220] Arpan and Pompper, *op. cit*.

[221] Kim and Lee, *op. cit*.

often referred to as the "boomerang effect," becomes more evident when the given information is ambiguous, insufficient, or regarded as an effort to manipulate the narrative without real transparency.[222] In such instances, the organisation may find itself not only the subject of scrutiny for the original issue but also accused of manipulating public discourse.

Stealing Thunder could also have legal and regulatory consequences. In regulated businesses, admitting wrongdoing or making a mistake too soon could make the company liable, break its contracts, or start compliance enquiries. Because of this, companies need to think about the reputational benefits of disclosing information early vs the risks of legal exposure. Crisis communication tactics must be evaluated via the frameworks of risk management and legal scrutiny, regardless of their rhetorical efficacy.[223]

Even with these warnings, Stealing Thunder is still a useful tool for crisis communicators to have in their toolbox. It is different from more reactive theories since it focuses on timing, initiative, and narrative control. When used with cultural awareness, real follow-through, and legal due diligence, the strategy can do more than just reduce harm; it can also actively support the organisation's values and re-establish trust with stakeholders before it has completely broken down.

2.1.6   Comparative Analysis of Theories

Each of the principal theories in crisis communication offers unique advantages while also bearing critical limitations. When placed into comparative perspective, these strengths and weaknesses reflect not only differing theoretical orientations but also practical concerns such as empirical applicability, ethical viability, and digital adaptability.

SCCT remains one of the most structurally rigorous models within the crisis communication literature. Based on attribution theory, it connects how stakeholders see crisis responsibility with the best ways to respond. Its primary strength resides in its predictive utility: by classifying crises as victim, accidental, or preventable, it offers evidence-based guidance for organisational reaction options, covering denial, apologies, and corrective action. Coombs' empirical testing has shown that it is consistent and makes accurate predictions about how stakeholders will respond in a wide

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[222] **L. Dolnik**, **T. I. Case**, and **K. D. Williams**, 'Stealing Thunder as a Courtroom Tactic Revisited: Processes and Boundaries', *Law and Human Behavior*, 27.3 (2003), pp. 267–287.

[223] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

range of scenarios.[224] However, this very structure creates a notable limitation: SCCT tends to treat crises as rational assessments of responsibility, often ignoring the emotional, cultural, or symbolic dynamics that accompany stakeholder reactions in the real world. It has difficulty dealing with crises that are full of values, as those caused by discrimination, ethical failures, or moral outrage, where blaming someone is less essential than how it makes people feel or how unfair it seems.[225]

By contrast, Image Repair Theory focuses on rhetorical construction and message effectiveness rather than situational typology. Its five broad categories, denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification, offer a wide palette for communicators to frame and deliver responses tailored to reputational threats.[226] IRT's strength lies in its discursive depth. It allows practitioners to manipulate tone, language, and symbolic framing, making it highly effective for cases involving individual misconduct or reputational attacks on character and values. Yet, this flexibility can become a weakness. Without a diagnostic mechanism for matching response types to crisis typologies, IRT is vulnerable to misuse or superficial apology strategies that may appear manipulative or insincere. This is especially problematic in digital environments where stakeholder scrutiny is immediate and continuous, and public perceptions of authenticity carry significant weight.[227]

The Theory of Persuasive Attack offers a crucial shift in perspective by focusing not on how organisations defend themselves, but on how crises are constructed by external actors. Its principal strength lies in its explanatory power; it helps practitioners understand how stakeholders, particularly those empowered by social media, can frame narratives in ways that elevate minor incidents into full-blown scandals.[228] This is particularly salient in the age of digital virality, where influencers and activist communities can amplify accusations with moral and emotional framing. However, Persuasive Attack is still a descriptive approach, not a prescriptive one. It discusses how businesses become targets, but it doesn't give any advice on how to respond. So, it works best as a diagnostic tool along with other models, warning professionals of early indicators of symbolic escalation.

Stealing Thunder offers neither a strategic model nor a rhetorical typology but instead introduces a tactical principle grounded in communication psychology: that organisations that disclose

[224] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10.3 (2007), pp. 163–176.

[225] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in Situational Crisis Communication Theory: A Triadic Appraisal Model for Crises', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 37.4 (2023), pp. 798–820.

[226] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

[227] **M. R. Brown**, **M. A. McDonald** and **J. F. Tanner**, 'Repenting in the Spotlight: Strategic Apologies in Crisis Management', *Business Horizons*, 53.2 (2010), pp. 113–121.

[228] **W. L. Benoit**, *Persuasive Messages: The Process of Influence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 181–197.

information about a crisis before it is exposed externally are perceived as more credible, honest, and in control.[229] Empirical studies show that proactive disclosure tends to reduce perceived culpability and increase trust, making it an essential tactic in high-stakes, high-velocity crises such as data breaches or internal misconduct. However, the power of Stealing Thunder depends heavily on context, execution, and follow-up. Disclosure without visible accountability or follow-through can backfire, particularly if audiences interpret the action as a manipulative attempt to minimise damage rather than a sincere gesture of transparency. Moreover, its effectiveness may vary significantly across cultures; in high-context or face-saving societies, disclosure may be viewed as a weakness rather than a strength.[230]

The Contingency Theory of Accommodation departs from prescriptive models altogether, proposing a continuum ranging from pure advocacy to full accommodation, and arguing that strategic stance should evolve based on a complex interplay of 87 contextual variables, including legal constraints, stakeholder pressure, corporate culture, and media intensity.[231] Its great strength lies in its realism. Crises rarely unfold in linear or static ways, and this theory reflects the iterative, adaptive nature of actual organisational decision-making. It also allows space for competing internal priorities (e.g., legal vs reputational risk), making it particularly useful in politically or socially complex crises. Nevertheless, this adaptability comes at a cost: the theory is notoriously difficult to operationalise. It offers little guidance for when and how to shift positions, and the sheer number of influencing factors can paralyse decision-making without experienced leadership and cross-functional alignment.[232]

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[229] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31.3 (2005), pp. 425–433.

[230] **J. Lee** and **J. Atkinson**, 'Does Stealing Thunder Always Work? A Content Analysis of Crisis Communication Practice under Different Cultural Settings', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16.1 (2022), pp. 40–58.

[231] **E. Cancel, G. T. Cameron, L. M. Sallot** and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

[232] **E. Cancel, M. A. Mitrook** and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Public Relations Review*, 24.2 (1998), pp. 171–197.

Theory	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
The SCCT	Predictive, structured, empirically supported	Overly rational, ignores emotions and values	Integration with emotion and culture-sensitive models	May fail in moral outrage or symbolic crises
The IRT	Flexible, rhetorically rich, effective in character attacks	Lacks diagnostic framework, risks superficiality	Combining with SCCT for timing and strategy alignment	Digital audiences may spot insincerity quickly
The Theory of Persuasive Attack	Explains external attack dynamics, relevant to social media	Not prescriptive, limited tactical guidance	Paired with SCCT/IRT for early warning systems	Limited use without complementing frameworks
The Stealing Thunder	Enhances trust and credibility through proactive disclosure	Context-sensitive, can appear insincere or weak	Used as first step in integrated crisis communication plans	Misinterpretation in high-context cultures
The Contingency Theory of Accommodation	Realistic, adaptive, accommodates complex variables	Hard to operationalise, decision paralysis risk	Ideal for multi-stakeholder, dynamic crisis contexts	Too complex without experienced leadership

Table 2: SWOT analysis of the Theories

The SWOT analysis shows how the five crisis communication theories can work together, each having its strengths and weaknesses in different situations. SCCT is great for systematic, predictive direction, but it doesn't work as well when situations are emotionally charged or symbolically complicated. IRT's rhetorical adaptability is effective in mitigating reputational damage; nonetheless, it may be regarded as fake in the absence of explicit diagnostic standards. The Theory of Persuasive Attack provides essential insights into the external framing of crises but lacks prescriptive applicability for response. The Stealing Thunder's proactive disclosure can help develop trust, but it needs to be done with caution and cultural sensitivity. The Contingency Theory of Accommodation, on the other hand, shows how complicated the real world is by giving a wide range of nuanced positions. However, it is hard to employ because it is hard to put into practice. No theory properly explains the strategic, rhetorical, emotional, and operational aspects of current crises. Instead, communicators need to know what each framework is good at and use them together, changing their strategy to fit the needs of the crisis, the expectations of stakeholders, and the larger social and political situation.

2.1.7 Planning Crisis Responses Across Models

Each theory examined provides significant insights into crisis communication; nevertheless, their complete effectiveness is achieved only when converted into practical planning frameworks.

Effective crisis response begins before any public incident occurs. In this early phase, SCCT provides tools for mapping potential risks and classifying crisis types based on historical patterns and organisational responsibility.[233] Contingency Theory complements this by allowing communicators to assess where the organisation currently stands along the advocacy–accommodation continuum and which internal or external factors might force a shift.[234] In the meantime, the Persuasive Attack theory advocates for the proactive identification of reputational vulnerabilities, emphasising that it is often the symbolic framing, rather than operational failure, that triggers crises.[235] Monitoring media sentiment, activist discourse, and social trend signals can help anticipate attack vectors. Organisations might also simulate potential crises using IRT-style framing exercises, imagining how audiences could interpret different offensive scenarios, and prepare corresponding messaging responses. A plan for controlled empathetic early communication may prevent third-party narrative capture.[236]

When a crisis breaks, organisations must rapidly assess the situation and choose an appropriate strategy. SCCT informs this decision via its attribution-based framework: events with low responsibility may necessitate denial or justification, whereas crises with high responsibility require an apology or corrective measures. Nonetheless, the significance of emotional and moral context cannot be overlooked, particularly in crises that are rich in symbolism or tied to identity, where the principles of SCCT ought to be enhanced by the rhetorical resources provided by IRT. For example, transcendence, differentiation, or mortification might resonate more effectively with stakeholder sentiment compared to outright denial.

If the organisation anticipates reputational harm but still controls the timeline, Stealing Thunder becomes critical. Disclosure should be approached with empathy, employing IRT strategies and following SCCT recommendations. The Persuasive Attack theory serves as a framework for understanding stakeholder motives, emotional drivers, and symbolic framing in contexts where public outrage has already emerged. This enables the crisis team to comprehend not only the events that transpired but also the reasons behind their offensiveness to stakeholders, which is essential for developing impactful responses.

Contingency Theory serves as a valuable management tool in this context by providing adaptability. If stakeholder pressure escalates, communicators may adjust their stance from partial

[233] **W. T. Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 5th edn (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2021).

[234] **A. E. Cancel, G. T. Cameron, L. M. Sallot** and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

[235] **W. L. Benoit**, *Persuasive Messages: The Process of Influence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 181–197.

[236] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31.3 (2005), pp. 425–433.

advocacy to partial accommodation, rationalising each transition as contextually driven rather than inconsistent. This is particularly advantageous in situations characterised by extended or politically complex crises, wherein various publics impose conflicting demands.[237]

In the active response phase, the design and delivery of messages take on critical importance. IRT's rhetorical richness provides structure for the verbal response: should the message include apology (mortification), offer restitution (corrective action), or attempt reframing (transcendence)? Tone is equally critical; publics often react more to how something is said than what is said.

Stealing Thunder, if not used earlier, may still be leveraged here for new or emerging issues. Its effect is maximised when paired with transparent follow-up actions and consistency across platforms. Contingency Theory offers flexibility during the response, encouraging organisations to adapt tone and content without appearing inconsistent, provided they explain their evolving stance credibly.

Meanwhile, SCCT continues to provide a strategic backbone to guarantee rhetorical responses are aligned with stakeholder expectations of responsibility and fairness. Nonetheless, it is essential that all messaging remains consistently guided by the dynamics of real-time public discourse, as articulated in the Persuasive Attack theory. Should the moral framing of the crisis intensify, for instance, if the public perceives the crisis as indicative of systemic injustice, it may be necessary to emotionally recalibrate even the most robust messages aligned with SCCT.

Once immediate crisis pressure eases, planning should shift to recovery and reflection. SCCT recommends reinforcing positive relationships and rebuilding trust through consistent actions.[238] IRT remains useful for closing rhetorical loops; organisations should continue referencing values, sincerity, and shared goals in follow-up communications.

Contingency Theory is particularly valuable in this stage as it allows for repositioning over time, moving back toward advocacy or maintaining a more open stance depending on stakeholder feedback. Internal debriefings can include an evaluation of whether stance shifts were successful and ethically sound. Finally, the Persuasive Attack logic offers insight into the broader reputational landscape: has the organisation addressed the symbolic source of stakeholder anger, or merely the operational issue?

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[237] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook** and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Public Relations Review*, 24.2 (1998), pp. 171–197.

[238] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

2.2 Crisis Management

Crisis management refers to the strategies and processes that organisations employ to anticipate, mitigate, respond to, and recover from events that pose a significant threat to their operations, reputation, and stakeholders. This covers the structural and communicative dimensions involved in addressing crises. A crisis is generally characterised as an unforeseen and disruptive occurrence that is regarded by both managers and stakeholders as significantly important and potentially detrimental to organisational objectives and credibility. These events necessitate an immediate response and frequently entail intricate decision-making amidst uncertainty. Bundy et al. define an organisational crisis as an event that is perceived as "highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive" with significant consequences for stakeholder relationships and firm outcomes, including reputation, trust, legitimacy, and survival.[239] Crisis management, therefore, not only entails resolving the technical and operational dimensions of a crisis but also managing stakeholder perceptions and communications effectively in order to preserve or restore trust and organisational legitimacy.[240]

Crisis management represents a set of factors designed to combat crises, lessen the actual damage inflicted, and facilitate resilience. Put another way, it seeks to prevent or mitigate the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organisation, stakeholders, and industry from harm while enabling a constructive response to the situation.[241]

Rooted in emergency preparedness, crisis management comprises four interrelated factors: prevention, preparation, response, and revision. Prevention, or mitigation, encompasses the measures implemented to avert crises. Crisis managers frequently identify early indicators and take proactive measures to avert escalation. For example, a defective toaster may be subject to recall before its overheating problem results in damage; however, effective prevention seldom receives media attention.[242]

The most acknowledged element of crisis management is preparation, which encompasses the formulation of a crisis communication plan (CCP). The CCP is frequently perceived as the complete embodiment of crisis management; however, it represents only its visible segment.

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[239] **J. Bundy**, **M. D. Pfarrer**, **C. E. Short** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development', *Journal of Management*, 43.6 (2017), pp. 1661–1692.

[240] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay** (eds.), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10.3 (2007), pp. 163–176.

[241] Bundy et al., 'Crises and Crisis Management'.

[242] **W. T. Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 5th edn (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2021), p. 3-4.

Preparation encompasses the diagnosis of vulnerabilities, the training of crisis teams and spokespersons, the creation of crisis portfolios, and the refinement of internal communication systems, all aimed at fostering resilience at both the organisational and individual levels.[243]

Response is the application of preparation to a real or simulated crisis. Regular testing through simulations and drills is essential to evaluate the readiness of plans, teams, and communication systems. In real crises, these preparations are publicly executed and judged. For instance, Bausch & Lomb were widely criticised for their delayed recall of ReNu with MoistureLoc during a 2006 outbreak of Fusarium keratitis, a fungal infection potentially leading to blindness.[244] Similarly, Volkswagen's poor handling of the Dieselgate emissions scandal provoked lasting media scrutiny.[245]

An effective response aims to reduce the crisis's impact on stakeholders and organisational reputation. It seeks to limit threats to public safety, brand equity, and revenue, yet can also improve long-term outcomes such as organisational learning, reputational gains, and structural improvements.[246] The recovery process involves a swift return to normal operations, relying heavily on resilience and serving as a fundamental aspect of business continuity.[247]

The fourth factor, revision, involves a thorough assessment of responses to both real and simulated crises. This process includes identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as making necessary adjustments to enhance future prevention, preparation, and response strategies. This contributes to the development of institutional memory, thereby enhancing the organisation's understanding of crises and its ability to adapt. As Li, YeZhuang and Ying argue, organisations that accumulate experience through varied crisis exposures tend to improve their crisis handling over time.[248] Weick likewise emphasises the development of organisational sense-making and memory as essential to future crisis navigation.[249]

The crisis management cycle is interlinked: if prevention fails, preparation must compensate; revision feeds back into prevention and preparation, fostering continual improvement.[250]

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[243] *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

[244] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, p. 6; **B. Dobbin**, 'Bausch & Lomb Faces Contact Lens Solution Crisis', *Associated Press*, April 2006; **J. Mintz** and **F. Di Meglio**, 'MoistureLoc Recall and the Delay That Damaged Trust', *USA Today*, 2006.

[245] **M. Clemente** and **C. Gabbioneta**, 'How Does the Media Frame Corporate Scandals? The Case of Volkswagen's Emissions Scandal', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 2017.

[246] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, pp. 6–7.

[247] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[248] **X. Li**, **L. YeZhuang** and **H. Ying**, 'Crisis Management Capabilities and Organizational Resilience', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 2004.

[249] **K. E. Weick**, 'Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations', *Journal of Management Studies*, 25.4 (1988), pp. 305–317.

[250] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, p. 8.

Crisis management extends beyond its structural components; it is also conceptualised as a sequential process. The life cycle perspective, which is widely supported in the literature, categorises crisis events into specific temporal phases, each necessitating varied managerial responses.[251] Fink's foundational four-stage model delineates the prodromal phase (early warning), acute phase (triggering event), chronic phase (ongoing response), and resolution (crisis closure).[252] This methodical approach enables managers to customise their actions in response to the progression of a crisis.

Richardson, Mitroff, Birch, and others have presented different interpretations of this concept, frequently condensing it into three overarching stages: precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis.[253] This tripartite model provides a framework that accommodates additional sub-stages and theoretical contributions. Each stage encompasses clusters of action and thought, from signal detection and risk assessment to containment and evaluation, enabling crisis managers to organise their efforts methodically.[254]

An advanced interpretation of this framework is the regenerative model of crisis, which conceptualises crises as dynamic events marked by communicative turning points. These turning points, where stakeholder perception reframes a crisis into a new form, can shift what was initially a post-crisis response back into a new pre-crisis phase. Brinson and Benoit, for example, show how Dow Chemical's breast implant controversy was periodically reframed as new evidence and narratives emerged.[255] This underscores that crises are not static; they evolve as new meanings are assigned to events over time.[256]

2.2.1 Forms of Crises

Coombs indicates in his publication, 'Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding,' various categories of disasters. Despite the abundance of literature on crisis management, there is no single, universally accepted definition of a crisis. Yet defining the term is

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[251] *Ibid.*, pp. 8–10.

[252] **S. Fink**, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable* (New York: AMACOM, 1986), pp. 20–30.

[253] **B. Richardson**, 'Crisis Management and the Capabilities of Organisations', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 2.3 (1994), pp. 189–197; **I. Mitroff**, 'Crisis Management: Cutting Through the Confusion', *Sloan Management Review*, 1994.

[254] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, pp. 10–13.

[255] **S. L. Brinson** and **W. L. Benoit**, 'Dow Corning and the Silicone Breast Implant Crisis', *Journal of Business Communication*, 33.2 (1996), pp. 202–220.

[256] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, p. 13.

essential, as how a subject is defined determines how it is approached.[257] A general definition describes a crisis as a systemic breakdown that creates shared stress.[258] To operationalise this concept, crises can be categorised into disasters, public health crises, and organisational crises, each with specific characteristics and communicative demands.

Disasters are sudden events that disrupt the routine functioning of systems, require new courses of action, and threaten societal values and goals.[259] They are typically large in scale and require multi-agency responses. For instance, utilities restoring electricity after a tornado face both disaster and organisational crisis demands. Occasionally, crises can even trigger disasters, such as the Bhopal gas leak or the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.[260]

Though literature on disaster response is abundant, this work focuses on organisational crises, defined here with specificity to differentiate them from disasters and public health emergencies.[261] Public health crises involve threats to public health that cross geographic boundaries[262] and exceed the routine capacity of communities to manage them.[263] The COVID-19 pandemic, SARS, and Ebola are all examples of these kinds of catastrophes. These events put a lot of stress on healthcare systems, like when New York had a lot of cases in early 2020, and they need help from both the government and NGOs. The main responsibility falls on public health infrastructure, but organisations must also be ready for the operational problems and damage to their reputation that these kinds of crises can cause.[264]

An organisational crisis is characterised by the perceived violation of significant stakeholder expectations, potentially resulting in adverse consequences for stakeholders and/or the business.[265] This concept is based on a combination of different academic views and includes three main parts: perception, anticipation, and consequences.

Crises are perceptual; if stakeholders perceive an issue as a crisis, it becomes one in practice, regardless of managerial interpretation.[266] Stakeholders are those who can affect or are affected by

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[257] **W. T. Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 5th edn (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2021), p. 1.

[258] **R. W. Perry**, 'What Is a Disaster?', in **H. Rodríguez**, **E. L. Quarantelli** and **R. R. Dynes** (eds), *Handbook of Disaster Research* (New York: Springer, 2007), pp. 1–15.

[259] **E. L. Quarantelli**, 'Disaster-Related Social Behavior: Summary of 50 Years of Research Findings', *University of Delaware Disaster Research Center*, 2005.

[260] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, pp. 2–3.

[261] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[262] **E. Maibach** and **D. Holtgrave**, 'Advances in Public Health Communication', *Annual Review of Public Health*, 16 (1995), pp. 219–238.

[263] **C. D. Nelson**, **N. Lurie**, **J. Wasserman** and **J. Zakowski**, 'Conceptualizing and Defining Public Health Emergency Preparedness', *American Journal of Public Health*, 97. Suppl 1 (2007), pp. S9–S11.

[264] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, pp. 5–6.

[265] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[266] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the organisation.[267] Notably, both the Audi transmission failure (1980s) and the Toyota unintended acceleration case (2009) demonstrate the dangers of delayed acknowledgement due to management's failure to see events from the stakeholder perspective.[268]

Crises also involve the violation of salient expectations. These expectations, regarding safety, ethics, environmental responsibility, etc., are often unwritten but deeply held. Their violation generates outrage, weakens stakeholder trust, and threatens the organisation's reputation.[269] A damaged reputation, defined as stakeholder perception of the organisation, is a frequent outcome of crises.[270]

Additionally, crises have tangible consequences ranging from financial losses and physical harm to reputational and environmental damage.[271] Stakeholders affected may include customers, employees, investors, communities, and even entire industries, as in the Carnival Cruise Line fire incident of 2006. Reputational harm can extend from one company to a whole sector due to perceived common risks.[272]

Crisis management seeks to minimise these outcomes and support resilience, defined as the ability to recover from shocks.[273]

Crises are unpredictable but not unexpected. Although their timing is uncertain, most organisations recognise that crises will eventually occur. Some crises are preceded by warning signs, allowing time to prepare. Metabolife, for example, used advance notice of a negative media investigation in 1999 to mount a counter-narrative campaign through multimedia and online channels.[274]

2.2.2 Types of Crises and the Risk-Crisis Relationship

A crisis is not simply any organisational problem or disruption. It is more accurately defined as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders

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[267] **J. M. Bryson**, Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); **R. E. Freeman**, Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach (Boston: Pitman, 1984).

[268] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, p. 9.

[269] *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

[270] **L. Barton**, *Crisis in Organizations* (Cincinnati: South-Western, 2001), p. 15; **R. L. Dilenschneider**, *The Corporate Communications Bible* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2000), p. 22.

[271] **R. Loewendick**, 'Assessing Crisis Damages: A Multidimensional View', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 1.3 (1993), pp. 159–166.

[272] **Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, p. 12.

[273] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[274] **National Research Council**, *Understanding Risk: Informing Decisions in a Democratic Society* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1996); **I. Clarke** and **C. C. Millar**, 'Measuring a Crisis Response', *Journal of Communication Management*, 1996.

and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes".[275] This definition highlights two characteristics: unpredictability and the importance of stakeholders. Crises are understood as social constructs; they are designated as crises only when stakeholders perceive them as such, particularly when their expectations have been compromised.[276] Therefore, crisis communication must begin with an understanding of the anomaly, that is, the breach in what is considered normal or acceptable organisational behaviour.[277]

Additional researchers provide further refinement of the concept. Fink defines a crisis as a "turning point for better or worse," whereas Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer characterise it as an unexpected and non-routine organisational event that generates significant uncertainty and poses a threat to key goals.[278] Coombs cautions against the excessive application of the term "crisis" to situations of lesser significance, asserting that the designation of crises should be limited to serious occurrences that possess the capacity to substantially impact the organisation or its stakeholders.[279]

In contrast, risk refers to the possibility of being subjected to harm or loss. This serves as the probabilistic basis for the emergence of crises. In crisis discourse, risk is often expressed as a function of threat, the likelihood of an event occurring and the severity of its consequences.[280] Risk assessments evaluate these dimensions, guiding decision-makers to prioritise vulnerabilities and mitigation strategies. Thus, while all crises embody risk, not all risks materialise into crises.

Risk and crisis are intimately connected. Risks are prospective; they represent what might happen. Crises are retrospective or emergent; they represent what is happening or has happened. Crisis management often begins with risk assessment, seeking to forecast, prevent, or prepare for the transformation of a latent risk into a manifest crisis.[281] Conversely, a crisis can reveal previously overlooked risks, highlighting deficiencies in organisational foresight or control.[282]

Organisations operationalise this connection through structured risk-to-crisis translation mechanisms. Crisis managers evaluate organisational risks, considering internal factors (e.g., processes, personnel) and external variables (e.g., location, partnerships, industry exposure), and map them to potential crisis types. This diagnostic process includes analysing likelihood, potential impact (both organisational and reputational), and crisis velocity.[283] Each risk is then assigned a

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[275] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 2–3.

[276] *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

[277] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crisis Management and Communication', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

[278] **M. W. Seeger**, **T. L. Sellnow** and **R. R. Ulmer**, 'Communication, Organization, and Crisis', *Communication Yearbook*, 21 (1998), pp. 231–275.

[279] **W. T. Coombs**, The Handbook of Crisis Communication, p. 20.

[280] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[281] *Ibid.*

[282] *Ibid.*

[283] **W. T. Coombs**, Crisis Communication and Crisis Management (2022), pp. 71–75.

threat score, which aids in prioritising preparedness efforts and forming the organisation's crisis portfolio.[284]

The literature identifies a wide range of crisis types. Coombs and Holladay argue that, while individual crises vary, they tend to cluster into identifiable types that help organisations structure their preparedness plans.[285] The main typologies include:

Operational Crises:

- Natural Disasters: earthquakes, floods, pandemics.

- Human Error Accidents: resulting from mistakes in judgment or action.

- Technical Errors: failures of systems or equipment, including product harm.

- Malevolence: external attacks such as sabotage, tampering, or terrorism.

- Workplace Violence: violent incidents involving employees or former employees.

- Organisational Misdeeds: violations of laws or ethics by leadership.

- Scansis: crises that also become scandals, generating moral outrage.[286]

- Data Breaches: unauthorised access to sensitive digital information.

Emerging or Unique Crisis Forms:[287]

- Sticky Crises: persistently complex situations that resist resolution.

- Double Crises: secondary crises generated by inadequate or inappropriate initial responses.

- Longitudinal Crises: those lasting over extended periods.

- Public Health Crises, such as COVID-19, with wide social, economic, and operational impacts.

- Industry-wide Crises: triggered by shared suppliers or associated reputational spillovers.

- Crisis Contagion: where reputational harm transfers between unrelated but perceived-similar organisations.

- Synecdoche Crises: where an incident in one unit (e.g., a franchise) is perceived to represent the entire organisation.

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[284] *Ibid.*

[285] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16.2 (2002), pp. 165–186.

[286] **W. T. Coombs**, **S. J. Holladay** and **E. Tachkova**, 'Scansis: When Scandal Meets Crisis', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 23.3 (2018), pp. 377–391.

[287] **F. Frandsen** and **W. Johansen**, 'Organizational Crisis Communication: A Multivocal Approach', *Corporate Communications*, 22.3 (2017), pp. 346–362.

Given this diversity, organisations cannot prepare individual crisis communication plans (CCPs) for every imaginable event. Instead, they create crisis portfolios based on crisis types, selecting representative scenarios within each type that are most likely or most harmful.[288] This enables a structured, scalable approach to preparation and response.

As risk is fluid and influenced by internal changes and external pressures (e.g., societal values, technological developments), ongoing monitoring is critical. Regular meetings of risk committees allow organisations to revise threat assessments and update their crisis portfolios accordingly. This ensures that crisis preparedness remains aligned with real-world developments.[289]

2.2.3 Operational Crises vs. Paracrises

Operational crises entail disruptions to an organisation's operations and serve as the foundational aspect of crisis management practices. These include product harm, natural disasters, and industrial accidents. Business continuity planning is integral to this domain, emphasising the restoration of operations. Effective communication in these events should encompass the varied needs of stakeholders, including aspects such as employee scheduling and delivery timelines.

Paracrises, on the other hand, involve managing crisis risks publicly, often before actual operational disruption occurs.[290] They are predominantly reputational and increasingly manifest in digital and social media environments.[291] Unlike operational crises, they do not require activating crisis teams but demand public communication to prevent escalation.

A classic paracrisis example is the 2008 Motrin ad backlash. McNeil Consumer Healthcare withdrew the ad and issued an apology after it provoked strong public criticism from mothers on Twitter and YouTube.[292] While sales and operations were unaffected, the brand reputation was at risk. By acting swiftly, the company prevented a paracrisis from escalating into an operational crisis. Paracrises differ from traditional prevention efforts because of their visibility; they blur the boundary between mitigation and response.[293] Publicly addressing the issue becomes necessary to avoid reputational erosion and to demonstrate responsiveness.

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[288] **T. C. Pauchant** and **I. I. Mitroff**, *Transforming the Crisis-Prone Organization* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

[289] **T. A. Williams**, **D. A. Gruber**, **K. M. Sutcliffe**, **D. A. Shepherd** and **E. Y. Zhao**, 'Organizational Response to Adversity', *Academy of Management Review*, 42.2 (2017), pp. 377–395.

[290] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'The Paracrisis: The Challenges Created by Word-of-Mouth Online', in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, ed. by **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay** (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 379–382.

[291] *Ibid.*, pp. 380–383.

[292] **J. Greer**, '"Motrin Moms" Harness the Power of Social Media', *CBS News*, 18 November 2008, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/motrin-moms-harness-the-power-of-social-media/.

[293] **Coombs** and **Holladay**, 'The Paracrisis', p. 384.

2.3 Enterprise Risk Management

Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) has emerged as a key component of contemporary organisational strategy, empowering firms to not only endure but also prosper in landscapes characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. ERM involves the identification, analysis, response, and monitoring of risks that may affect an organisation's ability to achieve its objectives. The operation functions at both strategic and operational tiers, connecting various departments to establish a unified risk culture that is proactive instead of reactive. At its essence, ERM involves integrating foresight, adaptability, and accountability into the decision-making processes of the organisation.

According to the existing literature, risk should not be viewed merely as an event; rather, it is a relational construct influenced by stakeholder perceptions, societal context, and the framing of narratives. Therefore, ERM should operate not merely as a technical task but also as a means of communication that reflects the organisation's integrity, competence, and concern in times of potential disruption.[294]

2.3.1 Types of Risks: known, unknown; internal, external

To effectively manage risk, organisations must first classify it. One widely accepted typology draws a matrix between the epistemological status of risk (known vs. unknown) and its origin (internal vs. external). This dual framework is particularly useful in determining the level of control an organisation has over a risk and how resources should be allocated to manage it.[295]

Known risks are those that can be anticipated, modelled, and for which mitigation strategies can be prepared. These include familiar issues such as equipment failure, supply chain delays, or regulatory non-compliance. For example, a company situated in an area susceptible to flooding can analyse rainfall patterns and develop appropriate flood-response protocols in response. Known risks benefit from historical data, making them more manageable within traditional risk management frameworks.[296] Unknown risks refer to unforeseen, emergent, or unprecedented events that elude prediction. Events often referred to as "black swan" occurrences encompass global health pandemics, abrupt technological disruptions, and the surge of misinformation

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[294] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay** (eds), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

[295] **J. Bundy**, **M. D. Pfarrer**, **C. E. Short** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development', *Journal of Management*, 43.6 (2017), pp. 1661–1692.

[296] *Ibid.*

through digital platforms. The presence of unknown risks highlights the shortcomings of current planning models, necessitating a need for flexibility, creativity, and interdisciplinary strategies in preparedness efforts.[297] Coombs states that these risks frequently confront not only the operational capacity but also the ethical and relational aspects of crisis communication.[298]

The distinction between internal and external risks centres on the origin of the risks themselves. Internal risks arise from within the organisation and are often linked to controllable factors such as poor leadership, organisational misconduct, or employee negligence. An example can be seen in data loss resulting from internal system failures or insufficient cybersecurity training. In contrast, external risks originate from factors beyond the organisation's control, including natural disasters, changes in legislation, geopolitical tensions, or reputational threats arising from activist campaigns or international boycotts.[299] The interaction among these dimensions is essential. An external risk, such as COVID-19, when combined with internal weaknesses like insufficient remote work infrastructure, can exacerbate the overall impact. Consequently, comprehending the position of a risk within this spectrum enables risk managers to formulate responses that are both proportionate and adaptable.

Additionally, scholars such as Bundy et al. highlight that the classification of risk also affects stakeholder perception, which in turn influences organisational legitimacy, trust, and post-crisis reputation.[300] As such, categorisation is not just an operational act but a communicative one.

2.3.2 Risk Mitigation. Resolve Risk Before It Becomes a Crisis

The cornerstone of modern ERM is the proactive mitigation of risks before they escalate into crises. Traditional crisis management typically focuses on damage control after a disruption. In contrast, ERM adopts a more strategic perspective, aiming to identify and mitigate vulnerabilities proactively. This approach often transforms risks into opportunities for innovation or organisational learning.[301]

One basic approach to proactive mitigation involves the practice of scenario planning. This includes a systematic application of "what-if" scenarios to model possible disruptions, allowing

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[297] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

[298] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41.3 (2004), pp. 265–289.

[299] **A. E. Cancel, G. T. Cameron, L. M. Sallot** and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

[300] **Bundy et al.**, 'Crises and Crisis Management'.

[301] **W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay**, The Handbook of Crisis Communication.

organisations to evaluate their resilience and response strategies. Scenario planning integrates elements of strategic foresight and behavioural psychology to examine not only technical failures but also the cognitive blind spots present within leadership teams.[302]

Early-warning systems, including social listening tools, predictive analytics, and real-time risk dashboards, play a crucial role in facilitating pre-crisis interventions. The use of these tools lies in the capacity to monitor gradual risks, including reputational decline or regulatory challenges, which may not elicit immediate concern but can develop into crises as time progresses.[303]

Another tactic is the "stealing thunder" strategy, which involves the voluntary disclosure of negative information before it becomes public through external sources.[304] This approach gives the organisation narrative control and allows organisations to demonstrate accountability, reducing stakeholder outrage and potentially lowering legal liability. However, the effectiveness of this strategy is context-dependent.

Risk mitigation is also a matter of ethical practice. As Coombs notes, communicating early and responsibly about risks is not merely good for reputation; it is a moral imperative rooted in stakeholder protection and public trust.[305] A failure to acknowledge early warning signs or suppress critical information, as seen in several industrial disasters, can turn operational faults into legitimacy crises.

Lastly, risk mitigation must be embedded in organisational culture. It requires cross-functional coordination, leadership buy-in, and an openness to continuous feedback. A successful ERM programme is not a siloed department but a mindset, one that views risk not as a threat to be avoided, but as a signal to adapt, evolve, and lead.

2.4 Crisis Preparation

Crisis preparedness is a foundational pillar of effective organisational risk management. As Coombs notes, crisis management must be understood not as a static outcome, but as a continuous process of preparing for disruption rather than achieving some finished state of preparation.[306] This distinction highlights the fact that no combination of preventative strategies can completely protect an organisation from reputational damage. Consequently, crisis preparedness aims to

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[302] *Ibid.*

[303] **W. T. Coombs,** 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis'.

[304] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31.3 (2005), pp. 425–433.

[305] **Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication'.

[306] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*, 5th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2022), pp. 68–69.

provide organisations with the necessary agility, insight, and framework to respond effectively and ethically in the event of a crisis.

Coombs presents a six-step model that functions as a pragmatic framework for assessing organisational readiness. The following elements are essential: (1) identifying potential crisis threats, (2) evaluating crisis types along with their related reputational risks, (3) choosing and training a crisis management team, (4) designating and preparing a spokesperson, (5) formulating a crisis communication plan, and (6) regularly reviewing and updating the crisis communication system.[307] This approach is not merely administrative. Each step supports the development of anticipatory capacity and organisational resilience, thereby promoting adaptability under turbulent conditions.[308]

The development of a Crisis Communication Plan transcends mere logistical considerations; it bolsters internal coherence, guarantees message consistency, and enables the organisation to respond promptly to stakeholder concerns.[309] Moreover, selecting and preparing a credible spokesperson ensures that the organisation has a trusted face to deliver critical messages when visibility and transparency matter most.[310] The final review phase guarantees that the communication ecosystem, tools, protocols, and stakeholder channels remain aligned with evolving risks and expectations.[311]

While Coombs' model provides a robust, internally focused framework, Ulmer and Pyle argue that managing crisis communication becomes significantly more complex in international and intercultural contexts.[312] Ulmer and Pyle advocate for a "simple rules" approach rooted in complexity theory. They suggest four rules: be honest, be open, be relationship-focused, and be authentic. Honesty involves full disclosure of information that allows stakeholders to make meaningful decisions for their safety and welfare.[313] Openness denotes a willingness to engage with ambiguity and initiate dialogue even in the absence of clear outcomes.[314] A relationship-focused stance prioritises long-term trust over short-term image repair, emphasising coordination and empathy with affected publics.[315] Finally, authenticity demands consistency between organisational

[307] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

[308] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

[309] **W.T. Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication, p. 70.

[310] *Ibid.*

[311] *Ibid.*

[312] **R. R. Ulmer** and **A. S. Pyle**, 'A Simple Rules Approach to Managing Crisis Complexity', in **A. Schwarz**, **M. W. Seeger** and **C. Auer** (eds), *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), pp. 109–117.

[313] **R. R. Ulmer**, **T. L. Sellnow** and **M. W. Seeger**, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), pp. 70–75.

[314] **E. J. Langer**, *Mindfulness* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1989).

[315] **B. Reynolds**, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication* (Atlanta, GA: CDC, 2002).

values and communication behaviour, especially in emotionally charged or ethically fraught situations.[316]

These principles contrast starkly with legacy strategies aimed at minimising reputational harm through denial, deflection, or spin. Historical cases, such as Exxon's initial blame-shifting during the Valdez oil spill and Enron's systematic hiding of information, demonstrate how strategies aimed at preserving image can exacerbate stakeholder mistrust and extend the duration of reputational harm. Organisations that seek to manipulate narratives or conceal facts frequently jeopardise their credibility and diminish their chances of recovery over time.[317]

International and intercultural crises have also been under-represented in empirical literature. Most studies focus on isolated national contexts or retrospective case studies rather than developing universal models that can guide real-time communication in diverse environments.[318] Despite contributions from scholars such as Fearn-Banks, Lee, and Hearit, much of this research remains descriptive rather than prescriptive, offering limited utility to practitioners operating under pressure.[319] Furthermore, even though Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory has been widely used to understand organisational dynamics, it lacks specific strategies for effectively managing crises in multicultural or transnational environments.[320]

The simple rules approach provides a limited solution by promoting iterative and culturally attuned engagement. During the 2009 Swine Flu outbreak, Dr. Richard Besser of the US Centres for Disease Control received commendation for his transparent public briefings. He openly acknowledged the uncertainty and complexity of the situation, which in turn fostered trust among a global audience.[321] Comparably, the timely self-disclosure and corrective measures taken by Taiwanese company King Car during the 2008 melamine crisis were instrumental in restoring consumer confidence and fostering ethical leadership within the region.[322]

Crucially, the simple rules model also identifies behaviours that organisations should avoid. These include withholding information, attempting to spin or manipulate facts, and suppressing

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[316] **G. Cheney** and **L. T. Christensen**, 'Organizational Identity', in **F. M. Jablin** and **L. L. Putnam** (eds), *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), pp. 231–269.

[317] **R. A. Oppel** and **K. Eichenwald**, 'Enron's Collapse', *The New York Times*, 16 January 2002

[318] **F. Frandsen** and **W. Johansen**, 'Crisis Communication, Complexity, and the Cartoon Affair', in **R. L. Heath** and **H. D. O'Hair** (eds), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 425–448.

[319] **K. Fearn-Banks**, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, 4th edn (New York: Routledge, 2011); **K. M. Hearit**, *Crisis Management by Apology* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006).

[320] **G. Hofstede, G. J. Hofstede** and **M. Minkov**, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd edn (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

[321] **G. Harris**, 'Agency Official Draws on TV Skills for Flu Updates', *The New York Times*, 28 April 2009.

[322] **F. Ku**, Organizational Renewal: A Case Study of King Car's Crisis Communication Strategies (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Arkansas, 2009).

stakeholder dissent.[323] Such tactics often escalate the severity of a crisis and diminish the organisation's legitimacy. Studies into corporate scandals, including the evasion strategies employed by the Peanut Corporation of America and Ford's persistence in manufacturing the faulty Pinto, demonstrate that these methods often undermine public trust instead of safeguarding reputational assets.[324]

The integration of Coombs' procedural model with the simple rules framework significantly enhances the crisis communication toolbox. Collectively, they provide a strategic framework for readiness and a moral guide for dialogue across diverse cultural landscapes. This synthesis illustrates the developing agreement that crisis response should be both strategically effective and ethically principled. Considering the digital era and the heightened interconnectedness of the globe, future frameworks must take into consideration the nuances of cultural diversity, the intricacies of complex systems, and the relational dynamics that influence public perception.

2.5 Emerging Gaps in Crisis Communication Literature

While looking at the main crisis communication theories, like SCCT, IRT, Persuasive Attack, Stealing Thunder, and Contingency Theory, a few main problems have come up. These models provide formal frameworks for crisis initiation and quick reaction; nevertheless, they inadequately address the emotionally charged and reputationally intricate consequences that follow crises. SCCT has been criticised for its short-term concentration and lack of attention to emotional dynamics like moral outrage and stakeholder weariness, even though it has been shown to work and is useful for guiding strategy response. Recent upgrades that include affective polarisation and triadic appraisal models have not yet been widely tested in different industries or cultural settings.[325] Image Repair Theory also ignores how public opinion changes in digital spaces, and Persuasive Attack talks about how reputations can be damaged without giving any suggestions for how to fix them. The efficacy of Stealing Thunder is contingent upon cultural context and subsequent actions,[326] whereas Contingency Theory, despite its adaptability, has challenges in operationalising for the

[323] **Ulmer and Pyle**, 'A Simple Rules Approach', p. 112.

[324] **G. Goetz**, 'Peanut Corporation from Inception to Indictment: A Timeline', *Food Safety News*, 22 February 2013 https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2013/02/peanut-corporation-of-america-from-inception-to-indictment-a-timeline/; **I. Peterson**, '$467.9 Million Loss Reported by Ford', *The New York Times*, 30 July 1980.

[325] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorizing Around Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36.1 (2024), p. 18.

[326] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximize the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-Up Actions and Transparent Communication', *Corporate Communications*, 27.3 (2022), pp. 425–440.

restoration of long-term legitimacy.[327] These theoretical gaps converge on a key research necessity: a more cohesive comprehension of how communicative choices influence reputation, both during a crisis and in its extended aftermath. As such, this thesis asks: How do different crisis response strategies impact long-term reputation restoration?

2.6 Case Studies in Crisis Communication Literature

The development of crisis communication research has been influenced by examinations of corporate crises, which act as essential environments for evaluating and enhancing theoretical models. Case studies offer contextual insights that enhance abstract models like the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Stealing Thunder, and the Contingency Theory of Accommodation. By conducting a comparative evaluation of crises such as the BP Deepwater Horizon incident, Volkswagen Dieselgate, the Samsung Galaxy Note 7 recall, the KFC chicken shortage in 2018 and Slack's outage on February 22, 2022. The BP Deepwater Horizon spill stands as the leading case in environmental disaster studies, providing a compelling framework for examining corporate negligence, stakeholder mistrust, and inconsistencies in messaging. The case demonstrated BP's initial reluctance to acknowledge accountability, prioritising technical minimisation and the enhancement of its public image instead. Coombs and Holladay observed that a disconnect between the company's established CSR image and its sluggish, defensive response strategy intensified perceptions of organisational responsibility.[328] Later research revealed that the late implementation of accommodative strategies, such as apologies, restitution, and stakeholder engagement, only somewhat alleviated the reputational harm. Furthermore, the crisis revealed the constraints of SCCT when a company's reputational capital is inadequate to protect it from allegations of moral wrongdoing.[329]

The emissions scandal involving Volkswagen similarly revealed the dangers associated with the adoption of evolving response strategies over time. The brand's inconsistent communication strategy, characterised by denial and deflection followed by a belated apology and attempts at remediation, ultimately eroded trust among its audience. Oosthuizen's content analysis of 23 VW press releases indicates a progression from distancing strategies to complete accommodation,

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[327] **A. E. Cancel, G. T. Cameron, L. M. Sallot,** and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

[328] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[329] **A. Schwarz**, 'Crisis-Induced Public Demand for Regulatory Intervention in the Social Media Era', *Public Relations Review*, 43.5 (2016), 1036–1047.

occurring only after considerable reputational damage.[330] Raupp, in his research, demonstrated that while VW held a significant rhetorical presence in the media, it fell short in terms of dialogic engagement, as its communications were largely self-referential and reactive. The crisis further demonstrated the extent to which influential entities control the narrative, marginalising the perspectives of civil society, consumers, and impacted stakeholders.[331]

The case of the Samsung Galaxy Note 7 shows a responsive and coordinated approach to crisis management. In response to incidents of battery explosions, Samsung implemented swift recall measures, provided clear technical explanations, and maintained consistent communication. Initially hesitant in its act, the company promptly adopted a corrective approach, adhering to the recommendations of SCCT regarding preventable crises. Samsung used digital platforms to engage with consumers directly, thereby promoting transparency and restoring confidence.[332]

The Slack 2.22.22 incident showed different communication dynamics, influenced by the digital characteristics of both the crisis and the brand involved. The company provided timely responses, keeping users informed through its status page and Twitter updates. Internal accounts from Slack engineers, along with public statements, presented a clear and technically comprehensive message that exemplified the principles of the Stealing Thunder strategy: proactively revealing failure before stakeholders assign blame. Nevertheless, certain scholars have observed that despite the implementation of rapid technical transparency, brands may face the danger of estranging non-technical audiences in the absence of empathy and accessibility.[333]

The 2018 KFC chicken shortage in the UK is another example of how even small problems may turn into big problems. The supply-chain problem that should have been avoided led most stores to close, which made people angry and made fun of them. KFC's innovative "FCK" apology campaign, which mixed shame with comedy, changed the story and sped up the company's recovery of its reputation. This shows how cultural resonance and creative adaptability may make a company more resilient in the long run.[334]

In studying these cases, distinct patterns become obvious. Crises characterised by intentional error, such as those seen with VW and BP, necessitate swift acknowledgement and a commitment to transparency to uphold legitimacy. Using reactive strategies or denial often intensifies stakeholder

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[330] **M. Oosthuizen**, 'Crisis Response Strategies: A Case Study of the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal', *Proceedings of IASTEM International Conference* (Johannesburg, 2019).

[331] *Ibid.*

[332] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), 141–148.

[333] **Amy J. Wilson**, 'Slack: Case Study', *Empathy for Change*, *Medium*, 6 July 2021, https://medium.com/empathy-for-change/slack-case-study-5833a57289d2.

[334] **W. L. Benoit**, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory Extended* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2024);

E. Oster, *'KFC Responds to UK Chicken Shortage Scandal'*, *AdWeek*, 23 February 2018, https://www.adweek.com/creativity/kfc-responds-to-u-k-chicken-shortage-scandal-with-a-timely-fck-were-sorry/.

outrage and prolongs the recovery process. Conversely, when crises are viewed as accidents or technical failures (such as those experienced by Samsung and Slack), companies can implement corrective and informational strategies more effectively, provided these actions are executed promptly and with empathy. Moreover, the selection of platform, be it traditional media, corporate websites, or social media, significantly influences the interpretation of messages within the rhetorical landscape of public discourse.[335]

In the subsequent chapter, a detailed analysis of the case will be conducted to examine the similarities and differences in the organisations' strategies, as well as to identify the patterns of crisis communication.

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[335] **F. Frandsen** and **W. Johansen**, *Organizational Crisis Communication: A Multivocal Approach* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017).

Chapter 3

3.1 BP Deepwater Horizon Case Study

In April 2010, British Petroleum (BP) found itself at the epicentre of what would become the most devastating environmental crisis in U.S. history. The Deepwater Horizon rig, operating in the Macondo Prospect of the Gulf of Mexico and leased by BP from Transocean, had a catastrophic explosion during temporary drilling operations. The explosion and fire killed eleven workers and injured seventeen more. When the rig sank on 22 April, it left an open wellhead leaking thousands of barrels of oil per day into the Gulf waters.[336] The well would not be sealed until mid-September, by which time nearly 4.9 million barrels of oil had been discharged.[337]

The immediate reason was a technical issue, but the reputational damage arose from wider stakeholder perceptions influenced by BP's past lack of security, primarily the 2005 Texas City refinery explosion, which put doubt on the company's risk culture.[338] As the disaster developed, BP faced criticism from the public for its weak leadership, complex language, inconsistent communication, and misjudgment of the spill's magnitude. The media's image of BP officials, especially CEO Tony Hayward, whose miscommunication symbolised the company's distance from stakeholder emotion, intensified the public's response.[339] Under pressure from the U.S. government, President Obama publicly declared the disaster a national emergency and announced a $20 billion escrow fund to compensate affected communities. BP's leadership transitioned shortly after, with Hayward replaced in July by Bob Dudley, a Gulf-born executive whose appointment was designed to localise credibility and rebuild trust.[340] To regain reputational ground, BP launched a large-scale communication campaign under the banner "We will make this right." This multi-channel strategy included national TV advertisements, full-page newspaper apologies, and the deployment of Gulf-based BP employees as spokespeople. It was backed by a $20 billion

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[336] **National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling**, *Deep Water: The Gulf Oil Disaster and the Future of Offshore Drilling* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-OILCOMMISSION/pdf/GPO-OILCOMMISSION.pdf.

[337] **U.S. Department of the Interior**, *Final Estimate of Oil Released During Deepwater Horizon Spill*, 11 March 2011, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-OILCOMMISSION/pdf/GPO-OILCOMMISSION.pdf.

[338] **U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB)**, *Investigation Report: BP America Refinery Explosion, Texas City, Texas (March 23, 2005)* (Washington, DC: CSB, 2007), https://www.csb.gov/bp-america-refinery-explosion/.

[339] **J. Treanor**, 'Bob Dudley: The American Who Will Lead BP into Calmer Waters?', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jul/25/bob-dudley-profile-bp-ceo.

[340] **Reuters**, 'Full Text of Obama's Address on BP Oil Spill', *Reuters*, 16 June 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-spill-obama-text-idUSTRE65F02C20100616/.

compensation fund and a \$500 million commitment to environmental research.[341] But communication experts have pointed out that BP's messaging was still inconsistent across platforms, and social media sites often made criticism and stakeholder anger worse, which turned against the company's planned stories.[342]. Strategic framing research further revealed that BP's official communications attempted to emphasise recovery and action frames, but these were frequently disconnected from the emotionally charged, stakeholder-led discussions emerging online and in press coverage.[343]

3.1.1 Communication Analysis

The disaster of April 2010 is one of the most complex cases in crisis communication history. It was not perceived as an unforeseeable accident but rather as a preventable crisis rooted in organisational negligence and systemic failures. Situational Crisis Communication Theory provides a framework for categorising crises into victim, accidental, and preventable clusters, each associated with different levels of attributed responsibility and corresponding communication strategies.[344] BP initially framed the event as an accident; regulatory investigations and media narratives, however, emphasised safety violations, cost-cutting, and a history of prior operational failures, firmly placing the event within the preventable cluster.[345] Preventable crises are those where human error, organisational mismanagement, or unethical decision-making play a decisive role, thereby generating the highest degree of reputational threat under SCCT.[346]

The degree of organisational responsibility attributed to BP was further compounded by its history of crises. Coombs demonstrates that prior negative events intensify the reputational damage of new crises, even if the present event is less severe.[347] In BP's case, earlier safety lapses, including the 2005 Texas City refinery explosion and the 2006 Prudhoe Bay oil spill, reinforced the narrative

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[341] **W. L. Benoit**, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research*, 2nd edn (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), chapter 'British Petroleum and the Gulf Oil Spill: We Will Make This Right'.

[342] **L. V. Chewning**, 'Multiple Voices and Multiple Media: Co-constructing BP's Crisis Response', *Public Relations Review*, 41, no. 1 (2015), pp. 72–79.

[343] **F. Schultz, S. Utz** and **A. Göritz**, 'Strategic Framing in the BP Crisis: A Semantic Network Analysis of Associative Frames', *Public Relations Review*, 38 (2012), pp. 97–107.

[344] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the right words: The development of guidelines for the selection of the "appropriate" crisis response strategies', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8.4 (1995), pp. 447–476.

[345] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

[346] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10.3 (2007), pp. 163–176.

[347] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of past crises on current crisis communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41.3 (2004), pp. 265–289.

of a negligent corporation that consistently prioritised cost over safety.[348] These past crises created a reservoir of distrust, which SCCT predicts heightens reputational threat and constrains available communication strategies.[349]

The Deepwater Horizon spill also caused a lot of moral outrage, which is becoming increasingly clear as a major factor in how stakeholders react to crises.[350] Pictures of wildlife covered in oil, ruined fisheries, and ruined lives were symbolic triggers of anger and betrayal. People were angry not only about the damage to the environment, but also about what they saw as BP's arrogance, which was best shown by CEO Tony Hayward's famous quote: "I'd like my life back."[351] This statement made the sense of company indifference even stronger, which made it easier to blame someone.

The communication plan went back and forth between making people feel bad, building them up, and taking action to fix things. The company apologised, but it never fully took responsibility for the spill. Instead, it framed responsibility around the efforts to clean up and pay for the damage.[352] This partial acceptance went against SCCT guidelines, which say that when responsibility is high and reputational threat is severe, companies should fully rebuild, apologise, and take corrective action.[353] The company spent a lot of money on corrective action talk, which included sending out 6,000 ships, 50 planes, and billions of dollars in claims and cleanup money. But inconsistent messaging, changes in leadership, and a sense of defensiveness made this focus on technical recovery less effective.[354] The inconsistency between assigning blame (for a crisis that could have been avoided) and acting (partially mortifying and taking strong corrective action) hurt credibility. From the point of view of Image Repair Theory, BP used corrective action and mortification the most, along with local employee testimonials and Gulf business spokespeople, to strengthen their case.[355] The sequencing of strategies showed inconsistency: early denial and minimisation of the spill size gave way to apology and corrective action only under intense external pressure. Later campaigns, such as "We will make this right," showcased an extensive use of evidence and third-party credibility, notably featuring local small business owners and Gulf-based BP staff to signal

[348] **A. Schwarz**, The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016).

[349] **A.-S. Claeys** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Organizational crisis communication: Suboptimal crisis response selection decisions', *Organization Studies*, 41.8 (2020), pp. 1193–1216.

[350] **A.-S. Claeys** and **W. T. Coombs**, *Organizational Crisis Communication*, op. cit. A. Schwarz, *The Handbook*, op. cit.

[351] **S. Chen**, 'Crisis management 101: What can BP CEO Hayward's mistakes teach us?', *CNN*, 27 July 2010, https://edition.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/07/27/bp.tony.hayward.mistakes/.

[352] **W. L. Benoit**, op. cit.

[353] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

[354] BP, We Will Make This Right, advertisement (2010), in **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

[355] **W. L. Benoit**, op. cit.

community alignment and empathy.[356] This bolstering strategy reflected an attempt to regain legitimacy by emphasising shared values and proximity to those affected.[357] However, the initial strategic missteps, combined with emotionally flat delivery and legalistic language, limited the persuasive force of the later campaigns.[358]

BP was subject to intense public and political attack. President Obama's speech on national television made it clear that BP was to blame and promised to hold it accountable.[359] In response, BP didn't attack back directly and didn't blame its partners in public messages, even though it later sued Transocean and Halliburton. This public restraint, which was in line with the theory of reputational defence, was at odds with behind-the-scenes legal aggression, which made people think the company was being duplicitous.[360] Benoit's Persuasive Attack model applies here: BP faced public accusations that it caused harm and broke moral rules, especially because it was seen as careless and not sorry enough. Being silent, BP helped the attack story become stronger.[361]

At the same time, major news outlets began to call BP's actions "reckless," which added moral condemnation to the public conversation and made the damage to BP's reputation even worse.[362] This restraint was in line with the logic of protecting one's reputation, but media talk about "reckless behaviour" kept BP's negative framing going, which the company had a hard time fighting against.[363]

Stealing Thunder, the proactive disclosure of bad news, has been shown to reduce reputational damage by increasing perceived credibility.[364] BP failed with this strategy. The first estimates of oil flow were always too low, and BP only changed its numbers after outside scientists questioned them. This reactive stance gave up control of the story, which made people think it was opaque.

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[356] **A. M. Kanso**, **R. A. Nelson** and **P. J. Kitchen**, 'BP and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: A Case Study of How Company Management Employed Public Relations to Restore a Damaged Brand', *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 26, no. 7 (2020), pp. 703–731; **I. Urbina**, 'BP Spill Report Hints at Legal Defense', *New York Times*, 8 September 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/09/us/09spill.html.

[357] **W. L. Benoit**, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research*, 2nd edn (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), pp. 146–147; **F. Schultz**, **S. Utz** and **A. Göritz**, 'Strategic Framing in the BP Crisis: A Semantic Network Analysis of Associative Frames', *Public Relations Review*, 38 (2012), pp. 97–107.

[358] **A. Diers-Lawson** and **A. Pang**, 'Did BP Atone for Its Transgressions? Expanding Theory on "Ethical Apology" in Crisis Communication', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 24, no. 3 (2016), pp. 148–161.

[359] Reuters, 'Full text of Obama's BP oil spill speech', *Reuters*, 16 June 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-spill-obama-text-idUSTRE65F02C20100616/.

[360] National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, *Deep Water*, pp. 123–127.

[361] **L. V. Chewning**, 'Multiple Voices and Multiple Media: Co-constructing BP's Crisis Response', *Public Relations Review*, 41, no. 1 (2015), pp. 72–79.

[362] *Ibid.*

[363] **C. Krauss** and **B. Meier**, 'Reckless actions tolerated by BP, prosecutor says', *New York Times*, 29 January 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/business/judge-approves-bp-criminal-settlement.html.

[364] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, op. cit.

In failing to lead the narrative with honesty and vulnerability, BP surrendered the moral high ground and enabled adversarial frames to dominate.[365]

The Contingency Theory of Accommodation frames organisational responses along a continuum between pure advocacy and pure accommodation.[366] BP's position was flexible but limited. Internally, leadership and legal issues made it hard to fully accommodate, but externally, huge regulatory pressure and public anger made it necessary. The outcome was a mixed stance: financial help through billions of dollars in funds and corrective actions, along with advocacy when arguing about liability limits in court and negotiations. This strategic ambivalence was caused by conflicting pressures from inside (legal, financial) and outside (media, government, and the public) that affected communication choices.[367]

Looking at how BP used communication channels during the Deepwater Horizon crisis, it is possible to see that the company made mistakes early on that hurt the credibility and emotional impact of their messages. People didn't like BP's first public statements because they were too vague, too technical, and didn't connect with people emotionally. The first estimates of how big the oil spill was were later changed to be much higher, which made official communications less believable and made people more suspicious of the company's openness.

To fight the growing negative feelings, BP ran one of the biggest corporate crisis advertising campaigns in a long time. Eight full-page advertisements in major newspapers and 15 television commercials were launched with the central slogan "We will make this right".[368] The campaign included a robust emphasis on corrective action, e.g., clean-up operations, claims processing, and long-term research funding, as well as emotional bolstering through human interest stories and employee testimonials. These advertisements, analysed by Benoit, were rich in specific claims, including statistics on boats used in clean-up operations, the size of financial investments, and quotes from local tourism operators who had reportedly seen recovery.[369] However, the media's concurrent circulation of critical narratives diluted the potential impact of these messages.

BP used digital platforms like YouTube and its own website to host video messages, but user-generated content was more popular on social media. Accounts like @BPGlobalPR became very popular by making fun of the company's crisis rhetoric and pointing out inconsistencies. An academic examination of BP's digital crisis communication indicated that disjointed media and the

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[365] **L. V. Chewning**, 'Multiple Voices and Multiple Media', *Public Relations Review*, 41, no. 1 (2015), pp. 72–79.

[366] **A. E. Cancel, G. T. Cameron, L. M. Sallot** and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It depends: A contingency theory of accommodation in public relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

[367] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook** and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the contingency theory of accommodation', *Public Relations Review*, 25.2 (1999), pp. 171–197.

[368] BP, *We Will Make This Right* (2010), in **W. L. Benoit**, op. cit.

[369] **W. L. Benoit**, op. cit.

interactive characteristics of social platforms undermined the efficacy of top-down messaging, consequently enhancing public scepticism.[370]

Although less visible in public sources, internal communication was oriented toward mobilising employee participation in recovery and reinforcing organisational commitment. BP's strategic use of employees, especially those from the Gulf region, as spokespeople can be seen to communicate with both the outside world and the inside world, boosting morale and unity under pressure. One of the major criticisms levelled at BP's communication was its inconsistency. Messages about technical recovery often went against the tone set by earlier interviews and press briefings. There was no clear single voice in the company's discourse. One study found that BP's response was marked by "multiple voices and multiple media," which made it harder for the company to show a unified identity.[371] BP's disclosures were often reactive instead of proactive. The company only changed its flow rate estimates after outside experts questioned the original data. Most of the company's public engagement was focused on dealing with reputational fallout instead of leading the information agenda. This failure to employ the Stealing Thunder approach contributed to stakeholder perceptions that BP was reluctant to face the full extent of its responsibility.[372]

3.1.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder responses to the disaster were extensive and highly emotional, especially within communities most directly affected by the spill's consequences. Public anger, criticism from institutions, and damage to BP's reputation all came together to paint the company as not a victim of bad luck in the industry, but as a corporate criminal of environmental and moral failure.

The Gulf of Mexico area had a lot of problems with its ecology, economy, and daily life. People who lived in the area, worked in tourism-dependent businesses, or fished were among the most affected. BP tried to present the company as a partner in recovery in public ads by prominently showcasing local employees who said they shared the same identity as the region. One such message stated: "The region is home to thousands of BP employees, so we also feel the impact".[373] Nevertheless, such efforts to portray emotional proximity were met with scepticism, given the magnitude of the environmental and economic damage. Researchers observed that the local

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[370] **S. Muralidharan, K. Dillistone** and **J.-H. Shin**, 'The Gulf Coast oil spill: Extending the theory of image restoration discourse to the realm of social media and beyond petroleum', *Public Relations Review*, 37.3 (2011), pp. 226–232.

[371] **L. V. Chewning**, op. cit.

[372] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing thunder: Analysis of the effects of proactive disclosure of crisis information', *Public Relations Review*, 31.3 (2005), pp. 425–433.

[373] BP, *We Will Make This Right*, op. cit.

spokesperson strategy worked in theory, but the fact that the media was showing BP as secretive and not responsible at the same time hurt its emotional impact.[374]

After the crisis, BP's market capitalisation fell significantly, with share value halving over the course of several weeks. Investor confidence was shaken not only by the operational failure but by the company's communication and leadership missteps. The financial community reacted to both what they thought was bad crisis management and the size of the possible debts. The company's economic recovery in the years that followed shows that some investors regained their trust, but the reputational discount during the crisis phase showed how worried people were about BP's response to the disaster and how accountable it was.[375]

The media had a big impact on how stakeholders reacted, especially through emotional images. Seabirds smeared in oil, habitats ruined, and families in despair all told a compelling picture of loss and treachery. Even though BP ran a big ad campaign on TV and in newspapers with the slogan "We will make this right," several news stories pointed out problems and questioned the company's honesty.[376]

A 2015 study of BP's crisis communication found that media coverage often changed the way BP's words were presented and understood, which caused communication problems and made people think the company was spinning things.[377] This phenomenon, where public relations efforts are re-mediated and stripped of control, further intensified distrust.

BP employees were themselves affected by the reputational crisis, with internal morale reportedly shaken. The company's use of local employees in advertising had a goal to humanise its image and signal solidarity with the affected population. Darryl Willis, a Louisiana native, appeared in both TV and print ads to state: "I volunteered for this assignment because this is my home".[378] These appeals attempted to foster trust and distance the company from abstract corporate blame. But these strategies, while emotionally powerful, didn't do much to counteract the public's larger moral outrage. The contrast between emotionally warm local voices and CEO-level defensiveness in early interviews created credibility tensions that made it harder to convince stakeholders.[379]

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[374] **W. L. Benoit**, op. cit.

[375] BP, 'BP announces final estimate of Deepwater Horizon oil spill, but are they being honest?', *DeSmog*, 18 July 2016, https://www.desmog.com/2016/07/18/bp-announces-final-estimate-deepwater-horizon-oil-spill-are-they-being-honest/.

[376] BP, *Gulf of Mexico Response: Communities* (2010), in **W. L. Benoit**, op. cit.

[377] **L. V. Chewning**, 'Multiple voices and multiple media: Co-constructing BP's crisis response', *Public Relations Review*, 41.1 (2015), pp. 72–79.

[378] BP, *Gulf of Mexico Response: Claims* (2010), in **W. L. Benoit**, op. cit.

[379] Chen, 'Crisis management 101', *op. cit.*

3.1.3 Reputation Impact

The disaster had serious effects on BP's finances, public trust, and long-term reputation. The crisis changed how people saw the company, not just as a global oil company that had an accident, but as a careless company whose culture and decisions led to one of the worst environmental disasters in corporate history.

BP's stock price dropped significantly right after the spill, losing more than half of its market value between April and June 2010. This drop reflected investor fears over possible fines, legal problems, and reputational damage. While the company's financial performance eventually stabilised in the years that followed, with the announcement of recovery in net earnings by 2011. But this financial recovery did not mean that BP's reputation was also restored.[380]

In the early stages, the media and the public were extremely furious. News stories, social media, and political talk all made BP look bad, and pictures of environmental damage were the focus of the global media. Scholars argue that outside groups, like the U.S. government, prosecutors, and scientists, who questioned the company's openness and accused it of being careless, repeatedly damaged BP's efforts to fix its image.[381] One U.S. Justice Department prosecutor, Michael Underhill, openly stated that "reckless actions were tolerated by BP, sometimes encouraged by BP," a sentiment widely covered and interpreted as evidence of deep organisational failure.[382]

Leadership change formed a critical component of the short-term response. On 26 July 2010, BP confirmed that CEO Tony Hayward would step down, replaced by Bob Dudley. Since Hayward had become a liability in public discourse, the change was generally seen as a symbolic reset.[383] Dudley, born in the United States and previously responsible for BP's Gulf of Mexico operations, was strategically positioned to repair strained relations with U.S. regulators and local communities.[384] Despite BP's later efforts to present its clean-up and restitution work as evidence of responsibility, public trust remained low in affected communities. Reputation surveys conducted in subsequent years consistently ranked BP among the least trusted global companies, especially in the environmental sector.[385] Moreover, branding initiatives associated with

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[380] BP, 'BP announces final estimate of Deepwater Horizon oil spill, but are they being honest?", *op. cit.*

[381] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

[382] **C. Krauss** and **B. Meier**, 'Reckless actions tolerated by BP, prosecutor says', *The New York Times*, 30 January 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/business/judge-approves-bp-criminal-settlement.html.

[383] **A. Clark** and **S. Bowers**, 'BP chief executive Tony Hayward to quit', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jul/26/tony-hayward-to-quit-bp.

[384] **J. Treanor**, 'Bob Dudley: The American who will lead BP into calmer waters?', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jul/25/bob-dudley-profile-bp-ceo.

[385] **K. Nuortimo, H. Rämö** and **E. Vähämaa**, 'Exploring corporate reputation and crisis communication', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 27.1 (2024), pp. 1–20.

sustainability, specifically, the "Beyond Petroleum" campaign, were successfully discredited. The Deepwater Horizon catastrophe's scope eclipsed the brand's connection to environmental advancement. Stakeholders continued to associate BP with the crisis even years after the well was sealed, indicating that reputational harm had become ingrained in the system.

Over time, however, a sort of functional legitimacy was achieved. Many of the company's pledges were met, including creating a $500 million research fund for long-term scientific evaluation, assisting with wildlife rehabilitation, cleaning up beaches, and paying affected companies. Later corporate communications acknowledged these significant actions, but the public did not always trust them.[386] A strategy that relies entirely on corrective action without consistently addressing moral and emotional expectations is insufficient, as evidenced by the discrepancy between the recovery of financial performance and the restoration of brand trust. BP's operations and balance sheets were more successfully restored in terms of reputation than its identity and credibility.

3.1.4 Summary and Lessons Learnt

The incident serves as an example of how crisis response tactics' consistency, sequencing, emotional resonance, and perceived sincerity all influence how effective they are. It also highlights how even well-resourced efforts can have their impact amplified or limited by the strategic context, which includes past crisis history, outside pressure, and cultural expectations.

Multiple strategies were used in BP's response: bolstering, which involved testimonials from Gulf Coast local employees and affected business owners; mortification, which was expressed through limited apologies; and corrective action, which included environmental cleanup and the establishment of compensation funds.[387] These strategies fit into the framework of Image Repair Theory, which suggests that mortification and corrective action are two of the best ways to handle high-responsibility crises.[388] However, BP's efforts to rebuild public trust were only partially successful, even with its massive response, with billions in compensation commitments, and a $500 million fund for environmental research.[389]

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[386] BP, 'Active shoreline clean-up operations for the Deepwater Horizon accident end', *BP Press Release*, 15 April 2014, https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/press-releases/active-shoreline-cleanup-operations-dwh-accident-end.html.

[387] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

[388] *Ibid.*

[389] BP, 'Active shoreline clean-up operations for the Deepwater Horizon accident end', *BP Press Release*, 15 April 2014, https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/press-releases/active-shoreline-cleanup-operations-dwh-accident-end.html.

Timing was a major mistake. In the early stages of the catastrophe, BP did not implement a proactive communication strategy. After third-party assessments, flow-rate estimates were repeatedly updated upward, indicating that the company first tried to minimise the crisis.[390] This delay not only contradicted the Stealing Thunder principle, which promotes early, voluntary disclosure as a means of preserving credibility, but also reinforced public perceptions that BP lacked transparency.[391]

Another challenge was inconsistency in messaging across platforms and spokespersons. While TV commercials and full-page ads showed BP as calm, sensitive, and dedicated to "making this right," Tony Hayward, the company's then-CEO, demonstrated a more defensive and technical impression in his early public appearances. These contradictions weakened the company's capacity to encourage emotional engagement and diluted the intended narrative.[392] Research on BP's crisis discourse found that the communication effort was marked by "multiple voices and multiple media," which fragmented its messaging and created reputational dissonance.[393]

BP was partially rehabilitated in terms of long-term recovery. The company's financial stability and operational resumption under Bob Dudley's leadership showed that corrective action can aid in the restoration of functional legitimacy.[394] Years later, however, surveys and research show that moral legitimacy, the idea that the business had behaved morally and learnt from its mistakes, remained elusive.[395]

Furthermore, this case highlights the importance of cumulative crisis history. BP had experienced previous crises, including the 2005 Texas City refinery explosion and the 2006 Prudhoe Bay oil spill, which had already weakened stakeholder confidence. In such cases, the bar for reputation restoration is higher, and stakeholders are less forgiving of communication missteps.[396] According to SCCT, an organisation with a history of similar incidents must adopt more accommodating

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[390] BP, 'BP announces final estimate of Deepwater Horizon oil spill, but are they being honest?', *DeSmog*, 18 July 2016, https://www.desmog.com/2016/07/18/bp-announces-final-estimate-deepwater-horizon-oil-spill-are-they-being-honest/.

[391] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing thunder: Analysis of the effects of proactive disclosure of crisis information', *Public Relations Review*, 31.3 (2005), pp. 425–433.

[392] S. **Chen**, 'Crisis management 101: What can BP CEO Hayward's mistakes teach us?', *CNN*, 27 July 2010, https://edition.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/07/27/bp.tony.hayward.mistakes/.

[393] **L. V. Chewning**, 'Multiple voices and multiple media: Co-constructing BP's crisis response', *Public Relations Review*, 41.1 (2015), pp. 72–79.

[394] J. **Treanor**, 'Bob Dudley: The American who will lead BP into calmer waters?', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/jul/25/bob-dudley-profile-bp-ceo.

[395] **A. Diers-Lawson** and **A. Pang**, 'Did BP atone for its transgressions? Expanding theory on "ethical apology" in crisis communication', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 24.3 (2016), pp. 148–161.

[396] **K. Nuortimo, H. Rämö** and **E. Vähämaa**, 'Exploring corporate reputation and crisis communication', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 27.1 (2024), pp. 1–20.

strategies and demonstrate meaningful change to regain trust.[397] While BP did invest in post-crisis remediation, its symbolic communication, such as a full and unequivocal apology and transparent leadership transformation, lagged behind expectations.

The Deepwater Horizon crisis offers several lessons. First, BP lost the chance to influence public perceptions and gave third-party actors like scientists, reporters, and regulators command of the crisis framing by neglecting to recognise the disaster's likely magnitude early on.[398] Regardless of their content, the credibility of later declarations and initiatives was seriously damaged by this delay. Second, confusion and eroded trust resulted from the discrepancy between BP's official campaigns, which demonstrated empathy and dedication, and its executive communications, which came across as defensive or impersonal. Reputational coherence requires strategic alignment across all internal and external communication channels.[399] Third, the case illustrates the limitations of financial and operational corrective action in the absence of moral engagement. Although BP's massive compensation and cleanup initiatives helped to stabilise the economy and restore the environment, they fell badly in meeting the public's moral and emotional needs. Stakeholders wanted not only accountability, but signs of cultural change within the organisation. Fourth, it was essential to replace Tony Hayward with Bob Dudley to show responsiveness to stakeholder concerns. However, in order to reinforce the message that lessons have been learnt and reforms are underway, such changes must also be accompanied by more significant changes in the organisational tone and communication style.

Finally, the case affirms that long-term reputation restoration depends on an organisation's ability to combine symbolic repair (apology, empathy, cultural reform) with functional repair (clean-up, compensation, legal resolution). The two must be synchronised, not sequential. Emotional intelligence, trust-building, and consistency are as important as investment levels when managing the consequences of large-scale reputational crises.

3.2 VW Diesel-Gate Case Study

Volkswagen AG was not only a major player in the global auto industry but also a representation of German industrial prowess in the years preceding 2015. With its headquarters located in Wolfsburg, Germany, the company was founded in 1937 and has since expanded into a vast

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[397] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10.3 (2007), pp. 163–176.

[398] BP, 'BP announces final estimate…', op. cit.

[399] Chen, op. cit.

multinational.[400] It was a symbol of environmental innovation and precision engineering.[401] Central to this identity was the company's bold push into "clean diesel." Volkswagen presented its diesel technology as a green alternative in a market dominated by gasoline-powered cars, especially in the United States. These engines provided the driving performance that consumers had come to expect from German engineering, along with better fuel economy and lower CO_2 emissions.[402] The "clean diesel" campaign was more than a marketing slogan; it was an attempt to redefine consumer perceptions of diesel itself. In Europe, where diesel vehicles were already established, the technology was presented as a natural choice for efficiency-conscious drivers; in the US, it was promoted as a forward-thinking environmental statement.[403] By 2014, this strategy appeared to be paying off. Volkswagen had become the world's second-largest car manufacturer. In the US, diesel sales accounted for a growing share of Volkswagen's revenue.[404] The company's sustainability reports boasted progress toward environmental goals, reinforcing its reputation as a responsible global citizen.[405] Yet behind the scenes, this image rested on a dangerous compromise. As early as 2006, internal meetings among senior executives and engineers confronted a problem: meeting increasingly strict nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions standards in the US without sacrificing engine performance was proving technically and financially difficult.[406] The solution, as later revealed, was the deliberate development of a "defeat device", a piece of software embedded in the engine control unit that could detect when the vehicle was undergoing emissions testing and adjust performance to comply with regulations. In normal driving, the system reverted to higher performance settings that emitted NOx far above legal limits.[407]

The scandal's discovery began with academics. In 2013, the International Council on Clean Transportation commissioned the Centre for Alternative Fuels, Engines, and Emissions at West Virginia University to conduct on-road emissions tests of diesel vehicles, including Volkswagen's Jetta and Passat.[408] The results were startling: emissions were between 8 and 35 times higher than

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[400] **Welch**, J., 'The Volkswagen recovery: leaving scandal in the dust', *Journal of Business Strategy*, 40.2 (2019), p. 3.

[401] **Volkswagen AG**, *Sustainability Reports* (pre-2015), cited in **Painter**, C. and **Martins**, J. T., 'Corporate response to the Volkswagen emissions scandal: The importance of legitimacy and reputation', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 142.2 (2017), p. 205.

[402] **Raupp**, J., 'Crisis communication in the rhetorical arena', *Public Relations Review* (2019), p. 3.

[403] *Ibid.*

[404] **Welch**, op. cit., p. 3.

[405] **Volkswagen AG**, *Sustainability Reports* (pre-2015), cited in **Painter** and **Martins**, op. cit., p. 205.

[406] **Ewing**, J., *Faster, Higher, Farther: The Volkswagen Scandal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), cited in **Welch**, op. cit., p. 4.

[407] **Painter** and **Martins**, op. cit., p. 204.

[408] **Franco**, V., **Sánchez**, F., **German**, J. and **Mock**, P., 'Real-world exhaust emissions from modern diesel cars', *International Council on Clean Transportation* (2014), cited in **Welch**, op. cit., p. 4.

permitted under US law.[409] These findings were shared with the California Air Resources Board (CARB) and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in May 2014, prompting over a year of further inquiries.[410] During this period, Volkswagen provided technical explanations that regulators later described as evasive. Rather than disclosing the defeat devices, the company suggested calibration irregularities and possible technical malfunctions.[411] This prolonged back-and-forth ended abruptly on 18 September 2015, when the EPA issued a formal Notice of Violation under the Clean Air Act, publicly alleging that Volkswagen had intentionally equipped approximately 482,000 vehicles in the US with software designed to cheat emissions tests.[412] Days later, Volkswagen admitted that the issue was far larger: 11 million cars worldwide were equipped with the defeat device.[413]

The scandal broke during the Frankfurt Motor Show, one of the most significant events on the automotive calendar, thereby amplifying global media attention.[414] Within a week, CEO Martin Winterkorn had resigned, stating he was "shocked" by the events but accepting "responsibility for the irregularities".[415] Matthias Müller, then CEO of Porsche, was appointed as his successor, inheriting what he described as "the greatest challenge in the history of the company".[416]

3.2.1   Communication Analysis

The Volkswagen Dieselgate scandal illustrates the close link between attribution of responsibility and the choice of communication strategies. From the standpoint of SCCT, Dieselgate clearly belongs to the preventable crisis cluster, where organisations knowingly violate rules and are therefore held to the highest level of responsibility.[417] The discovery that Volkswagen had deliberately installed "defeat device" software, known internally since at least 2006, meant that the company could no longer credibly frame the event as an accident or misunderstanding.[418] In such cases, SCCT recommends an immediate rebuild strategy, which includes a full apology, acceptance

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[409] Center for Alternative Fuels, Engines and Emissions, *Research Report* (2014), cited in Painter and Martins, op. cit., p. 204.

[410] **Welch**, op. cit., p. 4.

[411] **Painter** and **Martins**, op. cit., p. 204.

[412] **US Environmental Protection Agency**, *Notice of Violation* (2015), cited in **Painter** and **Martins**, op. cit., p. 204.

[413] **Volkswagen AG**, *Annual Sustainability Reports* (2015a–m), cited in **Painter** and **Martins**, op. cit., p. 204.

[414] **Welch**, op. cit., p. 4.

[415] **Volkswagen AG**, *Press Release*, 23 September 2015, cited in **Painter** and **Martins**, op. cit., p. 210.

[416] **Volkswagen AG**, *Annual Report 2015*, cited in **Painter** and **Martins**, op. cit., p. 204.

[417] **W. T. Coombs**, *Ongoing Crisis Communication* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007).

[418] **J. Ewing**, cited in **J. Welch**, Volkswagen's Emissions Crisis: A Case of Failed Crisis Communication? (2019), p. 4.

of blame, and corrective action.[419] Instead, Volkswagen initially attempted to diminish and deny responsibility. Early statements in September 2015 suggested that the emissions discrepancies were due to "technical issues" or misunderstandings with US regulators, and the company even hinted that rogue engineers were responsible.[420]

This partial denial directly conflicted with the high level of responsibility already fixed in the public mind, particularly as the US EPA and CARB had released evidence-based accusations.[421] The effect was a widening gap between what theory prescribes and what the company delivered: rather than beginning the process of trust restoration, Volkswagen's hesitation deepened scepticism and extended the reputational crisis.

Image Repair Theory helps explain this trajectory. Volkswagen employed all five categories of Benoit's strategies, but in a problematic sequence. It began with denial and evasion of responsibility, moved to reducing offensiveness by pointing to its broader record of innovation, and only later adopted corrective action (recalls, buybacks) and mortification through staged public apologies.[422] The sequencing undermined the sincerity of the later strategies: when mortification follows denial, audiences often perceive apologies as tactical rather than authentic.[423] This pattern was evident in consumer and media reactions, where apologies were dismissed as forced responses to regulatory pressure rather than genuine expressions of contrition.

The rhetorical confrontation can also be read through the Persuasive Attack Theory. Once credible authorities such as the EPA substantiated wrongdoing, Volkswagen faced public attacks from regulators, NGOs, consumers, and the media.[424] Defensive tactics that might have worked in cases of ambiguity, such as questioning testing methods, quickly collapsed under the weight of evidence. Volkswagen largely avoided discrediting regulators, recognising that open confrontation would further damage legitimacy. Instead, it attempted to shift the narrative toward corporate reform and technological solutions, positioning itself as an actor capable of future improvement rather than as an adversary.[425] This repositioning was a necessary long-term move, but the initial denial phase weakened its effect.

[419] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, 'Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16, no. 2 (2002), pp. 165–186.

[420] Volkswagen Press Release, 20 September 2015, cited in **C. Painter** and **J. T. Martins**, 'Dieselgate', *Journal of Strategic Communication*, 11, no. 3 (2017), p. 210.

[421] Painter and Martins, 'Dieselgate', p. 205.

[422] **W. L. Benoit**, 'Image Repair Theory', in **R. L. Heath** (ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), pp. 263–280.

[423] Painter and Martins, 'Dieselgate', p. 207.

[424] **J. Raupp**, 'Crisis Communication in the Rhetorical Arena', *Public Relations Review*, 45, no. 5 (2019), p. 3.

[425] **J. Welch**, Volkswagen's Emissions Crisis, p. 6.

Another example of the misalignment between attribution and communication is the lack of Stealing Thunder, which proactively disclosed harmful information. Even under high responsibility, Volkswagen might have maintained some credibility if it had acknowledged that the defeat devices existed before regulatory announcements.[426] Rather, disclosure was reactive, letting critics dictate the course of events. The company's refusal to publish the entire Jones Day report, which was justified legally but was widely interpreted as ongoing concealment, undermined subsequent attempts to "catch up" with partial transparency, such as the release of internal investigation updates.[427] Research shows that while reactive disclosure reinforces impressions of dishonesty, proactive transparency frequently mitigates reputational harm.[428]

Taken together, the case shows how attribution influences strategy: denial and diminishment are almost always ineffective during high-responsibility crises. Volkswagen's slow movement toward rebuilding strategies prolonged reputational harm and prevented its later corrective actions and apologies from achieving their full restorative potential.

Volkswagen's communication can be interpreted as a slow transition from advocacy to accommodation when viewed through the lens of the Contingency Theory of Accommodation. The business defended its position, attempted to minimise responsibility, and took on a more advocacy-like tone during the first few weeks. Volkswagen changed to a more accommodating position as regulatory evidence accumulated, and public outrage increased. It cooperated with investigations, provided buybacks and compensation, and ultimately committed to significant investments in environmental and electric mobility projects.[429]

This progression was not smooth but was forced by mounting external pressure. Every change, from advocacy to partial admission, from denial to accommodation, occurred only when escalation by the public or regulations left no other choice. With cross-jurisdictional settlements and a new strategic identity focused on sustainability, Volkswagen had significantly improved its accommodation by 2017. Yet the slow pace of this transition meant that financial survival outpaced reputational recovery. The lesson of Dieselgate is that, in crises where responsibility is clear, delayed accommodation weakens the impact of later concessions. Even though Volkswagen's finances eventually recovered well, years later, the damage to its reputation from its hesitation and deceit is still evident.[430]

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[426] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: An Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31, no. 3 (2005), pp. 425–433.

[427] Painter and Martins, 'Dieselgate', p. 205.

[428] Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 'Stealing Thunder'.

[429] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook** and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation', *Public Relations Review*, 25, no. 2 (1999), pp. 171–197.

[430] Welch, Volkswagen's Emissions Crisis, p. 7.

3.2.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholders' reaction to the Volkswagen diesel emissions scandal in September 2015 was swift, intense, and worldwide. Outrage, betrayal, and, among some loyalists, a mild sympathy for the brand's history were the most frequent responses, though the emotional tone differed among groups. Customers were some of the most outspoken. Many people felt cheated, particularly those who bought diesel models because of their environmental credentials.[431] Social media platforms were filled with posts expressing anger and calls for boycotts, accompanied by the hashtag #Dieselgate.[432] Some owners in the United States joined class-action lawsuits, while others tried to sell their cars in secondary markets.[433] In Europe, where diesel engines were more culturally entrenched, reactions were mixed. Even though headlines were dominated by outrage, some customers showed loyalty because they were proud of their country and thought VW engineering was good.[434]

Investors reacted swiftly. Volkswagen's share price dropped by almost 30% in just two trading days after the EPA's announcement, reducing the company's market value by billions.[435] Investor sentiment was dominated by concerns over the scope of regulatory penalties, the long-term impact on diesel as a viable market segment, and the broader reputational damage.[436] This erosion of confidence was compounded by uncertainty over leadership stability after Winterkorn's resignation.[437]

Media outlets played a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment. The framing of Dieselgate was overwhelmingly critical, often employing moral language, such as "betrayal," "cheating," and "lies," to describe the company's actions.[438] This moral framing amplified public outrage, particularly in the United States, where corporate wrongdoing is viewed through an ethical lens rather than a technical one.[439]

Regulators reacted with public censure as well as procedural authority. Press conferences by the CARB and US EPA highlighted the extent of the fraud.[440] Despite being slower to react at first, European regulators eventually started their investigations, and the European Commission issued

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[431] **C. Painter** and **J. T. Martins**, *Product-Harm Crises and Spillover Effects* (2017), p. 207.

[432] **J. Raupp**, Crisis Communication in the Rhetorical Arena (2019), p. 6.

[433] Product-Harm Crises and Spillover Effects (2017), p. 2.

[434] **J. Welch**, VW Walking the Environmental Responsibility Talk (2019), p. 5.

[435] Financial Times data, cited in **Welch**, *op. cit.*

[436] **Welch**, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[437] **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

[438] **Raupp**, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[439] **Ø. Ihlen** and **R. L. Heath**, *The Handbook of Organizational Rhetoric and Communication* (2020).

[440] US Environmental Protection Agency (2015), cited in **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

a warning about systemic oversight failures.[441] The tone of regulatory engagement was uncompromising, reflecting both legal obligations and the political capital to be gained from holding a global corporation accountable.[442]

Employees faced a complex emotional landscape. Many were shocked and dismayed at the revelations, concerned about the reputational impact on their careers and the company's future.[443] The engineering and compliance departments suffered the most from low internal morale as a result of investigators and the media inspecting their employees.[444] While some defended the broader workforce as victims of executive-level decisions, others admitted a pervasive sense of shame.[445]

3.2.3 Reputation Impact

The short-term consequences of Dieselgate were immediate, severe, and multi-dimensional. In the financial markets, Volkswagen's share price collapsed by almost 30% in the two trading days following the US Environmental Protection Agency's 18 September 2015 notice of violation.[446] This wiped tens of billions of euros from the company's market capitalisation and triggered panic among investors uncertain about the potential scale of legal penalties.[447] Analysts predicted, and regulators later confirmed, that the crisis would cost the company more than €25 billion in settlements, fines, and technical fixes over the coming years.[448]

Media sentiment was overwhelmingly negative in the first months, and it remained critical throughout 2016. Moral terms like "cheating," "lying," and "betrayal" were frequently used in American headlines, framing the scandal as an ethical breach rather than a technical compliance issue.[449] European coverage was similarly critical, though in markets like Germany, a parallel narrative emerged that combined condemnation with concern for the national economic impact of damage to a flagship industrial brand.[450] The crisis prompted an immediate leadership change. CEO Martin Winterkorn resigned on 23 September 2015, insisting on his ignorance of the

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[441] **Raupp**, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[442] *Ibid.*

[443] **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

[444] *Ibid.*

[445] **Welch**, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[446] Financial Times data, cited in **J. Welch**, *VW Walking the Environmental Responsibility Talk* (2019).

[447] **C. Painter** and **J. T. Martins**, *Product-Harm Crises and Spillover Effects* (2017), p. 204.

[448] **J. Welch**, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[449] **J. Raupp**, Crisis Communication in the Rhetorical Arena (2019), p. 3.

[450] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

wrongdoing but accepting "responsibility for the irregularities".[451] Matthias Müller, his successor, had to lead the business through its worst crisis in decades. VW announced major restructuring changes under Müller's direction, including a reorganisation of compliance departments and a renewed emphasis on electric mobility.[452]

Recovery was uneven in terms of stakeholder trust. Short-term trust erosion was dramatic: consumer confidence in VW's environmental claims collapsed, particularly in the US, where the diesel brand was effectively irreparable.[453] In Europe, trust recovery was slower but more achievable, owing to the region's entrenched diesel culture and brand loyalty.[454] Investors regained some confidence as VW's financial performance stabilised in late 2016, supported by strong sales in China and non-diesel segments.[455] Brand rehabilitation has been partial. By 2019, VW had regained much of its pre-crisis sales volume, driven by aggressive investment in electric vehicles and global marketing campaigns emphasising a "new Volkswagen".[456] Yet reputational scars remain: the phrase "Dieselgate" is now embedded in the corporate lexicon as shorthand for corporate environmental deception.[457] In sustainability rankings and consumer trust surveys, VW continues to lag behind competitors that avoided similar scandals.[458] There is a mixed degree of alignment between strategy and recovery. Due to VW's size, market diversification, and engineering capacity, the financial recovery has been robust; however, the reputational recovery has been more gradual and insufficient. The delayed shift from partial denial to full acceptance of responsibility, combined with the absence of early transparency, limited the effectiveness of long-term brand repair.[459]

3.2.4 Summary and Lessons Learnt

Volkswagen's Dieselgate crisis shows how the sequence, timing, and framing of crisis response strategies can impact the depth and pace of reputational recovery. The company's handling of the scandal shows that financial rehabilitation and market survival are possible, even after systemic misconduct, but that reputational scars endure when responses are delayed, reactive, and inconsistent. When the Environmental Protection Agency issued its notice of violation on 18

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[451] VW Press Release, 23 September 2015, cited in **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

[452] **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

[453] *Ibid.*, p. 207.

[454] **Welch**, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[455] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[456] Volkswagen AG Annual Reports 2018–2019, cited in **Welch**, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[457] **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[458] **Raupp**, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[459] **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

September 2015, Volkswagen was thrust into what would quickly become one of the most severe corporate crises in automotive history. Denial and minimisation dominated the company's immediate response, which blamed rogue engineers and framed the problem as technical irregularities. Credibility was weakened immediately by such messaging, which may have been meant to reduce legal liability but conflicted with growing regulatory evidence and media portrayals of intentional deception By taking this position, Volkswagen handed the narrative over to outside parties, such as journalists, regulators, and non-governmental organisations, who presented the scandal as a breach of public confidence rather than a technical problem that could be resolved. This early loss of narrative control entrenched distrust among stakeholders and made subsequent apologies appear reactive and insincere.[460]

The turning point was CEO Winterkorn's resignation in September 2015, which represented accountability but did little to dispel suspicions of systemic dishonesty. Matthias Müller, who took over for him, changed the company's tone to one of acceptance and reform. He promised to fully cooperate with regulators and started global recalls. By 2016, Volkswagen had launched extensive corrective measures, including vehicle buybacks, retrofits, and compensation schemes. These efforts, while financially costly, over €25 billion in penalties and settlements, were necessary for operational legitimacy. Yet their reputational effect was blunted by the sequencing problem: apologies and corrective actions followed denial, reinforcing perceptions that the company acted under pressure rather than out of genuine contrition.[461]

The limitations of such an approach are highlighted by long-term consequences. Volkswagen's reputation took longer to recover than its financial situation. Global sales had increased by 2017, especially in China and non-diesel markets, and the company had regained its top position as the biggest automaker in the world. Its market position was further enhanced by strategic investments in sustainability and electric mobility. Volkswagen's environmental credibility was permanently damaged, though, as it continued to lag its peers in consumer trust rankings and sustainability indices. Despite the company's commercial resilience, the term "Dieselgate" became a cultural

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[460] Volkswagen Press Release, 20 September 2015, cited in **C. Painter** and **J. T. Martins**, 'Organisational Communication Management During the Volkswagen Diesel Emissions Scandal', *Knowledge and Process Management*, 24, no. 3 (2017), p. 210;

J. Raupp, 'Crisis Communication in the Rhetorical Arena', *Public Relations Review*, 45, no. 5 (2019), p. 3.

[461] Volkswagen Press Release, 23 September 2015, cited in Painter and Martins, 'Organisational Communication Management', p. 210;

J. Welch, 'The Volkswagen Recovery: Leaving Scandal in the Dust', *Journal of Business Strategy*, 40, no. 2 (2019), pp. 4–7.

shorthand for corporate greenwashing, indicating the ongoing harm to the company's reputation.[462]

The case shows that reputational recovery requires more than financial settlements and product recalls. In Dieselgate, the order of tactics was crucial. Reactive disclosure damaged perceptions of transparency, denial followed by apology weakened the authenticity of mortification, and a gradual shift from defensive advocacy to full accommodation resulted in incomplete closure of reputational wounds. VW, on the other hand, might have maintained some degree of credibility even under high responsibility attribution if it had implemented early disclosure, accepted immediate responsibility, and interacted directly with stakeholders.

This case shows that crisis response plans that are not in line with public expectations can ensure operational and financial survival but still fall short of complete reputational restoration. Marketwise, the company survived and thrived, but the persistent symbolic link to dishonesty emphasises how difficult it is to repair reputations damaged by avoidable wrongdoing. The lesson is that delayed acceptance of responsibility is not only a tactical mistake but a strategic failure that hinders long-term reputational rehabilitation in crises where culpability is evident.[463]

The Dieselgate crisis offers a set of lessons for crisis communication theory and practice.

First, Volkswagen had the chance to take charge of the conversation during the first 72 hours following the EPA announcement. Rather, it missed the "golden window" when public perceptions are still developing by prioritising legal caution over emotional resonance in its initial statements.[464] The lesson: in high-responsibility crises, the cost of delayed responsibility acceptance outweighs the legal risks of early admission in the long-term reputational ledger. Second, as IRT emphasises, the order in which response strategies are deployed shapes their effectiveness. VW's decision to start with denial before moving on to corrective action undermined the credibility of its following apologies.[465] A more effective sequence would have combined early mortification with immediate corrective action, reinforced by a bolstering that drew on the company's strengths without downplaying the wrongdoing. Third, the absence of Stealing Thunder meant that the first public account of Dieselgate came from adversarial sources, framing VW as deceptive before it had had a chance to speak. Proactive transparency, even if partial, could have signalled integrity

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[462] **J. J. Zhang**, 'Product-Harm Crises and Spillover Effects: A Case Study of the Volkswagen Diesel Emissions Scandal in eBay Used Car Auction Markets', *Marketing Letters*, 28, no. 1 (2017), p. 2; Welch, 'The Volkswagen Recovery', p. 7.

[463] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31, no. 3 (2005), pp. 425–433;

A. E. Cancel, **M. A. Mitrook** and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation', *Public Relations Review*, 25, no. 2 (1999), pp. 171–197.

[464] **Coombs**, *op. cit.*

[465] **Benoit**, *op. cit.*

and possibly mitigated the "corporate villain" framing.[466] Fourth, VW ignored the need for unique messaging because of its consistent, corporate-legal tone across all platforms. Investors sought clear risk assessments, customers wanted empathy and restitution, employees needed reassurance, and regulators demanded full cooperation. Each channel's effectiveness was diminished by a one-size-fits-all strategy.[467] Fifth, Contingency Theory shows that while a defensive advocacy stance may seem rational in the legal arena, in the court of public opinion, it prolongs hostility. VW's eventual full accommodation, large-scale buybacks, environmental funding, and leadership changes helped stabilise its standing, but earlier movement along this continuum could have accelerated the recovery.[468] Finally, restoring the symbolic aspect of brand trust can take decades, particularly when the betrayal involves core brand values like environmental responsibility, but financial indicators can recover in a few years. Dieselgate will remain a case study in how corporate misconduct can permanently alter brand legacy, even when operational success is regained.[469]

3.3 Samsung Galaxy 7 Case Study

Samsung Electronics was one of the most potent technology brands in the world at the height of its success. Its Galaxy product line was the cornerstone of this dominance, and in 2015, Forbes ranked Samsung as the fifteenth most reputable company in the world.[470] The release of the Galaxy Note 7 in August 2016 confirmed this trajectory. The phone, which was marketed as Samsung's most innovative flagship to date, featured a powerful battery, an iris scanner, and a waterproof design. Records were broken by preorders, and the launch appeared in the media as a triumph of Korean innovation.[471] Within weeks, however, the narrative shifted dramatically. News began to emerge that the devices were overheating and, in some cases, catching fire. Reports of burned hands and scorched bedside tables went viral on social media, drawing the interest of global news organisations.[472]

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[466] Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, *op. cit.*

[467] **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

[468] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook** and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation', *Public Relations Review*, 25.2 (1999).

[469] **Painter** and **Martins**, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[470] *Forbes Magazine*, 'World's Most Reputable Companies 2015' (2015), https://www.forbes.com/pictures/egkm45egeg/15-tie-samsung-electroni/

[471] **R. Triggs**, 'Galaxy Note 7 Breaks South Korean Pre-Order Record', *Android Authority*, 11 August 2016, https://www.androidauthority.com/galaxy-note-7-breaks-pre-order-records-708863/

[472] **P. Mozur**, 'Galaxy Note 7 Fires Caused by Battery and Design Flaws, Samsung Says', *The New York Times*, 22 January 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/business/samsung-galaxy-note-7-battery-fires-report.html

One of the most striking early incidents occurred in Florida over the U.S. Labour Day weekend. Nathan Dornacher had left his four-day-old Galaxy Note 7 charging in his Jeep Grand Cherokee while unloading groceries. Within minutes, the car was engulfed in flames, images of which quickly went viral.[473] The scale of risk became impossible to ignore. Samsung's most celebrated product had become a potential hazard. Samsung suspended sales and announced a global recall of 2.5 million devices on September 2, 2016. The business explained that the batteries produced by Samsung SDI, its internal supplier, were flawed and prone to short-circuiting.[474] At first, this response was praised for its speed, but soon regulators and commentators began to criticise the company for bypassing official channels. By announcing a recall without coordinating with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Samsung created the impression of acting unilaterally, an approach described by some as rash rather than proactive.[475]

The crisis deepened in October. Replacement devices, fitted with batteries from a second supplier, Amperex Technology Limited (ATL), were also prone to overheating. In a dramatic incident aboard a Southwest Airlines flight on October 6, a replacement Note 7 began emitting smoke before take-off, forcing the evacuation of all passengers.[476] The incident captured global headlines and confirmed a worst-case scenario: Samsung had not fixed the defect, but had instead exchanged one set of dangerous phones for another.

By 11 October 2016, U.S. regulators had logged at least 92 reports of overheating, including 25 cases of burns and 55 incidents of property damage.[477] That same day, Samsung abandoned the product altogether, halting production and urging users to power down their devices immediately.[478] The announcement was made on the company's website under the passive heading "Updated Consumer Guidance," a choice of language that critics argued lacked urgency and transparency.[479] The reputational impact was severe. Financially, the decision to kill the Note 7 line

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[473] *Fox News Tech*, 'Florida Man's Vehicle Catches Fire after Charging Galaxy Note 7 Explodes', 9 September 2016, https://www.foxnews.com/tech/florida-mans-vehicle-catches-fire-after-charging-galaxy-note-7-explodes

[474] *Fortune Tech*, 'Here's the Timeline of Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 Recall Crisis', 10 October 2016, https://fortune.com/2016/10/10/timeline-samsun-galaxy-note-recall-crisis/

[475] **S. Maheshwari**, 'Samsung's Response to Galaxy Note 7 Draws Criticism', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/business/media/samsungs-passive-response-to-note-7s-overheating-problem-draws-criticism.html

[476] **D. Lee**, 'Fixed Samsung Galaxy Note 7' Catches Fire on Plane, *BBC News*, 5 October 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-37570100.

[477] **B. X. Chen** and **S.-H. Choe**, 'Why Samsung Abandoned Its Galaxy Note 7 Flagship Phone', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/business/international/samsung-galaxy-note7-terminated.html

[478] **J. S. O'Rourke**, *Management Communication: A Case Analysis Approach*, 6th edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), Case 7.1: 'Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.: Galaxy Note 7 Crisis'.

[479] **Maheshwari**, *op. cit.*

was estimated to cost the company more than $6.2 billion, while its market value plunged by $17 billion in just a few days.[480] South Korea's leading daily, Chosun Ilbo, expressed the mood succinctly: "You cannot calculate the loss of consumer trust in money".[481]

The ban imposed by the U.S. Department of Transportation on carrying the Note 7 aboard flights further magnified the symbolic damage.[482] Meanwhile, competitors responded strategically: Motorola mocked Samsung with advertisements emphasising battery safety, while Apple benefitted quietly, capturing market share with its newly released iPhone 7.[483]

The Note 7 scandal became a worldwide reputational disaster because of technical mistakes, poor risk assessment, and inconsistent communication. While the immediate issue was a faulty battery design pushed to its technological limits, the deeper story lay in how the company communicated: slowly, reactively, and often unclearly.[484] For stakeholders, from consumers and regulators to investors and competitors, the crisis marked a turning point. It turned Samsung from a respected market leader into a warning about how easily a company's reputation can be damaged when safety, accountability, and openness are questioned.

3.3.1   Communication Analysis

According to SCCT, Samsung effectively created its own crisis in the Note 7 incident rather than it being a misfortune that befell the company. The exploding batteries were not the result of unforeseeable natural forces or isolated manufacturing accidents; they were the outcome of strategic decisions made under pressure to surpass Apple's iPhone. Engineers had pushed the design of lithium-ion batteries beyond safe limits, producing thinner separators and creating conditions where overheating was highly likely.[485] SCCT categorises crises of this type in the preventable cluster, where organisations bear the highest level of responsibility because the harm could and should have been avoided.[486]

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[480] **Chen** and **Choe**, *op. cit.*
[481] *Ibid.*
[482] *U.S. Department of Transportation*, 'DOT Bans All Samsung Galaxy Note7 Phones from Airplanes', 14 October 2016 https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/dot-bans-all-samsung-galaxy-note7-phones-airplanes.
[483] **C. Smith**, 'Apple's Reaction to the Galaxy Note 7 Recall was Brilliant, and We All Missed It', *Yahoo Tech*, 13 September 2016, https://www.yahoo.com/news/apple-reaction-galaxy-note-7-recall-brilliant-missed-184431973.html
[484] **C. Criddle**, 'Why is the Samsung Galaxy Note 7 Catching Fire?', *The Telegraph*, 11 October 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2016/10/11/why-is-the-samsung-galaxy-note-7-catching-fire-the-lithium-ion-b/
[485] *Ibid.*
[486] **W. T. Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 5th edn (Los Angeles: Sage, 2021).

Consumers responded accordingly. Early adopters of the Note 7 had paid a premium for what was supposed to be Samsung's most advanced device, only to discover that it carried the risk of bursting into flames. The sense of betrayal went beyond disappointment; it triggered moral outrage, a powerful emotion that surfaces when stakeholders feel they have been endangered by recklessness rather than accident.[487] This outrage was fuelled further when replacement devices, issued during the first recall, also caught fire. Instead of restoring confidence, Samsung had handed customers "safe" devices that proved just as dangerous. For many, this confirmed a perception of negligence bordering on indifference.[488]

The company's crisis history amplified the reputational damage. Confidence in Samsung's safety culture was damaged by several issues, not just the Note 7. Within months, the company recalled nearly three million top-loading washing machines in the United States for safety defects, and around the same time, its vice chairman was arrested in a corruption scandal.[489] SCCT states that stakeholders interpret new crises more severely and assume patterns of irresponsibility rather than isolated failures when an organisation has a history of crises.[490]

Samsung's initial communication was swift but cautious. On 2 September 2016, only days after the first incidents, it suspended sales. It announced a recall of 2.5 million devices worldwide, framing the move as a "precautionary measure" rather than an admission of fault.[491] This language reflected a diminishing strategy, downplaying responsibility while appearing decisive. However, in the preventable cluster, where stakeholders demand strong corrective action and clear accountability, diminished strategies are unsuited to crises. Samsung was forced to implement a rebuild strategy, stopping production and providing refunds after the company's credibility collapsed due to replacement phones catching fire as well. By then, however, the delay had undermined its ability to regain trust.[492] SCCT suggests that preventable crises necessitate rebuilding strategies, apologies, compensation, and corrective action from the outset; however, Samsung shifted too late, resulting in a mismatch that damaged its standing.[493]

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[487] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. Tachkova**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorizing Around Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36.1 (2024), 1–19.

[488] **D. Lee**, 'Fixed Samsung Galaxy Note 7' Catches Fire on Plane, *BBC News*, 5 October 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-37570100.

[489] **J. S. O'Rourke**, *Management Communication: A Case Analysis Approach*, 6th edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), Case 7.1: 'Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.: Galaxy Note 7 Crisis'.

[490] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41.3 (2004), 265–289.

[491] *Fortune Tech*, 'Here's the Timeline of Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 Recall Crisis', 10 October 2016.

[492] **S. Maheshwari**, 'Samsung's Response to Galaxy Note 7 Draws Criticism', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016.

[493] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), 141–148.

Benoit's Image Repair Theory helps to unpack the inconsistencies in Samsung's discourse. The company initially used evasion of responsibility by attributing the issue to Samsung SDI, a single supplier.[494] This shifted the blame away from corporate decision-making and suggested the issue was external. Once ATL-supplied batteries also ignited, this strategy collapsed, and Samsung pivoted to corrective action, ending production and launching a refund programme.[495] Yet what was striking was the absence of full mortification. Samsung did not issue a direct apology until late in the crisis, and even then, it was couched in technical explanations rather than expressions of regret. The sequencing of strategies, first evasion and then reluctant corrective action, created the impression of a company reacting piecemeal and unwilling to own the crisis fully. Scholars note that consistency and tone are critical in image repair, and in this case, inconsistency fuelled scepticism.[496] The failure to own the narrative left Samsung vulnerable to public attack. Airlines banned the Note 7 from flights, regulators castigated the company for failing to coordinate recalls properly, and competitors like Motorola mocked it with advertisements stressing their own superior safety standards.[497] From the perspective of the Persuasive Attack Theory, the company became the accused party in a public drama, with little effective defence. Samsung avoided counterattacks, instead offering technical justifications and limited apologies. Because of this lack of action, media outlets and critics were able to shape the story to suit their needs and paint Samsung as careless and unreliable.[498]

Samsung's failure to use the Stealing Thunder strategy was a major mistake in its crisis management. Rather than disclosing the problem proactively, Samsung responded only after consumers, journalists, and regulators had already publicised images of burned phones on social media and in the press.[499] Even then, its messaging lacked the hallmarks of transparency: the company bypassed the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission in announcing its first recall, a decision that regulators condemned as undermining public confidence.[500] According to research,

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[494] **T. Lan**, A Critical Case Report of Samsung Note 7 Recall (2018).

[495] **B. X. Chen** and **S.-H. Choe**, 'Why Samsung Abandoned Its Galaxy Note 7 Flagship Phone', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016.

[496] **O. Aleshinloye**, Crisis Communication and Management: Lessons from the 2016 Samsung Galaxy Note 7 Crisis (2017).

[497] **C. Smith**, 'Apple's Reaction to the Galaxy Note 7 Recall was Brilliant, and We All Missed It', *Yahoo Tech*, 13 September 2016.

[498] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

[499] **P. Mozur**, 'Galaxy Note 7 Fires Caused by Battery and Design Flaws, Samsung Says', *The New York Times*, 22 January 2017.

[500] **S.-H. Lee** and **P. Mozur**, 'Samsung Stumbles in Race to Recall Troubled Phones', *The New York Times*, 15 September 2016.

stealing thunder only works when disclosure is made early, honestly, and regularly.[501] In this case, the lack of transparency and delay created an impression of concealment, which undermined the credibility of later disclosures.

As the crisis developed, Samsung's position changed along the advocacy–accommodation spectrum, according to the Contingency Theory of Accommodation. Initially, it adopted an advocacy posture, seeking to protect its brand image by focusing on a single supplier and emphasising technical fixes. Internal pressures, such as the desire to beat Apple in the market and preserve leadership prestige, encouraged this stance. However, as the crisis escalated, external factors, media coverage, regulatory condemnation, and consumer outrage compelled the company to make greater accommodations, culminating in the cancellation of the Note 7 line and the offer of full refunds.[502] The contingency approach serves as a reminder that organisational responses are influenced by the forces of external realities and internal goals, and do not always follow a predetermined course. Samsung's crisis communication was reactive, as proven by the fact that accommodations were forced rather than chosen.

3.3.2 Stakeholder Engagement

The Galaxy Note 7 issue set off a chain reaction of responses from Samsung's many stakeholders. Each response showed not only the direct risks they faced, but also how well they thought Samsung was communicating. People were mostly angry, betrayed, and scared. Consumers were outraged because of how big the risk was. Stories of burned automobiles, charred bedrooms, and even the evacuation of aircraft passengers made it seem like Samsung had put public safety at risk all around the world.[503] Betrayal was particularly acute among loyal Samsung users who had invested in the company's most expensive and technologically advanced product. Many consumers got angry on social media and asked directly if they could "ever trust Samsung devices again."[504] There was a sense of terror in viral pictures and videos of smoking phones, which became symbols of both physical danger and corporate irresponsibility.

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[501] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximize the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-up Actions and Transparent Communication', *Corporate Communications*, 27.3 (2022), 425–440.

[502] **A. E. Cancel**, **G. T. Cameron**, **L. Sallot** and **M. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), 31–63.

[503] **J. S. O'Rourke**, *Management Communication: A Case Analysis Approach*, 6th edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), Case 7.1: 'Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.: Galaxy Note 7 Crisis'.

[504] **S. Maheshwari**, 'Samsung's Response to Galaxy Note 7 Draws Criticism', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/business/media/samsungs-passive-response-to-note-7s-overheating-problem-draws-criticism.html

Investors were concerned when the company's market value dropped by approximately $17 billion just days after the recall.[505] While Samsung had weathered competitive challenges in the past, the perception of systemic negligence undermined confidence in its long-term resilience. Analysts said that the incident might hurt Samsung's global market share, and one Korean tabloid said, "You can't put a price on how much trust consumers have in money".[506]

The media rapidly amplified these concerns, presenting Samsung not as an innovator but as a business struggling to manage a reputational crisis. The coverage was notably critical of the company's erratic messaging and lack of coordination with regulators. Headlines in The New York Times and The Guardian emphasised that Samsung had "stumbled in its race to recall problematic phones," portraying the business as reactive rather than proactive.[507]

Regulators were equally inflexible. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission criticised Samsung for circumventing official recall protocols, while the Department of Transportation enacted an unprecedented prohibition on transporting the Note 7 on flights.[508] The symbolic effect was immense: airport loudspeakers worldwide warned passengers not to carry Samsung devices, embedding the company's failure into public consciousness.

Employees, however, who are less visible in public narratives, also experienced the crisis firsthand. Case reports suggest that worker morale was negatively impacted by the sudden reputational decline of a brand on which they had contributed to its development.[509] Simultaneously, Samsung's centralised decision-making culture constrained employee input throughout the crisis response, thereby restricting opportunities for bottom-up involvement.

3.3.3 Reputation Impact

The Galaxy Note 7 crisis had immediate and grave consequences that affected stakeholder trust, media narratives, and markets. In the short term, the decision to terminate production and recall the device in October 2016 cost Samsung an estimated $6.2 billion directly, while its share price

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[505] **B. X. Chen** and **S.-H. Choe**, 'Why Samsung Abandoned Its Galaxy Note 7 Flagship Phone', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/business/international/samsung-galaxy-note7-terminated.html.

[506] *Chosun Ilbo* editorial, cited in **Chen** and **Choe**, *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016.

[507] **S.-H. Lee** and **P. Mozur**, 'Samsung Stumbles in Race to Recall Troubled Phones', *The New York Times*, 15 September 2016.

[508] *U.S. Department of Transportation*, 'DOT Bans All Samsung Galaxy Note7 Phones from Airplanes', 14 October 2016.

[509] **O. Aleshinloye**, Crisis Communication and Management: Lessons from the 2016 Samsung Galaxy Note 7 Crisis (2017).

plunged by more than 8 per cent in a single day, erasing around $17 billion in market value.[510] For investors, this sudden collapse of market capitalisation represented not just a temporary disruption but a warning about structural weaknesses in risk management and corporate governance.

Media sentiment during the crisis largely reinforced this negative spiral. Early reports that praised Samsung's decisiveness in recalling 2.5 million devices quickly shifted to criticism as replacement phones also ignited.[511] Headlines described the company as "stumbling" and "scrambling," framing it as reactive, disorganised, and evasive.[512] Editorials in South Korea went further, suggesting that the most damaging cost was not financial but reputational, declaring that "you cannot calculate the loss of consumer trust in money".[513] In global markets, the crisis became a case study in technological failure and communicative mismanagement, feeding a cycle in which poor communication amplified already dire material losses.

Regarding leadership, the crisis overlapped with another event that hurt Samsung's reputation: Jay Y. Lee, the vice chairman of the company, was arrested on corruption charges in February 2017. Despite not having a direct connection to the Note 7, this controversy raised questions about Samsung's corporate governance and further damaged confidence.[514] Together, the leadership crisis and the product safety incident presented Samsung as a business dealing with systemic accountability issues in addition to technical ones.

The road to rebuilding consumer trust was complicated and chaotic. Surveys taken after the recall revealed significant declines in brand loyalty, with some customers vowing never to purchase Samsung products again.[515] The device was banned by airlines, which created a long-lasting symbolic link between Samsung and danger. At the same time, Samsung launched an eight-point battery check in 2017 and actively promoted this standard in future product launches as part of the efforts to repair its reputation through rigorous safety campaigns.[516] Over time, these actions, combined with the successful launch of later flagship models, helped the company stabilise sales

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[510] **B. X. Chen** and **S.-H. Choe**, 'Why Samsung Abandoned Its Galaxy Note 7 Flagship Phone', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/business/international/samsung-galaxy-note7-terminated.html.

[511] 'Here's the Timeline of Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 Recall Crisis', *Fortune Tech*, 10 October 2016, https://fortune.com/2016/10/10/timeline-samsun-galaxy-note-recall-crisis/.

[512] **S.-H. Lee** and **P. Mozur**, 'Samsung Stumbles in Race to Recall Troubled Phones', *The New York Times*, 15 September 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/16/business/samsung-galaxy-note-recall.html.

[513] *Chosun Ilbo* editorial, cited in **Chen** and **Choe**, *The New York Times*, 11 October 2016.

[514] **J. Russel**, 'Samsung Vice Chairman Arrested on Bribery Charges', *TechCrunch*, 16 February 2017, https://techcrunch.com/2017/02/16/samsung-vice-chairman-arrested-on-bribery-charges/.

[515] **O. Aleshinloye**, Crisis Communication and Management: Lessons from the 2016 Samsung Galaxy Note 7 Crisis (2017).

[516] **J. S. O'Rourke**, *Management Communication: A Case Analysis Approach*, 6th edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), Case 7.1: 'Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd.: Galaxy Note 7 Crisis'.

and partially restore consumer confidence. However, damage remained: many academics argue that Samsung's brand rehabilitation was only partially successful, and the Note 7 is still associated with crises.[517]

In the long term, the crisis turned into a liability as well as a learning opportunity. By 2018, Samsung had recovered financially and regained its position as the world's leading smartphone manufacturer, but the harm to its reputation persisted in consumer memory and business school case studies across the globe.[518] The gap between its technical expertise and its crisis communication failures demonstrated how quickly a company's reputation can be damaged when stakeholder expectations are not met. Samsung followed the SCCT's recommendations for avoiding crises by adopting full corrective action and refund programmes. However, the delay in implementing this strategy meant that it achieved only partial effectiveness. In terms of reputation, the recovery was slower and less complete than it might have been if Samsung had adopted a rebuild strategy early on, including full disclosure and an open apology.[519]

3.3.4 Summary and Lessons Learnt

The Galaxy Note 7 episode clearly demonstrates how the choice of crisis response strategies can determine not only immediate damage control but also the prospects for long-term reputation restoration. What sets this case apart is the contrast between Samsung's technical competence and its communicative weakness. The company was able to conduct rapid investigations, identify the flaws in both Samsung SDI and ATL batteries, and ultimately implement a rigorous eight-point safety protocol that set new industry benchmarks. Yet these measures were overshadowed by the earlier use of diminishing and evasive strategies, which undermined the trust on which long-term recovery depends. Different strategies left very different reputational imprints. The early diminished posture, framed as a "precautionary measure," communicated hesitancy rather than leadership, creating a gap between consumer expectations and organisational response.[520] By the time Samsung shifted to a rebuild posture, full refunds, discontinuation of the Note 7 line, and eventually publicised safety reforms, the reputational damage was already deeply embedded. SCCT

[517] **T. Lan**, A Critical Case Report of Samsung Note 7 Recall (2018).

[518] **P. Mozur**, 'Galaxy Note 7 Fires Caused by Battery and Design Flaws, Samsung Says', *The New York Times*, 22 January 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/business/samsung-galaxy-note-7-battery-fires-report.html.

[519] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), 141–148.

[520] 'Here's the Timeline of Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 Recall Crisis', *Fortune Tech*, 10 October 2016.

warns that in preventable crises, the window for rebuilding is narrow; once stakeholders attribute high responsibility, delayed corrective action cannot easily erase perceptions of negligence.[521]

A further difference emerged between Samsung's technical problem-solving and its emotional engagement. From an Image Repair perspective, the business did a great job with corrective action but failed with mortification. The apologies expressed in technical language, which were about supply chains and testing, lacked the human empathy consumers expected. This failure prolonged feelings of betrayal, meaning that while market share recovered by 2018, the Note 7 remained a symbol of corporate irresponsibility.[522]

Stealing Thunder provides another perspective. Samsung could have managed the framing if it had revealed the dangers before customers and media outlets shared viral recordings of devices blowing up. Instead, disclosure came after public outrage, which made every subsequent statement seem defensive rather than open.[523] This discrepancy shows how the strategies' timing can matter as much as their content. Finally, contingency theory reveals the tension between Samsung's internal and external pressures. Externally, regulatory condemnation and viral outrage forced accommodation. The result was a reactive rather than proactive trajectory: Samsung did not choose to accommodate but was compelled to do so.[524] Long-term reputation restoration was therefore limited by the perception that its most decisive steps were taken under duress, not conviction.

Samsung resolved the technical problem with new testing and redesigned batteries, but the organisation's ability to recover its reputation was more about how it was perceived to care, communicate, and accept responsibility than it was about what it managed materially. Second, Samsung's progression from diminishing to partial evasion to eventual rebuild demonstrates how inconsistency undermines trust. Stakeholders were left unsure whether the company accepted responsibility or not, and this ambiguity fed perceptions of dishonesty. The restoration process probably would have been shorter and less painful if Samsung had started with mortification and corrective action. Third, outrage, fear, and betrayal are not side effects but central variables in crisis communication. Samsung let its customers tell the story of the crisis through memes, tweets, and viral videos by not dealing with these feelings with empathy. Samsung's official communications lacked emotional resonance, which left a gap in the company's reputation that detractors and

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[521] **W. T. Coombs**, Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 5th edn (Los Angeles: Sage, 2021).

[522] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research, 2nd edn (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

[523] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximize the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-up Actions and Transparent Communication', *Corporate Communications*, 27.3 (2022), 425–440.

[524] **A. E. Cancel**, **G. T. Cameron**, **L. Sallot** and **M. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9.1 (1997), 31–63.

competitors filled. Fourth, Stealing Thunder must occur early. Once regulators, airlines, and the media were already framing the story, Samsung's later disclosures looked reluctant. The lesson is that proactive transparency is not only ethically preferable but strategically indispensable.

Finally, even after financial recovery and successful launches of later devices, "exploding phones" remained shorthand for Samsung in public imagination for years. Crises of safety leave indelible imprints unless communicative strategies are both immediate and emotionally intelligent.

Samsung's failure was not in its technical competence but in its communicative hesitancy. The broader implication for scholarship is that hybrid strategies, combining SCCT's rebuild orientation, IRT's mortification, and the timing advantages of stealing thunder, offer the strongest path to reputational resilience in preventable crises.

3.4 Slack Case Study

Slack Technologies, founded in 2013 and acquired by Salesforce in 2021, is one of the world's leading workplace collaboration platforms, serving millions of users around the world. Headquartered in San Francisco, California, the company positioned itself as a central tool for digital teamwork, replacing email chains with real-time messaging, file sharing, and integrations with productivity apps.[525] By 2022, Slack had become a necessary part of daily life in many fields, particularly for individuals working from home or in a hybrid setting due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the crisis, it was known as a reliable, innovative, and user-friendly platform that people often referred to as an "indispensable workplace infrastructure" rather than just a means of communication.[526]

On February 22, 2022, Slack had one of the biggest service outages in the world so far. The malfunction began at approximately 9 a.m. Eastern Time and lasted for several hours. During that time, users were unable to send or receive messages, log in, or access core functionalities.[527] The symbolic date helped to make the action memorable and spread quickly. The first reports of service failure came from users on social media platforms such as Twitter, where hashtags like #SlackDown began trending almost immediately. Soon after, major news outlets, including CNN and CNBC, amplified the incident, noting the irony of a collaboration platform collapsing at the

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[525] **Slack Technologies**, *Company Overview*, Salesforce (2021), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slack_Technologies.

[526] **Catchpoint**, 'Slack Outage of 2/22/22: Good Morning, Here's 16 Minutes of Stress', *Catchpoint Blog*, 22 February 2022, https://www.catchpoint.com/blog/slack-outage-of-2-22-22-good-morning-heres-16-minutes-of-stress.

[527] **CNN**, 'Slack Outage Hits Users Globally', *CNN Business*, 22 February 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/22/tech/slack-outage.

start of a working day for millions of employees worldwide.[528] Within minutes of the first reports, Slack's official communication channels, including its status page and Twitter account, confirmed the issue.[529] This quick response follows the crisis communication rule of "stealing thunder," which means bringing up a problem before others can frame the story.[530] The company issued step-by-step updates throughout the morning, confirming that engineers were actively investigating the outage. This practice aligns with Coombs' typology of crisis communication responses, as it provides instructive and adjusting information designed to mitigate stakeholder anxiety and provide clarity.[531]

By noon, Slack announced that the issue had been identified as a service database problem caused by a configuration change. Engineers provided a clear timeline for mitigation while transparently communicating incremental service recovery.[532] Later that same day, most users regained access, although the company stated that it took several hours to restore access fully. Importantly, Slack avoided scapegoating or vague terminology, instead assuming responsibility for the technical failure and framing it as an accidental crisis, which, according to SCCT, requires acknowledgement and corrective action rather than full-scale reputational repair.[533]

The following day, Slack published a detailed post-mortem on its engineering blog, outlining the sequence of events, the root cause, and the corrective measures taken to prevent recurrence.[534] This action was in line with best practices from the literature on crisis communication: timely follow-up actions and clear technical explanations make initial disclosures more credible and limit long-term damage to the company's reputation.[535] The crisis affected not only end users but also corporate IT departments, enterprise clients, investors, and regulators, each of whom had varying

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[528] **CNBC**, 'Slack Is Down for Thousands of Users', *CNBC*, 22 February 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/22/slack-is-down.html.
TechCrunch, 'Slack Confirms It's Down for Some Users, Says It's Working on a Resolution', *TechCrunch*, 22 February 2022, https://techcrunch.com/2022/02/22/slack-confirms-its-down-for-some-users-says-its-working-on-a-resolution/.

[529] **Slack**, 'Slack's Incident on 2-22-22', *Slack Engineering Blog*, 23 February 2022, https://slack.engineering/slacks-incident-on-2-22-22/.

[530] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31 (2005), 425–33.

[531] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58, no. 2 (2015), 141–48.

[532] **Slack**, 'Slack's Incident on 2-22-22', *Slack Engineering Blog*, 23 February 2022, https://slack.engineering/slacks-incident-on-2-22-22/

[533] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10, no. 3 (2007), 163–76.

[534] **Slack**, 'Slack's Incident on 2-22-22', *Slack Engineering Blog*, 23 February 2022, https://slack.engineering/slacks-incident-on-2-22-22/.

[535] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximize the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-up Actions and Transparent Communication', *Corporate Communications*, 27, no. 3 (2022), 425–40.

levels of interest and involvement. Enterprise customers expected not only service restoration but also accountability and a detailed technical explanation.

In theory, the Slack 22.2.22 outage shows how SCCT, Image Repair Theory, and Stealing Thunder all work together. The organisation's proactive approach, along with technical openness and corrective action, helped it keep its good name even though things were going wrong all over the place. This incident is an example of a technical service disruption crisis, and effective communication strategies played a significant role in minimising the damage to the company's reputation.

3.4.1 Communication Analysis

The way both the company and the people affected discussed the Slack outage on February 22, 2022, was crucial in determining who was responsible. In the first hours of the disruption, users turned to Twitter and news outlets to express their frustration, but their reactions made it clear that this was not being seen as a betrayal of trust or an act of corporate negligence. Rather, it was read as a technical glitch. Slack's own engineering team confirmed that the root cause lay in a database service problem triggered by a configuration change.[536] This explanation situated the event within what SCCT classifies as the accidental cluster, where a crisis is attributed to organisational error but not deliberate wrongdoing.[537]

This framing lowered the degree of responsibility stakeholders assigned to Slack. Studies show that the worst damage to a company's reputation occurs when stakeholders believe a crisis was caused by lying or careless behaviour.[538] In Slack's case, irritation was evident, but it did not escalate into moral outrage. People on social media often created memes and jokes about the outage, which made it seem like it was annoying but not a major issue.[539] The emotional register was more like annoyance at being bothered than anger at being betrayed.

Slack's relatively clean record was also vital. The business hadn't had many significant problems in the past that could have altered people's opinions. Scholars argue that crisis history serves as an

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[536] **Slack**, 'Slack's Incident on 2-22-22', *Slack Engineering Blog*, 23 February 2022, https://slack.engineering/slacks-incident-on-2-22-22/.

[537] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10, no. 3 (2007), 163–76.

[538] *Ibid.*

[539] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorizing Around Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36, no. 1 (2024), 18.

Catchpoint, 'Slack Outage of 2/22/22: Good Morning, Here's 16 Minutes of Stress', *Catchpoint Blog*, 22 February 2022, https://www.catchpoint.com/blog/slack-outage-of-2-22-22-good-morning-heres-16-minutes-of-stress.

intensifying element, amplifying reputational blame upon the recurrence of similar events.[540] Without such a history, Slack could draw on its accumulated goodwill. Stakeholders, then, approached the outage as an isolated incident rather than the latest chapter in a story of incompetence. In this respect, the organisation's background conditions worked in its favour: it was judged not as a company failing its duty, but as one temporarily tripped up by technical complexity.

Slack's communication throughout the disruption followed a path that closely reflected the strategies recommended by SCCT for an accidental crisis. Within minutes of the first reports, the company had acknowledged the problem on its official status page and on Twitter. It did not deny the event or attempt to divert blame but instead began issuing updates that mixed technical detail with reassurance. These updates were both instructive, letting users know what was going on and when they could expect progress, and adjusting meant to calm people down and keep them informed.[541] Slack was able to take control of the story because these messages were concise and clear, which prevented speculation from dominating the coverage.

Benoit's Image Repair Theory shows that Slack's main message was to take corrective action. Engineers stated that they were correcting the changes that had caused the problem and later wrote a comprehensive report on what had gone wrong. Along with this technical talk, there was also a softer sense of shame, as the company admitted that the disruption was bad and caused stress, but didn't overstate their guilt or offer apologies that might suggest negligence. There was no denial, no blaming others, and no attempt to downplay the seriousness of the outage, which is just as important as what Slack did. The tone remained steady and consistent, progressing from acknowledgement to explanation to resolution in a logical manner.[542]

The fact that the company didn't have to deal with persuasive attacks questioning its honesty also helped it. Reports in the news and comments from users suggested that the event was a service interruption, rather than a corporate scandal. Because of this, Slack didn't have to use counter-attack strategies or question the credibility of its critics. Instead, its defence was based entirely on

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[540] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41, no. 3 (2004), 265–89.

[541] **CNN**, 'Slack Outage Hits Users Globally', *CNN Business*, 22 February 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/22/tech/slack-outage.

W. T. Coombs, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58, no. 2 (2015), 141–48.

W. T. Coombs, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

[542] **W. L. Benoit**, 'Image Repair in Crisis Communication', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics* (2021).

R. L. Heath, 'Onward into More Fog: Thoughts on Public Relations' Research Directions', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18, no. 2 (2006), 93–114.

openness and responsibility, making it look both capable and trustworthy.[543] Slack's use of "Stealing Thunder" was probably the most important part of the response. The company established itself as the primary source of information by being the first to report the outage, rather than allowing unhappy users or journalists to take on that role.[544] This early disclosure was strengthened by a comprehensive post-mortem report, which detailed exactly what had happened and how they intended to prevent similar issues in the future.[545] Research shows that Stealing Thunder is only effective if initial openness is matched by thorough follow-up, and Slack demonstrated both, which bolstered credibility. Finally, the company's stance can be understood through the lens of the Contingency Theory of Accommodation. Slack adopted a position closer to accommodation than to advocacy. Its updates were framed around the needs and expectations of its stakeholders, rather than defending its own reputation at the expense of transparency.[546] Internally, this was made possible by a strong culture of engineering accountability and a leadership philosophy that emphasised openness. Externally, pressures from media coverage, public opinion, and the heightened reliance on collaboration tools during the pandemic all reinforced the need for openness.[547] By leaning into accommodation, Slack managed to address the concerns of its users while simultaneously protecting its long-term reputation.

3.4.2 Stakeholder Engagement

The outage affected a lot of people, from people who used Slack every day to communicate to multinational companies that had made it a key part of their digital infrastructure. Consumers were the ones who took the most visible action, quickly expressing their anger on Twitter and other social media sites. But the emotional tone of these reactions was revealing; even though people were angry, most of them were more annoyed and ironic than outraged. Humour played a significant role, with memes circulating with hashtags like #SlackDown that made the disruption

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[543] **TechCrunch**, 'Slack Confirms It's Down for Some Users, Says It's Working on a Resolution', *TechCrunch*, 22 February 2022, https://techcrunch.com/2022/02/22/slack-confirms-its-down-for-some-users-says-its-working-on-a-resolution/.

[544] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31 (2005), 425–33.

[545] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximize the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-up Actions and Transparent Communication', *Corporate Communications*, 27, no. 3 (2022), 425–40.

[546] **A. E. Cancel**, **G. T. Cameron**, **L. M. Sallot**, and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9, no. 1 (1997), 31–63.

[547] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook**, and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Public Relations Review*, 25, no. 2 (1999), 171–97.

appear to be a group issue rather than a breach of trust.[548] CNN and CNBC, among other news outlets, talked about how big the disruption was but framed it as a technical problem instead of a failure of ethics or governance.[549] The stories often pointed out how ironic it was that Slack went down on "two-two-two-two," a date that made the event more memorable, but reporters did not say that Slack was careless or wrong. This media position helped limit reputational damage by reiterating the idea that the crisis was long considered an accident rather than something that could have been avoided.

In the meantime, investors seemed to view the outage as a short-term operational problem rather than a systemic risk. Salesforce, the company that owns Slack, didn't see a big drop in its stock price after the incident. This suggests that investors thought the problem was manageable and not a sign of bigger problems.[550] Employees were also internal stakeholders. Slack's culture of engineering transparency influenced the tone of the company's public statements. Slack made it clear both inside and outside the company that everyone was responsible and that corrective learning was happening by putting the voices of its engineering team front and centre in the official blog post-mortem.[551]

In this case, regulators weren't very important, unlike in crises in highly regulated areas like finance or healthcare. However, due to the broader digital service accountability environment, Slack couldn't afford to appear as if it were avoiding the issue. So, being open and quick to admit the problem also sent a message to regulators that the company was doing its due diligence when it came to managing critical infrastructure.[552]

Stakeholder reactions were influenced less by anger or betrayal and more by general inconveniency. The lack of boycotts, online campaigns, or long-term attacks on Slack's reputation is important because it shows that the company's proactive communication successfully framed the crisis as a technical problem that could be fixed. At the same time, the lightness of user humour and media

[548] **Catchpoint**, 'Slack Outage of 2/22/22: Good Morning, Here's 16 Minutes of Stress', *Catchpoint Blog*, 22 February 2022, https://www.catchpoint.com/blog/slack-outage-of-2-22-22-good-morning-heres-16-minutes-of-stress.
Spiceworks, 'Slack Outage: Service Disruption Leaves Users Stranded', *Spiceworks*, 22 February 2022, https://www.spiceworks.com/tech/tech-general/news/slack-outage-service-disruption/.
[549] **CNN**, 'Slack Outage Hits Users Globally', *CNN Business*, 22 February 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/22/tech/slack-outage.
CNBC, 'Slack Is Down for Thousands of Users', *CNBC*, 22 February 2022, https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/22/slack-is-down.html.
[550] **TechCrunch**, 'Slack Confirms It's Down for Some Users, Says It's Working on a Resolution', *TechCrunch*, 22 February 2022, https://techcrunch.com/2022/02/22/slack-confirms-its-down-for-some-users-says-its-working-on-a-resolution/.
[551] **Slack**, 'Slack's Incident on 2-22-22', *Slack Engineering Blog*, 23 February 2022, https://slack.engineering/slacks-incident-on-2-22-22/.
[552] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

coverage shows a level of brand loyalty, where stakeholders were willing to overlook a temporary failure because they saw the platform's overall value.

3.4.3 Reputation Impact

In the short term, the disruption caused by millions of users who were cut off from their main way of communicating at work was the most noticeable effect of the outage. This caused short-term stress for businesses that relied on Slack for their work, especially since the outage happened at the start of the workday in North America.[553] From a market point of view, the event did not cause any measurable financial damage. In the days after the event, the company's stock price didn't drop significantly, which suggests that investors saw the outage as a problem with operations rather than a sign of systemic risk.[554]

The media talked about how big and ironic the disruption was, but they framed it as a technical problem instead of a criticism of corporate governance.[555] Headlines focused more on inconvenience than wrongdoing, and there wasn't much evidence of reputational escalation into claims of negligence or irresponsibility. Slack's communication strategy added to this tone: by quickly revealing the outage and giving updates, the company made itself the go-to source for information, stopping speculation from creating a more damaging story.[556]

In the short term, Slack's reputation didn't take too much damage. Most of the time, people who acted online were more likely to be funny than angry, which shows that they still liked the platform despite their frustration.[557] There was no evidence of user boycotts, organised protests, or a shift towards competitors. Instead, the event was seen as an annoyance that had to be dealt with rather than a reason to stop using the service.

Long-term effects were also limited. Slack didn't hurt its reputation at all; in fact, it may have strengthened its image as an open and responsible company by posting a detailed engineering report the next day.[558] This disclosure not only put an end to the incident, but it also showed that

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[553] **Catchpoint**, 'Slack Outage of 2/22/22: Good Morning, Here's 16 Minutes of Stress', *Catchpoint Blog*, 22 February 2022, https://www.catchpoint.com/blog/slack-outage-of-2-22-22-good-morning-heres-16-minutes-of-stress.

[554] **TechCrunch**, 'Slack Confirms It's Down for Some Users, Says It's Working on a Resolution', *TechCrunch*, 22 February 2022, https://techcrunch.com/2022/02/22/slack-confirms-its-down-for-some-users-says-its-working-on-a-resolution/.

[555] **CNN**, op. cit. **CNBC**, op. cit.

[556] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58, no. 2 (2015), 141–48.

[557] **Spiceworks**, 'Slack Outage: Service Disruption Leaves Users Stranded', *Spiceworks*, 22 February 2022, https://www.spiceworks.com/tech/tech-general/news/slack-outage-service-disruption/.

[558] **Slack**, 'Slack's Incident on 2-22-22', *Slack Engineering Blog*, 23 February 2022, https://slack.engineering/slacks-incident-on-2-22-22/.

Slack was willing to learn and change, which is important for keeping stakeholders' trust. From the point of view of brand rehabilitation, the company's proactive and consistent communication turned a situation that could have hurt its reputation into a chance to show how reliable it is in a crisis. Importantly, the result was very similar to the strategies that Slack used. SCCT says that in accidental crises, taking corrective action and being open about what happened is enough to protect the organisation's reputation, if it doesn't deny or avoid the problem.[559] Slack's actions were in line with these instructions, and the responses from stakeholders after that show that this alignment helped keep trust. The lack of changes in leadership or calls for executives to be held accountable only reinforces the notion that the crisis was more about technology than management.

3.4.4 Summary and Lessons Learnt

The Slack case shows how the careful adjustment of response strategies during a crisis can determine whether short-term disruptions lead to long-term reputational damage or boost stakeholder trust. What stands out most in this case is how Slack's mix of proactive disclosure, corrective action, and open closure not only limited damage to its reputation but also helped it keep its credibility. Slack made a guarantee that it would stay the most reliable source of information by adopting a proactive approach. The choice to quickly admit the outage on the status page and social media channels showed how well stealing thunder works. Studies show that companies that talk about problems themselves are seen as more honest and responsible, which lowers negative attribution.[560] Slack's communication was not limited to acknowledgement: it consistently offered instructing and adjusting information, which kept users informed of progress and reassured them that the company was actively resolving the problem.[561]

This strategy aligned with SCCT's prescriptions for accidental crises. Stakeholders did not attribute high responsibility to Slack, and by providing clear corrective action and avoiding defensive rhetoric, the company matched its response to the level of responsibility attributed.[562] If Slack had tried to minimise or deny the crisis, it could have made stakeholders even angrier, which could have led them to think that the company was arrogant or incompetent. The company was able to

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[559] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10, no. 3 (2007), 163–76.

[560] L. M. Arpan and D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen, *op. cit.*

[561] **W. T. Coombs**, The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research, op. cit.

[562] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', op. cit.

protect its reputational assets by choosing to respond in a way that was appropriate for the type of crisis. Equally important was the post-crisis transparency. The publication of a detailed report written by the engineers served as a final act of corrective action and demonstrated learning from the failure.[563] This step extended the time horizon of the crisis response: rather than treating the outage as a closed event once service was restored, Slack used it as an opportunity to signal organisational accountability and commitment to improvement. So, Slack's actions confirmed the Stealing Thunder theory and followed up with a disclosure to keep its credibility.[564]

Some lessons emerge from Slack's 22.2.22 case. First, the immediacy with which Slack acknowledged the outage prevented speculation and signalled control. Organisations that hesitate or conceal information risk losing ownership of the narrative, but Slack demonstrated that rapid, transparent updates can temper stakeholder anxiety even during a global disruption.[565]

Second, because the outage was perceived as an accidental technical failure, the company did not need to over-apologise or adopt strategies better suited to preventable crises. Instead, it struck the right balance between acknowledging user frustration and maintaining confidence in its technical competence.[566] This balance met stakeholder expectations for accountability while protecting the business from harm to its reputation. Third, Slack's actions highlight how important multi-phase crisis communication is. Immediate disclosure, ongoing updates, and a thorough final report demonstrate how communication needs to change as a crisis progresses. Every step had a specific function: the post-mortem strengthened long-term trust, the updates decreased uncertainty, and the initial acknowledgement reassured users. This phased strategy turned the outage from a possible threat to reputation into a chance to demonstrate reliability and transparency.[567] Finally, the case reveals how stakeholder humour and tolerance can serve as moderating forces in digital crises.

3.5 KFC Case Study

One of the biggest fast-food chains in the world, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), is a cornerstone of the quick-service restaurant industry worldwide, operating in over 145 countries. By 2018, KFC had about 900 locations across the UK, cementing its position as the industry leader in the chicken-based fast-food sector. Due to its decades-long market presence and steady brand positioning

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[563] **Slack**, 'Slack's Incident on 2-22-22', op. cit.

[564] S.-Y. Kim and J.-H. Lee, *op. cit.*

[565] **CNN**, 'Slack Outage Hits Users Globally', *CNN Business*, 22 February 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/22/tech/slack-outage.

[566] **W. L. Benoit**, 'Image Repair in Crisis Communication', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics* (2021).

[567] **W. T. Coombs**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2nd edn, Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

centred on taste, affordability, and convenience, the brand enjoyed high levels of consumer loyalty and visibility in Britain.[568] Compared to other international brands, KFC's reputation in the UK was steady and largely untarnished before 2018, experiencing few reputational crises.[569]

When KFC implemented a reorganisation of its supply chain operations in February 2018, the crisis started. The business chose to hire DHL and its partner QSL to manage deliveries from a single central warehouse, ending its long-standing collaboration with logistics provider Bidvest, which had overseen a dependable and decentralised distribution system.[570] Logistical issues emerged within days of the switch: deliveries were either missed or delayed, and the new distribution system was unable to satisfy the demands of KFC's nationwide restaurant chain.[571] One of the biggest operational disruptions in KFC's history occurred when more than 750 locations were forced to temporarily close by the middle of February.[572]

According to the SCCT framework, the crisis was categorised as an operational crisis that could have been prevented. Preventable crises arise from mismanagement or poor decision-making, where responsibility can reasonably be attributed to the organisation.[573] In contrast to accidental crises or natural disasters, the supply chain collapse was thought to be directly caused by KFC's strategic choice to switch from a reliable supplier to one that didn't perform. This attribution of blame was mirrored in public opinion, as many stakeholders saw the disruption as a predictable and preventable result of corporate error.[574]

The triggering event was symbolic: a chicken shortage at a fried chicken restaurant. The irony of a chicken chain "running out of chicken" transformed the logistical issue into a global reputational disaster, as the news media quickly reported.[575] While national outlets highlighted the cultural resonance of the short supply in the UK, where KFC was especially ingrained in consumer

[568] **YourStory**, *KFC shut 750 branches in 2018: a mind-bending business case study* (2025), https://yourstory.com/2025/04/kfc-shut-750-branches-2018-mind-bending-business-case-study.

[569] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41, no. 3 (2004), pp. 265–289.

[570] **About Resilience**, 'KFC: Humour and humility saved the chicken – the KFC logistics blunder' (2018), https://www.aboutresilience.com/humor-and-humility-saved-the-chicken-the-kfc-logistics-blunder/.

[571] **A. Petroff**, 'KFC apologises for chicken shortage with a hilarious hidden message', *CNN*, 23 February 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/23/news/kfc-apology-ad-shortage-chicken.

[572] **N. Hinde**, 'KFC Forced To Close Two-Thirds Of Its Restaurants After Running Out Of Chicken', *HuffPost UK*, 19 February 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/kfc-forced-to-close-stores-after-running-out-of-chicken_uk_5a8aa064e4b004fc3194212f.

[573] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis Response Strategies', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8, no. 4 (1995), pp. 447–476.

[574] **E. Travis** and **E. J. Lordan**, *Public Relations Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2018), chapter 'SCCT and Crisis Response'.

[575] **E. Oster**, 'KFC responds to UK chicken shortage scandal with a timely "fck, we're sorry"', *AdWeek*, 23 February 2018, https://www.adweek.com/creativity/kfc-responds-to-u-k-chicken-shortage-scandal-with-a-timely-fck-were-sorry/.

routines, international headlines portrayed the crisis as a brand paradox. There were many different parties involved in the crisis, and each one was affected individually. The immediate impact was felt by consumers who arrived at restaurants only to discover they were closed. Social media was filled with anger and ridicule, and in some extreme cases, customers even called the police to express their displeasure over restaurant closures.[576] Employees and franchisees were also severely affected; franchise owners faced large revenue losses, and staff were unable to work shifts at closed locations. Since distribution errors were identified as the direct cause of the shortages, suppliers and logistical partners, DHL in particular, were dragged into the crisis.[577] While regulators and local authorities were indirectly involved in consumer complaints, the media contributed to the crisis by presenting it as both a serious corporate error and a humorous cultural story. Beyond the immediate network, investors and brand analysts kept a close eye on the case because they were worried about both short- and long-term reputational consequences.[578] The involvement of multiple stakeholders shows the extent of the crisis's impact on reputation. Despite being operational in nature, the implications for culture and brand identity caused it to move quickly into a symbolic crisis.[579]

3.5.1 Communication Analysis

The 2018 KFC crisis is a case of how operational failure can escalate into a reputational threat when stakeholders perceive it as preventable. According to SCCT, crises fall into three broad clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable. Victim crises, such as natural disasters, minimise organisational responsibility; accidental crises assign partial responsibility; and preventable crises assign full blame, as they are seen to result from mismanagement or negligence.[580]

At first look, the chicken shortage might appear to be an operational mishap, a technical failure in the logistics chain. However, as the crisis unfolded, it became clear that the public viewed it as a preventable crisis. This perception derived from the fact that KFC itself had initiated the supply-chain change: the decision to terminate a proven partnership with Bidvest, which had run a

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[576] **HuffPost**, 'KFC says FCK in full-page ad apologising for chicken shortage', *HuffPost*, 23 February 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kfc-says-fck-in-full-page-ad-apologizing-for-chicken-shortage_n_5a9034b1e4b0ee6416a2adfb

[577] **The One Club for Creativity**, *KFC FCK: Case Study* (2018), https://www.oneclub.org/awards/theoneshow/-award/34056/fck/.

[578] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis: Insights from Strategic Communication Research', *Business Horizons*, 58, no. 2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

[579] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory Extended (Albany: SUNY Press, 2024).

[580] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis Response Strategies', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8, no. 4 (1995), pp. 447–476.

decentralised and effective distribution model, in favour of DHL's centralised warehouse system. When DHL's system collapsed almost immediately after implementation, responsibility was placed squarely on KFC's management rather than its supplier.[581] So, the problem went from being a "technical accident" to a terrible example of bad strategic judgement that hurt the company's reputation. The fact that "a chicken restaurant ran out of chicken" was a symbol of irony that made people even more angry. Media coverage of the crisis made it seem less like an unfortunate disruption and more like a corporate paradox, turning the failure into a punchline for headlines around the world.[582] Customers felt their trust in the brand had been belittled as a result of this mockery, which increased stakeholder frustration.[583] The incident thus moved beyond simple inconvenience to an affront against consumer expectations, producing a layer of moral outrage. Studies show that moral emotions like anger can make people feel more blame and less tolerant of mistakes, especially in crises that could have been avoided.[584] It's important to note that KFC didn't have to deal with a recent crisis in the UK when this one happened. SCCT, on the other hand, says that even if there is no negative history, crises that could have been avoided are especially dangerous because they take away the assumption of competence. In this case, KFC's operational mistake hurt its most basic value proposition, which was providing chicken. This made people question the company's competence at its very core.[585]

KFC tried to minimise the issue and make humorous of it in the early days of the crisis. The company made jokes on Twitter about how "the chicken crossed the road, just not to our restaurants," and they said that problems with suppliers were to blame. This message was meant to make people feel better and suggested that the crisis was not planned but rather an accident.[586] SCCT says that humour and making fun of things are not good for crises that can be avoided, where stakeholders expect strong rebuilding strategies like direct apologies and corrective action.[587] The difference in how the organisation and the media saw the situation created a perception gap: the organisation saw it as a minor issue, while consumers and the media saw it as a major failure. Recognising this misalignment, KFC changed its communication strategy within days. The

[581] **About Resilience**, 'KFC: Humour and Humility Saved the Chicken – The KFC Logistics Blunder', 2018.

[582] **E. Oster**, 'KFC Responds to UK Chicken Shortage Scandal with a Timely "FCK, We're Sorry"', *AdWeek*, 23 February 2018.

[583] **N. Hinde**, 'KFC Forced To Close Two-Thirds Of Its Restaurants After Running Out Of Chicken', *HuffPost UK*, 19 February 2018.

[584] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorising Around Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36, no. 1 (2024), pp. 6–22.

[585] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41, no. 3 (2004), pp. 265–289.

[586] **CNN Money,** 'KFC Apology Ad After Chicken Shortage', 23 February 2018.

[587] **E. Travis** and **E. J. Lordan**, *Public Relations Theory*, chapter 'SCCT and Crisis Response'.

company placed full-page newspaper advertisements in The Sun and Metro, featuring the now-famous "FCK" bucket image alongside the words "We're sorry." This shift marked a full embrace of SCCT's rebuilding posture: accepting responsibility, apologising, and offering corrective assurances. The text explained that fresh chicken was being delivered daily, thanked employees and franchisees, and made no attempt to deflect blame. This change was in line with both theory and practice, since companies that cause preventable crises must take responsibility and promise to do better to regain legitimacy.[588]

When analysed through IRT, KFC's final communication showed two main strategies: mortification and corrective action. Mortification was evident in the direct apology, described as a "huge" expression of regret. Corrective action followed in assurances that the logistics system was stabilising and that fresh chicken was being delivered daily.[589] The "FCK" bucket visual reinforced mortification in a humorous yet humble way, communicating the brand's embarrassment without alienating its audience.

By contrast, the initial tweets reflect Benoit's category of reducing offensiveness through minimisation. The humour attempted to trivialise the problem, but because consumers experienced real inconvenience, the attempt felt flat and risked appearing flippant. The eventual move to mortification and corrective action demonstrates an adaptive learning process: KFC discovered that only by combining apology with action could it regain credibility. This rhetorical shift reflects a sequence where ineffective early strategies gave way to consistent, audience-aligned discourse.[590]

From a Persuasive Attack perspective, KFC was clearly the target of criticism. Customers, the media, and commentators made fun of the company in public and said it was incompetent. KFC did not, however, engage in aggressive defence or counterattack. The company didn't directly blame DHL, even though it had plenty of reasons to do so, which could have made stakeholders even more upset. Instead, it took responsibility and made fun of itself, which took away the power of outside mockery. KFC changed the way people talked about it by making fun of itself with the "FCK" bucket. Instead of being laughed at, it laughed with the audience, turning ridicule into shared humour.[591]

The principle of Stealing Thunder says that companies should tell people about problems before they happen, but KFC didn't have this chance. Store closures, long lines, and customer complaints

[588] **BBC News**, 'KFC's Apology for Running Out of Chicken Is Pretty Cheeky', 23 February 2018 https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-43169625.

[589] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory Extended.

[590] **Campaign Live**, 'KFC's FCKing Clever Campaign', 2018.

[591] **The One Club for Creativity,** KFC FCK: Case Study, 2018.

made the shortage public. But KFC was able to take back some of the initiative by changing the way people saw the crisis with its apology ad. Even though it was late, the bold "FCK" campaign worked like a kind of stealing thunder: KFC took charge of the story, took responsibility, and changed the way people thought about the crisis. The literature suggests that even delayed disclosure can bolster credibility if conducted with sincerity and transparency, even though its impact is weaker than that of immediate self-disclosure.[592]

According to the Contingency Theory of Accommodation, KFC's position changed from partial support to full support. In the beginning, the funny tweets showed a pro-brand attitude, lightly defending the brand and suggesting that the crisis was not entirely under its control. But as anger and media pressure grew, outside forces pushed the company to adjust. The full-page apology shows that KFC was extremely willing to work with others. They took responsibility, apologised without reservation, and promised to fix the problem. The action was made possible by internal factors, such as the leaders' willingness to be humble instead of defensive in court. External factors, such as media amplification, customer ridicule, and the symbolic absurdity of the crisis, exerted immense pressure to comply. KFC's position on the advocacy-accommodation continuum shifted clearly towards accommodation in this way, showing the situational adaptability advocated by Contingency Theory.[593]

3.5.2 Stakeholder Engagement

The KFC crisis happened in front of lots of people, and the fact that a fried chicken chain ran out of chicken was so absurd that it drew a lot of attention and ridicule. Stakeholders acted quickly and, in many ways, turning what started as a problem with the supply chain into a problem with the company's reputation. Consumers were the most visibly affected. Clients who were angry found locked doors at closed restaurants all over the UK. For a brand that is part of people's daily lives, this disruption was more than just an inconvenience; it was seen as a breach of trust. A lot of people were angry and disappointed online, and they used hashtags and memes to make fun of the company.[594] Some social media posts were funny, while others were very angry. Outrage, abandonment, and ridicule were the most common feelings among consumers.[595] Even though people were angry, some customers showed loyalty by publicly saying they felt sorry for the local

[592] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31, no. 4 (2005), pp. 425–433.

[593] **A. E. Cancel**, **G. T. Cameron**, **L. M. Sallot** and **M. A. Mitrook**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9, no. 1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

[594] **N. Hinde**, 'KFC Forced To Close Two-Thirds Of Its Restaurants'.

[595] **E. Oster**, 'KFC Responds to UK Chicken Shortage Scandal'.

staff who were stuck in the middle of the crisis.[596] The crisis cost employees work hours and franchise owners money, upsetting many inside KFC after the company switched suppliers. KFC later thanked workers and franchisees in apology ads, showing it wanted to regain trust.[597] Investors and analysts watched for lasting brand damage, seeing reputational risk as more serious than immediate financial losses. The crisis's high media profile made it a test of KFC's resilience.[598] Media sources made the problem ridiculous and sensational by emphasising its symbolism. British tabloids criticised the nonsense, while worldwide media framed it as a supply-chain disaster turned cultural phenomenon. The mockery fuelled consumer resentment, but it also allowed KFC to respond creatively rather than defensively.[599] Regulators and local authorities were only slightly involved, mostly because of complaints from customers rather than formal investigations. But the fact that police had to tell people not to report chicken shortages showed how ridiculous and newsworthy the crisis was.[600] In the UK, where humour is a big part of the culture, both the public's ridicule and KFC's later self-critical apology fit with the way people feel about things. The fact that KFC's "FCK" campaign aligned with British humour standards played a significant role in its eventual success.

3.5.3 Reputation Impact

The chicken shortage crisis had immediate effects on operations, finances, and reputation in the short term. From a business perspective, KFC had to close more than 750 stores in the UK, which negatively impacted sales and resulted in millions of dollars in lost revenue.[601] The closure not only stopped customer service, but it also hurt franchisees, employees, and suppliers, which made a lot of stakeholders unhappy. For a couple of days, the media focused on negative headlines, painting the shortage as both a silly failure and a lesson in how to manage a supply chain.[602] During the first phase, the media's sentiment was very negative. The irony of a chicken restaurant running out of chicken was picked up by journalists, who turned it into a worldwide story beyond the UK. With international outlets pointing to the disruption as proof of corporate incompetence and tabloid headlines ridiculing the brand, the tone ranged from ridicule to outright condemnation.[603] Social

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[596] **YourStory,** 'KFC Shut 750 Branches in 2018'.

[597] **BBC News**, 'KFC's Apology for Running Out of Chicken'.

[598] **Campaign Live**, 'KFC's FCKing Clever Campaign'.

[599] The One Club for Creativity, KFC FCK: Case Study.

[600] **About Resilience**, 'KFC: Humour and Humility Saved the Chicken'.

[601] **YourStory**, 'KFC Shut 750 Branches in 2018'.

[602] **About Resilience**, 'KFC: Humour and Humility Saved the Chicken'.

[603] **N. Hinde**, 'KFC Forced To Close Two-Thirds Of Its Restaurants'.

media, where humour and anger mixed to create viral content, amplified public frustration and put extra pressure on the brand's reputation.[604] However, KFC's subsequent communication approach changed the course of the crisis despite this initial harm to its reputation. Customers and communications experts alike praised the "FCK" apology campaign as a model of openness, dignity, and humour in business communication. The creative self-deprecation changed the story in favour of KFC, and advertising and public relations analysts called the campaign "clever," "authentic," and "a masterclass in apology".[605] The campaign won several awards, including recognition at the Cannes Lions, further solidifying its place in industry memory as a case study in effective brand rehabilitation.[606] In the long run, the crisis did not harm the reputation. Instead, it demonstrated KFC's resilience and even enhanced its reputation for creativity in crisis handling. Consumer trust, initially shaken, was largely restored by the brand's bold apology and the speed with which it returned to full operations. Analysts noticed that rather than weakening customer loyalty, the brand's response strengthened it by demonstrating that even multinational companies are capable of openly and humorously acknowledging their mistakes.[607] The fact that KFC's situation stayed contained at the operational level, in contrast to other well-publicised avoidable crises that led to executive resignations (such as Volkswagen's Dieselgate), suggests that stakeholders saw the failure as serious but not systemic.[608]

Ultimately, there was a high degree of alignment between the recovery achieved and the strategy employed. KFC's later shift to apology and corrective action realigned communication with theory and stakeholder expectations, even though its initial humour-based response was out of step with SCCT's recommendations for avoidable crises. In a short period, the company was able to neutralise negative sentiment and achieve reputational rehabilitation thanks to the final rebuilding strategy.[609]

3.5.4 Summary and Lessons Learnt

The KFC crisis shows how different response strategies shape long-term reputation restoration. In the initial stages, the company's reliance on humour and minimisation reflected a strategy misaligned with the public's perception of responsibility. Although KFC's initial tweets described

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[604] **E. Oster**, 'KFC Responds to UK Chicken Shortage Scandal'.

[605] **Campaign Live**, 'KFC's FCKing Clever Campaign'.

[606] **The One Club for Creativity,** *KFC FCK: Case Study.*

[607] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory Extended.

[608] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication'.

[609] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the Right Words', Management Communication Quarterly, 8, no. 4 (1995), pp. 447–476.

the shortage as a small issue, consumers and the media had already framed it as a preventable failure due to poor corporate decision-making. This mismatch prolonged outrage and reinforced the sense that the company was trivialising the disruption.[610] The turning point came when KFC pivoted to a rebuilding strategy, characterised by unambiguous apology, corrective action, and symbolic mortification. The "FCK" bucket campaign was not only a message of contrition but also an inventive rhetorical device that used humour in a different way: not to minimise the crisis but to express embarrassment and accountability. This strategic shift demonstrates that successful reputation restoration hinges not only on the content of the response (apology, corrective pledge) but also on the emotional tone and cultural resonance of how it is delivered.[611]

Over the long term, the boldness of the "FCK" apology transformed the crisis into a reputational asset. Rather than eroding brand trust, the episode became a celebrated example of corporate authenticity and creativity. This outcome shows that crisis response strategies can convert reputational risk into reputational capital when organisations strike the right balance between humility, humour, and responsibility.[612] In comparison to other preventable crises, such as Volkswagen's Dieselgate or Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 recall, where apologies were accompanied by blame-shifting or protracted defensiveness, KFC's strategy was distinguished by its speed of adaptation and willingness to embrace ridicule. This demonstrates that a hybrid use of crisis communication strategies, rebuilding anchored in SCCT but enriched with rhetorical devices from Image Repair Theory, can accelerate recovery and even enhance reputational resilience.[613]

KFC demonstrates that reputation-long-term restoration is not guaranteed by apology alone, but rather by how effectively the chosen strategies align with public attribution of responsibility, cultural context, and the emotional tone of the crisis. Strategies that fail to acknowledge stakeholder expectations can prolong damage. In contrast, strategies that accept responsibility and creatively reframe the narrative can transform a reputational liability into a case of reputational reinforcement.[614]

There are a few lessons that can be learnt from the KFC case. First, it demonstrates that crises in the preventable cluster necessitate swift responsibility consent and robust reconstruction strategies. The dangers of improper framing are demonstrated by KFC's early error in viewing the shortage as a minor inconvenience. Its subsequent change in direction, however, emphasises the

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[610] **CNN Money**, 'KFC Apology Ad After Chicken Shortage'.

[611] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies.

[612] The One Club for Creativity, *KFC FCK: Case Study.*

[613] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication'.

[614] **E. Travis** and **E. J. Lordan**, *Public Relations Theory.*

significance of adaptive communication: organisations need to be prepared to swiftly drop unproductive tactics and switch to ones that meet stakeholder expectations.[615]

Second, the case demonstrates the potency of symbolism and tone. The "FCK" bucket was more than just a visual joke; it was a cultural gesture that recognised consumer frustration while maintaining the brand's individuality. KFC adopted informality, humour, and vulnerability in contrast to companies like Volkswagen and BP, which relied on corporate formality and technical explanations. Stakeholder mockery was changed into empathy and appreciation by this cultural sensitivity. It proves that emotional involvement is just as important to successful long-term restoration as logical guarantees.[616] Third, the case demonstrates the strategic importance of humility in crisis communication. KFC took responsibility for the issue by avoiding the temptation to place the blame on DHL. This choice signalled accountability to internal and external stakeholders and stopped the situation from degenerating into a blame game. KFC's refusal to shift blame allowed for a quicker reputational repair, in contrast to Samsung's initial hesitancy to take full responsibility for the Note 7 malfunctions.[617]

The KFC case also demonstrates how crises can turn into chances to differentiate one's reputation. The recovery story established KFC as a company that isn't afraid to own up to mistakes and make fun of itself, even though the shortage resulted in short-term losses. Since then, the crisis has been remembered in the literature on communication and advertising as a "best practice" example of brand recovery, showing that, with the right approach and cultural awareness, reputational setbacks can be turned into reputational strengths.[618]

3.6 Comparative Analysis

The case studies of BP, Volkswagen, Samsung, KFC, and Slack demonstrate how crisis communication methods influence both immediate and long-term reputation management. Despite the varying nature of the crises, recurring elements highlight the necessity for contextually appropriate responses.[619] The essence of the situation influences stakeholder perceptions. Preventable crises, such as BP's Deepwater Horizon oil leak and Volkswagen's Dieselgate scandal, elicited significant culpability attributions and moral indignation, resulting in enduring reputational

[615] **E. Oster**, 'KFC Responds to UK Chicken Shortage Scandal'.

[616] **Campaign Live**, 'KFC's FCKing Clever Campaign'.

[617] **About Resilience**, 'KFC: Humour and Humility Saved the Chicken'.

[618] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis'.

[619] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2nd edn (Chichester: Wiley, 2022).

damage.[620] The recall of Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 involved both preventable and accidental factors. Remedial measures and compensation facilitated partial recovery, but credibility continued to be compromised.[621] In contrast, the supply chain disruption at KFC and the outage at Slack, which are situations of lesser significance, demonstrate that humour, empathy, and transparency may not only alleviate harm but also enhance brand loyalty.

Second, timing was decisive. BP, Volkswagen, and initially Samsung delayed or fragmented disclosure, fuelling stakeholder anger and distrust.[622] Slack's immediate acknowledgement and KFC's candid "FCK" campaign exemplify the benefits of proactive and transparent disclosure, in line with the principle of "stealing thunder."[623]

Third, alignment with stakeholder expectations proved essential. Defensive strategies, such as denial or blame-shifting (BP, Volkswagen), consistently failed. At[624] the same time, accommodative approaches, mortification, corrective action, or humour were more effective when delivered sincerely and in line with public sentiment.[625]

Finally, outcomes diverged sharply. BP and Volkswagen remain cases of enduring reputational damage despite some financial recovery.[626] Samsung regained market share but not full trust.[627] By contrast, KFC and Slack transformed crises into opportunities to reinforce values and build loyalty.[628]

Overall, swift, transparent, and accountable communication increases the likelihood of reputational recovery, whereas delayed or defensive responses deepen reputational scars.[629]

[620] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in Situational Crisis Communication Theory: A Triadic Appraisal Model for Crises', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 37, no. 4 (2023), pp. 798–820.

[621] **M. Xia**, 'Consumer Response and Corporate Crisis Communication Strategies in Brand Crisis Events: A Case Study of Samsung Galaxy Note 7', *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 49 (2025), pp. 33–45.

[622] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication: Insights from Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Business Communication*, 41, no. 3 (2004), pp. 265–289.

[623] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder: Analysis of the Effects of Proactive Disclosure of Crisis Information', *Public Relations Review*, 31, no. 3 (2005), pp. 425–433.

[624] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10, no. 3 (2007), pp. 163–176.

[625] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis Response Strategies', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8, no. 4 (1995), pp. 447–476.

[626] **J. Bundy**, **M. D. Pfarrer**, **C. E. Short** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development', *Journal of Management*, 43, no. 6 (2017), pp. 1661–1692.

[627] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'How Emotions Can Enhance Crisis Communication: Theorising Around Moral Outrage', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 36, no. 1 (2024), pp. 6–22. *Op. cit.*

[628] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximise the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-Up Actions and Transparent Communication', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 27, no. 3 (2022), pp. 425–440.

[629] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58, no. 2 (2015), pp. 141–148.

The following table compares the five cases across crisis type, strategy, timing, theoretical fit, and outcomes, linking responses to their reputational consequences in line with SCCT, Image Repair Theory, Stealing Thunder, and Contingency Theory[630]

Company and Crisis	Crisis Type (SCCT)	Primary Communication Strategy	Timing and Transparency	Theoretical Lens Applied	Long-Term Reputational Outcome
BP. Deepwater Horizon - 2010	Preventable: high responsibility, moral outrage[631]	Denial, shifting blame, delayed apology, eventual compensation[632]	Very late and inconsistent; perceived as evasive[633]	SCCT (preventable cluster); Moral Outrage; Contingency (low accommodation)[634]	Severe and lasting reputational damage; long-term distrust of safety/environmental claims[635]
Volkswagen. Dieselgate - 2015	Preventable: intentional deception[636]	Initial denial, partial apology, corrective actions[637]	Slow admission; transparency undermined by regulatory revelations[638]	SCCT; IRT (mortification); Contingency (oscillation between advocacy and accommodation)[639]	Persistent reputational scars, loss of consumer trust; partial recovery in sales but brand credibility weakened[640]
Samsung. Galaxy Note 7 - 2016	Preventable/ Accidental hybrid: product harm[641]	Corrective action (recalls), apology, compensation[642]	Delayed initial response, later transparent recall campaigns[643]	SCCT (product harm cluster); IRT (mortification); Stealing Thunder (missed opportunity)[644]	Significant financial loss, but market share recovered; reputation remained fragile, trust impacted[645]
KFC. UK Chicken Shortage - 2018	Operational/ Accidental: supply chain disruption[646]	Humour and apology ("FCK" campaign)[647]	Timely once crisis recognised; transparent acknowledgement[648]	IRT (reducing offensiveness, humour);	Short-term criticism, but humour reframed crisis; brand affinity strengthened long-term[650]

[630] **W. T. Coombs**, *Op. cit.*; **J. H. Shin**, **Y. Kim**, and **J. Park**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in Situational Crisis Communication Theory: A Triadic Appraisal Model for Crises', *Public Relations Review*, 48, no. 4 (2022), article no. 102201; **K. Claeys**, **V. Cauberghe**, and **P. Leysen**, 'How to Maximize the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder in Crisis Communication: The Significance of Follow-Up Actions and Conversational Human Voice', *Public Relations Review*, 42, no. 5 (2016), pp. 956–962; **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook**, and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Public Relations Review*, 25, no. 2 (1999), pp. 171–197.

[631] **J. H. Shin**, **Y. Kim**, and **J. Park**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in SCCT', *Public Relations Review*.

[632] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations', *Corporate Reputation Review*.

[633] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58.2 (2015), 141–148.

[634] **J. H. Shin**, **Y. Kim**, and **J. Park**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in SCCT', *Public Relations Review*;
A. E. Cancel, **M. A. Mitrook**, and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory', *Public Relations Review*.

[635] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management', in *The Sage Handbook*.

[636] **J. H. Shin**, **Y. Kim**, and **J. Park**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in SCCT', *Public Relations Review*.

[637] **A. E. Cancel**, **M. A. Mitrook**, and **G. T. Cameron**, 'Testing the Contingency Theory', *Public Relations Review*.

[638] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises', *Journal of Business Communication*.

[639] **A. E. Cancel** et al., 'It Depends', *Journal of Public Relations Research*.

[640] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management', in *The Sage Handbook*.

[641] **M. Johansen** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Consumer Response and Corporate Crisis Communication', *Public Relations Review*.

[642] *Ibid*.

[643] **J. H. Shin**, **S. Cameron**, and **J. Park**, 'Stealing Thunder', *Public Relations Review*.

[644] **K. Claeys**, **V. Cauberghe**, and **P. Leysen**, 'Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder', *Public Relations Review*.

[645] **M. Johansen** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Consumer Response and Corporate Crisis Communication', *Public Relations Review*.

[646] **K. Claeys**, **V. Cauberghe**, and **P. Leysen**, 'Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder', *Public Relations Review*.

[647] *Ibid*.

[648] *Ibid*.

[650] **K. Claeys**, **V. Cauberghe**, and **P. Leysen**, 'Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder', *Public Relations Review*.

			SCCT (low responsibility cluster)[649]	
Slack. Outage 22.2.22 - 2022	Paracrisis/ Risk event: reputational risk only[651]	Immediate transparency, empathy, regular updates[652]	Fast and consistent disclosure; high transparency[653]	Stealing Thunder (effective use); SCCT (risk-level attribution); Paracrisis theory[654]	Reputation largely unaffected; trust reinforced through empathetic tone and transparency[655]

Table 3 Comparison of Crisis Communication Responses

To conclude, the research demonstrated that different crisis response strategies have a direct impact on long-term reputation restoration, with effectiveness depending on the crisis type, level of responsibility, and the emotional tone adopted. Successful strategies balance transparency, empathy, and responsibility acceptance, whereas defensive, inconsistent, or delayed responses deepen reputational scars. [656]

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[649] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations', *Corporate Reputation Review.*

[651] **Slack Communications Team**, 'The Curious Incident of the Bug', *Slack Engineering Blog,* https://slack.engineering/.

[652] *Ibid.*

[653] *Ibid.*

[654] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Handbook of Crisis Communication', in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, ed. by W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022).

[655] **Slack Communications Team**, 'The Curious Incident of the Bug', *Slack Engineering Blog.*

[656] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *Business Horizons*, 58, no. 2 (2015), pp. 141–148; **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the "Appropriate" Crisis Response Strategies', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 8, no. 4 (1995), pp. 447–476.

Chapter 4

4.1 Importance of Having a Crisis Communication Plan

The case analyses confirm that crises are not only operational disruptions but also reputational turning points. In this context, the existence of a formal crisis communication plan is essential for safeguarding stakeholder trust and ensuring organisational resilience. A crisis plan serves as both a roadmap for rapid action and a symbol of preparedness, signalling to stakeholders that the organisation can respond with clarity, accountability, and empathy.[657]

From a reputational standpoint, a plan influences not just the speed of response but also its consistency and tone. Research shows that stakeholders evaluate an organisation's response through lenses of responsibility, transparency, and moral integrity.[658] When communication is slow, contradictory, or defensive, stakeholders perceive it as evasive, which intensifies reputational damage. Conversely, planned responses that prioritise openness and stakeholder engagement have been shown to reduce crisis severity and preserve trust.[659]

SCCT emphasise that reputational threats are mediated by perceived responsibility.[660] Crisis plans that incorporate SCCT guidelines enable managers to adapt strategies to various crisis types, ranging from preventable to accidental or victim clusters. By doing so, they reduce misalignment between organisational messaging and stakeholder expectations.[661] Similarly, frameworks such as Stealing Thunder demonstrate that pre-emptive disclosure is more effective when built into planning rather than improvised under pressure.[662]

In practice, the absence of a plan leaves organisations vulnerable to reactive behaviours, such as denial, minimisation, or uncoordinated messaging. Such lapses were evident in the responses of BP and Volkswagen, where fragmented communication magnified reputational loss.[663] By contrast, KFC and Slack exemplify how structured, transparent, and empathetic communication, even under unanticipated circumstances, can stabilise or even enhance reputation.[664]

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[657] **W. T. Coombs** and **S. J. Holladay**, op. cit.

[658] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis', op. cit.

[659] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', op. cit.

[660] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in Situational Crisis Communication Theory', op. cit.

[661] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication', op. cit.

[662] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder', op. cit.

[663] **J. Bundy**, **M. D. Pfarrer**, **C. E. Short** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management', *op. cit.*

[664] **A. J. Wilson**, 'Slack: Case Study', *op. cit.*

Thus, a crisis communication plan is not merely procedural. It is a reputational safeguard, aligning strategic intent with communicative practice, and ensuring that organisations enter a crisis prepared to meet stakeholder expectations. Its influence extends beyond the immediate moment, shaping the narrative arc of recovery and determining whether reputation can be restored, reinforced, or irreparably harmed.[665]

4.2 Strategies for Rebuilding Trust

The restoration of trust is a long-term process, influenced more by the sustained demonstration of organisational accountability than by the immediate explanation of events.[666] Crisis communication strategies that rebuild trust share three core elements: transparency, corrective action, and emotional resonance.

Transparency has been repeatedly identified as the cornerstone of effective crisis communication. Organisations that disclose early and provide continuous updates are more likely to maintain credibility, even when responsibility is high.[667]

Research indicates that apologies or professions of remorse are inadequate unless accompanied by concrete actions to avert repetition.[668] Samsung's massive recalls, despite initial setbacks due to delays, ultimately demonstrated a dedication to consumer safety and enabled a partial recovery. In contrast, BP's inability to translate rhetoric into consistent action extended the reputational damage.[669]

Emotional resonance, through the expression of empathy and recognition of stakeholder concerns, is a critical element in rebuilding trust. Technical or defensive crisis communication overlooks the emotional aspect of crises, which research on moral indignation indicates is crucial in influencing stakeholder reactions. Slack's empathic communications and KFC's amusing yet modest messaging illustrate how aligning tone with stakeholder expectations may transform disruption into an opportunity for enhancing reputation.[670]

Rebuilding trust is not a singular occurrence, but a narrative process that transpires over months or even years. Research indicates that historical crises significantly influence stakeholder views, necessitating that companies with previous occurrences exert greater effort and time to establish

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[665] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Choosing the Right Words', *op. cit.*

[666] **R. L. Heath**, *op. cit.*

[667] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximise the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder', *op. cit.*

[668] **W. T. Coombs**, 'The Value of Communication During a Crisis', *op. cit.*

[669] **J. Bundy**, **M. D. Pfarrer**, **C. E. Short** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management', *op. cit.*

[670] **A. J. Wilson**, 'Slack: Case Study', *op. cit.*

credibility.[671] This underlines the necessity for crisis communication to persist beyond the initial stage, incorporated into comprehensive reputation management and corporate social responsibility initiatives.[672]

In conclusion, strategies that rebuild trust over time are those that combine immediate transparency with consistent follow-up actions and empathetic engagement. They acknowledge the crisis honestly, correct the underlying problem, and sustain communication that demonstrates both responsibility and resilience. Ultimately, the organisations that succeed are those that treat crisis communication not as damage control but as an opportunity to reaffirm values, rebuild relationships, and renew trust.[673]

4.3 Why Responses Fail

Corporate crises are not only situations of operational interruption; they also constitute incidents that influence the collective memory of stakeholders. Silence and denial are among the least successful responses in this context. Although these answers may seem to provide temporary safeguards against liability or reputational harm, they invariably lack a permanent impact on public memory and frequently exacerbate reputational damage over time.[674]

Silence creates a vacuum that stakeholders and the media fill with speculation and blame. Without a timely organisational voice, hostile narratives dominate, and these accounts become the stories stakeholders remember.[675] Denial, meanwhile, is only effective when an organisation is genuinely free of fault.[676] In most cases, however, evidence of responsibility emerges, as seen with Volkswagen during Dieselgate or BP in the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The gap between organisational denials and eventual revelations irreparably damages credibility.[677] What endures in public memory is not the complexity of the crisis itself but the perception of dishonesty and avoidance.[678] These responses also heighten emotional reactions. Preventable crises evoke anger and betrayal, and stakeholders expect organisations to acknowledge harm and show empathy.[679] When denial or silence replaces acknowledgement, stakeholders interpret the stance as callousness

[671] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication', *op. cit.*

[672] **W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay**, *op. cit.*

[673] **T. L. Sellnow** and **M. W. Seeger**, 'The Discourse of Renewal', *op. cit.*

[674] W. T. Coombs and S. J. Holladay, *op. cit.*

[675] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis', *op. cit.*

[676] **W. L. Benoit**, 'Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication', *op. cit.*

[677] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication', *op. cit.*

[678] **J. Bundy**, **M. D. Pfarrer**, **C. E. Short** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development', *Journal of Management*, 43, no. 6 (2017), pp. 1661–1692.

[679] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in SCCT', *op. cit.*

or arrogance. This moral violation magnifies outrage, ensuring that the organisation is remembered less for corrective action and more for its refusal to accept responsibility.

Silence and denial also empower external critics to frame the narrative. By failing to engage, organisations provide opponents with persuasive grounds to attack credibility and legitimacy.[680] Such counter-narratives gain traction in public discourse, embedding negative associations into stakeholder memory. Finally, research on proactive disclosure demonstrates why these strategies fail so decisively. Organisations that disclose bad news themselves are seen as more credible than those exposed by others.[681] Silence leaves disclosure to third parties, while denial collapses once evidence surfaces.[682] In both cases, what remains in memory is not just the crisis but the perception that the organisation sought to hide the truth.

4.4 Crisis Communication Planning and Strategy

An effectively devised crisis communication strategy is essential; when a crisis occurs, the organisation must be prepared with predetermined actions. A plan provides clarity, efficiency, and organisation, yet it cannot exist in isolation. It must be rooted in the overarching communication strategy and influenced by the brand's fundamental mission, values, and identity. The plan and strategy require frequent modifications due to the unpredictable evolution of crises and the rapid changes in stakeholder expectations within a digital landscape. Importantly, a strategy is not the same as a plan. The strategy defines the overarching approach and philosophy for how an organisation responds to crises; the plan translates that philosophy into specific, tactical actions and responsibilities. Without a strategy, a plan risks becoming a checklist detached from the organisation's culture. Without a plan, a strategy remains abstract and hard to implement.

Benoit's Image Repair Theory offers a foundation for structuring a strategy. At its heart, it requires communicators to analyse how audiences perceive the crisis: who they believe is responsible and how offensive or harmful they judge the act to be.[683] From this assessment, organisations can choose among strategies such as denial, reducing offensiveness, shifting responsibility, offering corrective action, or apologising (mortification). Benoit emphasises that responses must be sincere and consistent, and that strategies should align with the facts and audience expectations.[684]

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[680] **B. L. K. Hearit**, Crisis Management by Apology: Corporate Response to Allegations of Wrongdoing (London: Routledge, 2006).

[681] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, 'Stealing Thunder', *op. cit.*

[682] **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, 'How to Maximise the Effectiveness of Stealing Thunder', *op. cit.*

[683] **W. L. Benoit**, Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research, 2nd edn (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014).

[684] *Ibid.*

Preparing contingency plans allows organisations to anticipate accusations, prioritise stakeholders, and select the most appropriate repair strategies for different scenarios.[685]

Amanda Coleman argues that an effective crisis communication strategy should delineate practical elements: the strategy's purpose, guiding principles, communication priorities, response structure, pre-established scenarios and narratives, preferred channels, stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, and evaluation methods. She also explains that crises typically unfold in five phases, each requiring a tailored communication approach:

1. Identification – recognising that an incident has the potential to become a crisis and ensuring leadership and communicators are informed early.

2. Initial actions – the critical first 24 hours, when rapid responses, accurate information, and clear leadership set the tone.

3. Eye of the storm – the sustained period when the crisis dominates attention. Communication must be continuous, inclusive, and adaptable.

4. Pre-recovery – when the situation begins to stabilise, but vigilance is still required; organisations must prepare for recovery while still managing the crisis.

5. Recovery – once control is regained, attention shifts to rebuilding trust, resourcing recovery efforts, and evaluating lessons learned.[686]

Alongside this process view, Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, and Coombs propose that crisis strategy must balance internal dynamics (coordination, governance, resources) with external stakeholder management (media, regulators, victims, employees).[687] Situational Crisis Communication Theory adds a prescriptive layer: it matches crisis types, victim, accidental, or preventable, with appropriate responses.

The following table, from Coombs' SCCT, illustrates the main response strategies. It shows how organisations can align their actions with the perceived level of responsibility and threat. In victim crises (such as natural disasters or false rumours), low responsibility allows for strategies like denial or bolstering. Accidental crises, where responsibility is moderate, require organisations to show concern and take corrective action. Preventable crises, which generate the highest attributions of responsibility, demand full acceptance of blame, public apologies, and substantial corrective

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[685] *Ibid.*
[686] *Ibid.*
[687] **J. Bundy**, **M. D. Pfarrer**, **C. E. Short** and **W. T. Coombs**, 'Crises and Crisis Management: Integration, Interpretation, and Research Development', *Journal of Management*, 43, no. 6 (2017), pp. 1661–1692.

measures. The table can be used as a guide to calibrating responses depending on the crisis type and perceived severity.[688]

Primary crisis response strategies
   Deny crisis response strategies
      Attack the accuser: Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong
          with the organization.
      Denial: Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.
      Scapegoat: Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.
        Diminish crisis response strategies
      Excuse: Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm
         and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.
      Justification: Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.
        Rebuild crisis response strategies
      Compensation: Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.
      Apology: Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks
        stakeholders for forgiveness.

Secondary crisis response strategies
   Bolstering crisis response strategies
      Reminder: Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.
      Ingratiation: Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the
        organization.
      Victimage: Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

Table 4. SCCT Crisis Response Strategies[689]

Coombs explains that the weight of previous crises increases the reputational risk of subsequent crises, necessitating more conciliatory responses.[690] Furthermore, recent studies indicate that crises provoking moral outrage, particularly those associated with perceived ethical breaches, incite more intense stakeholder responses and necessitate heightened openness and accountability.[691]

Additional theoretical contributions reinforce the technique. The Contingency Theory of Accommodation dismisses universal solutions and instead situates organisational actions on a spectrum between complete advocacy and total accommodation.[692] This adaptability is crucial, as elements such as stakeholder influence, cultural conventions, and leadership perspectives determine the extent to which an organisation can or ought to compromise. The principle of Stealing Thunder demonstrates the significance of timing: by preemptively revealing detrimental information before it is disclosed by others, organisations can enhance credibility and mitigate

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[688] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis', *op. cit.*

[689] *Ibid.*

[690] **W. T. Coombs**, 'Impact of Past Crises on Current Crisis Communication', *op. cit.*

[691] **W. T. Coombs** and **E. R. Tachkova**, 'Integrating Moral Outrage in SCCT', *op. cit.*

[692] **A. E. Cancel, G. T. Cameron, M. A. Mitrook** and **L. M. Sallot**, 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9, no. 1 (1997), pp. 31–63.

perceived severity, provided this is accompanied by transparent communication and definitive corrective measures.[693]

In conclusion, an effectively crafted crisis communication strategy transcends mere damage control; it aims to safeguard and potentially enhance the organisation's brand image. The congruence among the strategy, the plan, and the brand's fundamental identity is essential. When the reaction embodies the organisation's values — transparency, accountability, and authentic concern for stakeholders — crisis communication may bolster the brand's promise instead of compromising it.[694] Conversely, denial, inconsistency, or insincerity can inflict enduring reputational damage, irrespective of tactical expediency.[695] The integration of theoretical frameworks like SCCT, contingency theory, and image repair, alongside practical methodologies such as Coleman's five phases and ethical timing strategies like stealing thunder, fosters resilience during crises and establishes a long-term foundation for maintaining trust and augmenting brand equity.[696]

4.5 Contributions, Discussion, and Limitations

In the digital age, communication professionals, brand managers, and legislators must navigate reputational risk. This study enhances the field by providing a comparative and integrative analysis of crisis communication models: Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, Stealing Thunder, the Theory of Persuasive Attack, and the Contingency Theory of Accommodation. While these models have been applied individually in prior research, this thesis presents a structured comparison that reveals their complementary strengths and limitations. For example, SCCT's diagnostic clarity supports early crisis framing, while IRT's rhetorical repertoire proves more effective in the repair and justification phases.[697] By demonstrating how each theory operates within distinct stages of a crisis timeline, the study contributes a hybrid theoretical approach that reflects the dynamic nature of public emotion, stakeholder pressure, and reputational recovery.[698]

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[693] **L. M. Arpan** and **D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen**, *op. cit.*; **S.-Y. Kim** and **J.-H. Lee**, *op. cit.*

[694] **A. Coleman**, *op. cit.*

[695] **W. L. Benoit**, *op. cit.*

[696] W. T. Coombs, *op. cit.*; A. E. Cancel, G. T. Cameron, M. A. Mitrook and L. M. Sallot, *op. cit.*; W. L. Benoit, *op. cit.*; A. Coleman, *op. cit.;* L. M. Arpan and D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen, *op. cit.*; S.-Y. Kim and J.-H. Lee, *op. cit.;* W. T. Coombs, 'Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis', op. cit.

[697] **F. Frandsen** and **W. Johansen**, 'Crisis Communication, Complexity, and the Cartoon Affair', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 15, no. 4 (2010), pp. 389–403.

[698] **R. L. Heath**, 'Best Practices in Crisis Communication: Evolution of Practice Through Research', *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34, no. 3 (2006), pp. 245–257.

Moreover, this thesis connects the gap between theory and practice by applying these models to five real-world crises: the BP Deepwater Horizon incident, Volkswagen's Dieselgate scandal, Samsung's Galaxy Note 7 recall, Slack's 2022 outage, and KFC's "FCK" campaign. These cases were selected not only for their industry diversity but also for the variety of reputational challenges and stakeholder responses they triggered. This applied analysis shows how theoretical models perform under real-world pressure, where timing, tone, transparency, and cultural sensitivity are critical in determining whether an organisation's message is perceived as sincere, manipulative, or insufficient.[699]

The thesis also highlights the rising importance of emotional tone and cultural framing in modern crisis response. Moving beyond traditional attribution or image repair logic, it integrates newer perspectives on moral outrage and affective public discourse.[700] Reputation today is not just threatened by operational or technical failures but also by perceived violations of societal norms, whether through racial insensitivity, ethical lapses, or delayed empathy.[701] This shift encourages scholars and practitioners to go beyond rational message design and consider symbolic, emotional, and culturally resonant elements of communication.

From a practical point of view, the thesis presents an adaptable framework for crisis communication planning, centred on pre-crisis preparation, in-crisis messaging, and post-crisis recovery. This model, informed by Amanda Coleman's five-stage cycle, synthesises lessons from the case studies into a concrete planning tool that includes timing, platform selection, emotional calibration, and feedback loops.[702] It aims to professionalise crisis readiness by providing a template that organisations can tailor to fit their values, audience, and risk profile.

Despite these contributions, the thesis also faces several limitations, both theoretical, methodological, and contextual, which shape the interpretation of the findings and suggest areas for future research.

A key theoretical limitation is the exclusion of Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT). Unlike linear models focused on sender-message-receiver structures, RAT conceptualises crises as multi-actor discursive spaces, where stakeholders, the public, and media collaboratively construct and contest

[699] **A. Schwarz** and **M. Löffelholz**, 'Theoretical Gaps in International Crisis Communication', in *The Handbook of International Crisis Communication Research*, ed. by **A. Schwarz**, **M. W. Seeger** and **C. Auer** (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), pp. 383–392.

[700] **B. Comyns** and **E. Franklin-Johnson**, 'Corporate Reputation, Risk and Strategic Disclosure', *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 27, no. 1 (2018), pp. 71–81.

[701] **W. L. Benoit**, 'Persuasive Attack and Defense in the Media', *Public Relations Inquiry*, 3, no. 1 (2014), pp. 5–21.

[702] **A. Coleman**, Crisis Communication Strategies: Preparing for, Responding to and Recovering from a Crisis (London: Kogan Page, 2020).

meaning.[703] The inclusion of RAT could have enhanced the analysis of dynamic message evolution and public co-creation, especially in digital arenas characterised by speed and polyphony.

Methodologically, the study relied solely on secondary data, including public documents, academic literature, and news media, to evaluate crisis communication outcomes. While this ensured transparency and replicability, it restricted access to internal decision-making processes, strategic deliberations, or stakeholder interviews. Without primary data, the analysis could not fully capture real-time emotional dynamics, managerial intent, or organisational learning during and after the crises.[704]

The research also adopts a retrospective lens, analysing cases after they stabilised or concluded. This limits insight into crisis escalation patterns, internal tensions, and adaptive communication tactics employed during the crisis. Moreover, the thesis does not empirically track long-term reputational recovery, relying instead on interpretive assessments from external sources.

Lastly, the thesis only briefly addresses the technological implications of algorithmic communication. As AI tools increasingly assist with drafting corporate responses, analysing sentiment, or moderating content, they raise new reputational risks, such as tone-deafness, disinformation, or loss of control. These aspects merit dedicated exploration in the context of evolving stakeholder expectations and digital ethics.[705]

Building on these limitations, future research should prioritise mixed-method designs incorporating primary data collection, such as interviews with crisis managers, internal communication audits, or sentiment tracking from digital platforms. This would help capture both strategic intent and stakeholder interpretation in real time.

The inclusion of Rhetorical Arena Theory, as well as Apologia Theory, Stakeholder Theory, or media framing theory, could enrich future frameworks and better account for the interactive, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of public crisis response.[706]

Cross-cultural crisis studies are also essential, particularly for multinational organisations operating across regulatory regimes and cultural logics. Such research could reveal contextual variations in trust repair, apology norms, and platform use, enhancing the global applicability of crisis communication models.[707]

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[703] **F. Frandsen** and **W. Johansen**, *op. cit.*

[704] **R. L. Heath**, *op. cit.*

[705] **B. Comyns** and **E. Franklin-Johnson**, *op. cit.*

[706] **F. Frandsen** and **W. Johansen**, *op. cit.*

[707] **A. Schwarz** and **M. Löffelholz**, *op. cit.*

Conclusion

This study has examined the many different aspects of crisis communication and its impact on the lasting reputation of organisations. It addressed a key reputation management challenge: how businesses may respond to crises to address immediate concerns and recover public trust and legitimacy over time. Research shows no single theory or strategy can address the complex requirements of crisis communication in the contemporary digital landscape, which is characterised by high emotional engagement. Effective crisis response relies on the integration of diagnostic precision, rhetorical sensitivity, cultural awareness, and digital agility. The analysis of the case studies highlights that strategic misunderstandings, such as tone, timing, or transparency, can worsen reputational harm, even in moments where the factual crisis is effectively managed. In contrast, authenticity, humility, and stakeholder engagement are essential components of post-crisis recovery, particularly in a time when customers expect not only competence but also moral leadership. This work does not assert the provision of a definitive model; instead, it presents an open framework intended for future examination. The fundamental principle is to establish links between recognised theory and developing practice, while also prompting enquiries into how reputation, power, and responsibility are managed in the public sphere. With the increasing speed, visibility, and stakes associated with corporate crises, the necessity for well-considered, evidence-driven communication strategies emerges as both a reputational priority and a moral and strategic obligation. The findings of this research aim to contribute to an ongoing dialogue among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers regarding how organisations can foster resilience, accountability, and credibility, both in times of crisis and well beyond the moment when the headlines have subsided.

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